

Easter Sunday
Rev Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB
April 12, 2020

Readings:

Barbara Kingsolver

In my own worst seasons I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again.

Matthew 28:1-8 (NRSV)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Sermon:

I am going to be real with you. The reason that there was no description for this sermon ahead of time was because I had no idea what I was going to say until yesterday. Easter is complicated. The resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to Christian theology, and not so much for most Unitarian Universalists. Easter is often described as a celebration of the triumph of life over death. And well, that is a toughie right now. Spring is a time of rebirth and renewal, and it is happening. Around the world, with so much less pollution begin pumped into the air, the earth is showing just how powerful it is, and how much what we do impacts Mother Earth. The trees are in bud near my house. My magnolia tree is getting ready to pop, and there is a red haze on the trees dancing in the wind outside my window. I saw a moose this week. My very first *in situ* moose in New England, after living here for 41 years, and spending a not insignificant amount of time looking.

As I type, I am seeing sunshine pouring through my window on to my seedlings that will become delicious food this summer. Folks are coming to our worship and programs, and I am so grateful for all of you. And I am struggling. A trip to the grocery store that would have taken 90 minutes, takes three hours. I can't see my kids and Sam is going out in the world as an essential employee. I can't hug my mom and dad. I have friends who are working on the front lines in hospitals, and people losing people, and I am struggling.

Barbara Kingsolver's words really spoke to me this week: "In my own worst seasons I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing... I have taught myself joy, over and over again." This could be a way to read the Easter story. Jesus was killed by the state, his followers devastated, and then life wins over death, and his followers tell this story each and every year—teaching joy, over and over again. So how do we teach joy and look for a long time at a single glorious thing? It is a practice—a practice of attention and time. Finding something to hold on to not as a liferaft, though it may be that, but something to turn our attention outward, to really see its whole being, and only that—to know something as itself. To watch my cat sleeping in a sunbeam. To watch the light filtering through basil leaves on the shelf, and not think about how I need to report that plant, or what I should make with it, but rather basil just being basil, and beautiful. And to repeat that again and again. When we are in despair, to teach ourselves joy.

I hope that there is much joy in your lives, and I imagine that there is also grief. I invite you to focus on a single glorious thing. Even better if it is something you can see in front of you or outside your window. Take a deep breath, and look, with your eyes, or with your mind's eye. Take another deep breath. And another. Let its light come into you. Remember joy, again, and again.

Often on Easter I preach from the Gospel of Mark. Mark tends to be matter of fact in his storytelling and is understood to be the earliest of the synoptic Gospels, for such a complicated story, I like the simplicity of Mark. However this year I thought Matthew might be just the thing. As we heard in our reading, the angel of the Lord's, "appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow." Angels in the Bible are not to be trifled with. Their appearance usually terrifies people and their first words are often, "Be not afraid," as is true in this passage. To be like lightening, the angel must have been emitting some serious light and energy. After the angel tells Mary and Mary Magdalene not to be afraid, they are to go tell the disciples that Jesus "has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." They "left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy." A lot of really important things have both fear and joy don't they? Big transitions in life tend to have both—having kids, getting married, new jobs, and sometimes, even death.

Tadd and I were watching a live-streamed concert the other day with Jeffrey Foucault and he was talking about John Prine. It was before John had passed and Jeffrey said something like, John Prine is going to be okay, we may not be okay, but he will be okay. I think Jeffrey meant that he thought John would be okay whether he made it, or he didn't. After John died last week, I was listening to his song, "When I Get to Heaven." John Prine wrote:

When I get to heaven, I'm gonna shake God's hand
Thank him for more blessings than one man can stand
Then I'm gonna get a guitar and start a rock-n-roll band
Check into a swell hotel, ain't the afterlife grand?

...Yeah when I get to heaven, I'm gonna take that wristwatch off my arm
What are you gonna do with time after you've bought the farm?
And then I'm gonna go find my mom and dad, and good old brother Doug
Well I bet him and cousin Jackie are still cuttin' up a rug
I wanna see all my mama's sisters, 'cause that's where all the love starts

I miss 'em all like crazy, bless their little hearts
In his music, and I imagine in his life, John Prine faced fear, after two bouts of cancer, and surgery, and all sort of health trouble, with love and joy. And I'm sure he *is* okay. I have known some folks like that in my life, who have so practiced joy, that even when despair or fear come around, they are limber and ready.

We are certainly in a time of leaving behind the familiar, of fear and joy. Whatever you are feeling in this challenging time, in this minute, or the next, remember that while you may be physically alone, or isolated from people or places you want see, or anxious about health, or money, or a job, or your kids, or, or, or.... Remember that it is also true that light comes down through basil leaves and makes deliciousness, and warms the fur of cats in the window. Practice the simplest things that teach you joy. An angel of the lord *is* here, and it is in the leaf of every tree, and crocuses, and birds shouting out that life continues. It is here in each breath we take. And in every person helping at the People's Pantry, and sewing masks, and fighting for the rights of tipped workers and migrants, and shining light on shameful inequities in our health care system, and, and, and... There are people shinging like lightening among us. Be not afraid. Remember joy, practice, and run and tell everyone the good news.

So may it be. Amen.