

United First Parish Church in Quincy  
“The Christ Event of Our Time” – 4/8/07  
By: Michelle Walsh

Lo, the day of days is here – Easter, resurrection, and the Christ event of our time. What in the world could that possibly mean for contemporary Unitarian Universalists? As a UU who practices humanism and socially engaged Buddhism, I have a commitment to seeking the wisdom in all religions – and this includes Christianity. I have a commitment to doing justice to each religion – to the messages of breadth and depth and height in all religions, including Christianity – and the events of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter are messages of breadth and depth and height that need to be heard for our time.

But how do Unitarian Universalists begin to approach the wisdom in these messages – messages and language often concretely associated with destructive judgmentalism or meaningless irrationality? As I said in my sermon in October – we do this by learning to play again with the metaphors and our language of reverence in new ways, by learning to hear in new ways and to listen to the liberating experiences of others as they reform this language on their own terms. Metaphor is poetry – it is our way of expressing that which is not concrete in human experience but which is true, as Sheldon spoke of last week. Metaphor has the capacity to hold multiple meanings in tension and with flexibility. Metaphor points to that ‘something more’ that can’t be seen concretely or measured exactly – and that ‘something more’ is the sum total of the breadth and the depth and the height of our experiencing capacity as human beings – our emotional core in life.

It is from the standing place and potential of metaphor that we can approach Easter and the resurrection – metaphor that is not simply fiction, but metaphor that is grappling with the real and true experience of being human – being human in knowing the reality of death but in choosing and risking the passion and love of life despite that knowledge.

We will never know in literal detail all aspects of Jesus' life and death, but we can hear what his followers tried to convey of their experiences of Jesus through the communities that wrote the various Gospel accounts. We can envision and feel what it must have been like to stand beneath his crucifix and watch a man they loved with a passion die a slow and agonizing death – labeled as a criminal but known by them as a prophet and messiah who showed them the meaning of love and hope and compassion on earth, the meaning of God's kingdom on earth. His presence was so real to them that over the many years of community building and gospel writing in the seventy-five years following his death, he would become a living symbol of hope and resurrection – a living symbol for each community of gospel writers in their own way. This is a fascinating and very real story of human experience. Each person within each community found their way into the Christ story through their own experiences and reshaped the metaphors of that story through their experiences.

Resurrection in the human experience often starts as *personal* encounter with passionate love and loss and then rebirth into new hope and love of life. But ultimately the fullest sense of complete resurrection entails connection to *communal* resurrection – because resurrection is about life and wholeness of being – and

wholeness of being is ultimately interdependent with all human beings everywhere and the vast expanse of life itself. Let me share a story that touches upon the start of personal resurrection. But let me warn you first that this is a challenging and painful story.

I first heard this story on NPR a few years ago on Easter afternoon after I had yet another disappointing experience with a UU minister's sermon on Easter. You may recall the RE Director I mentioned in a sermon last year who told the children that the Easter experience is like a yo-yo because it's about going down but coming back up. She then also gave all the kids their own personal yo-yo. If you think about metaphors and their meanings, you might see that equating the Easter experience with a toy might have some inherent problems for conveying depth and breadth and height. But there's another subtle problem with the yo-yo metaphor – it also individualized the Easter experience to only our personal ups and downs.

Well, the next year I went off to a different UU church on Easter where Jesus was barely mentioned and the focus again was on spring and the start of the Red Sox season – now all good things admittedly, but how does this help us as UU's to grapple with the wisdom of what is known in the Christian tradition as its highest holy day?

So driving home from that particular Easter Sunday, my attention was gradually caught by a woman's voice on National Public Radio. She was telling the story of her daughter, Liza, age 5, whom she had learned was dying of leukemia. One night, Liza crawled into her mother's lap and tucked herself into a corner of her mother's arm. "Mommy," she said, "am I always going to have leukemia?" Ah,

what a moment that must have been for her mother, can you begin to imagine, this moment of deep truth between them. “Yes, Liza, I think so.” “Mommy, am I going to get to be a mommy?” In ever so soft a voice, her mother replied, “No, I don’t think so.” “Mommy, am I going to get to be a teenager?” “No, I don’t think so.” “Mommy, am I going to get to be 7?” “No, I don’t think so.”

“Mommy, I know how I want to die! I want to die right here with you! No, I mean, I want to die first and then I want you to die right after me so we can be together.” “Liza, when you die, part of me is going to die with you, but a part of you is going to live forever with me.”

Deep breath everyone. A powerful story, right? And one that clearly reaches into the Good Friday experience of Jesus’ death, but which also hints at the Easter experience of resurrection through her mother’s living memory of Liza – a memory that isn’t allowed to be just personal – a memory that is now *living* in the world community through NPR’s transmission of that story on one Easter afternoon. Why is NPR more comfortable than some UU’s in touching this depth of pain and loss but with the hint of hope and work to come in the resurrection? Liza’s mother was doing the hard work of resurrection in sharing her daughter’s story to a broader community – the work of resurrection eventually must become communal work.

And the work of resurrection is often a long and slow process – filled first with small resurrection moments rather than a solitary brilliant and permanently renewing flash of life and passion. It is the type of work that benefits from having a spiritual discipline already at hand or at least a beloved community surrounding

you. Remember that in the first community's written gospel account, Mark, we are left with only an empty tomb, Mary's grief in the garden, and Jesus' cry of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" ringing in the air. The Christian community's fuller sense of the resurrected Christ took seventy-five years to form in writing – and it continues to form anew for each generation's experiences.

Let me share a different story of communal resurrection, one that is also challenging to hear. My first learning of the power of communal resurrection came through my immersion in the black inner-city community of Boston when Moses, a 20 year old, was shot in the head and murdered on Blue Hill Avenue in 1996 – a murder witnessed at close range by two other youth in our UU Urban Ministry program. Moses was the older brother of Randy, age 11, a member of our youth program since he was 7 years old.

As you can begin to imagine, this was devastating for both the family and the community. But that community represented not only Roxbury and Dorchester – it also represented Newton and Lexington, adults and youth who knew Randy and the other children. Joy and her son Thomas had been volunteering with our program for two years. Thomas was the same age as Randy, and they liked to hang out together on field trips, particularly the amusement park rides! I did not know how we could possibly make it through this terrible tragedy, but we did – and we did it together as an *entire* community, one day and one month and one year at a time. Thomas could have chosen not to participate in the funeral or subsequent memorial service – or his mother could have shielded him from doing so. But there they were, Joy and Thomas together, hugging Randy and walking with him and his family as

best as they could through their experience of pain and loss. Two years later, Thomas would be the first and only student in Newton to utter the words racism and classism when he presented his Coming of Age credo before the congregation. In that resurrection moment, we saw Moses living again, we saw him in the ultimate dimension living in a new form, as Thomas shared his story and used Moses' life and death as a call to deeper action.

So let me take my cue from young Thomas and call all of us, myself included, to a deeper sense of connection to communal resurrection. Today we are facing a need for national resurrection and global resurrection. This is our Christ event for our time, thinking metaphorically about those words. We face crises of war, violence in our streets, poverty in our nation and in the world, and by the latest report this week, a worsening crisis with global warming than we knew. Sheldon preached just a couple of weeks ago on the pervasive sense of depression that this leaves many of us with.

But the 'giving up place' never serves us well, and let me suggest that the depression is actually a symptom of the psychology of American individualism – a psychology that makes it difficult to value community – a psychology rooted in a nation founded on racial, class, and gender oppression and separation – a psychology in which each person is expected to pull themselves up by their own bootstrap and then is granted the illusion that they did so. The cure and the resurrection for our nation is in first breaking through our own historical amnesia about how we came to be before we will be able to break our various addictions to energy and oil and consumer toys and luxury goods that distract us from our

depression and prevent us from first creating a beloved national community, let alone truly being a partner to a global resurrection.

To live and to seek the ‘Kingdom of God on Earth,’ entails love, passion and risk – it entails the risk of encounter with worlds and experiences very different from our own. There can be change, and loss, and transformation in such encounters – but ultimately there is the hope and promise of renewed life. Remember that resurrection first starts with a personal encounter and search for resurrection, and then moves to a communal resurrection. Each of us must start and move from the place in which we have our being – this may mean first sharing with our church members the stories of our own losses and search for renewed life before we consider the issues of national or global resurrection. Resurrection is a step by step process.

In Ezekiel’s “Valley of the Dry Bones”, the army of skeletons does not spring quickly to life. They are re-membered – re-memebered – piece by piece – bone to bone, sinew by sinew, flesh and skin, and finally the breath of life. In this vision, we see the Jewish tradition’s clearer focus on the hope and promise of communal resurrection. Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel writes: “all the prophetic visions in [the Book of Ezekiel] are inserted in their proper calendar. Fourteen dates are indicated to help us place the speaker and his discourse – with one notable exception: the vision of the dry bones, meaning that the resurrection is undated. And we understand why: that vision, that promise, that hope, is not linked to either space or

time. That vision, that consolation, is offered to every generation, for every generation needs it – and ours more than any before us.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a promise of hope in life itself and in the life that we share together. We can learn together and act together. We have many opportunities in the coming weeks to learn about the interlinking nature of class consumption, racial privilege, and gender construction to these large national and global issues of resurrection with which we struggle – and we have many ways already in our congregation to engage in direct action, such as ESL classes, GBIO, the global warming study group, and marriage equality – and we also have continual opportunities to share our personal stories and journeys with one another to connect to the ever present spirit of life. Spiritual resurrection is a lived reality in the stories that we carry and actions we manifest as individuals and as a community. This is the hope and promise of our communal ministry together as Unitarian Universalists – a connection to Easter as a process of daily resurrection. Happy Easter. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wiesel, Elie, “Ezekiel,” in Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible, David Rosenberg, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987) 186.