

Passing on the Flame

A Joint Sermon by the Revs. Robert and Makanah Morriss

March 27, 2005

Makanah:

Mark Harris, Unitarian Universalist minister, offers these liberal religious perspectives about the resurrection. He writes:

“Is the resurrection real?”

“If we believe in a creative power which shatters the icy tomb of winter with the life-giving miracle of spring, we have seen a resurrection.

“If we believe in a creative power which moves tens and then tens of thousands of people to cry against the injustices of society, enabling the downfall of hatred and prejudice, [and if we have participated in this process] then we have created a resurrection.

“If we believe in a creative power lying within each human breast which enables us to break the bonds of personal pain and know the hope of new tomorrows, then we have experienced a resurrection.

“At Easter time Unitarian Universalists celebrate the many resurrections of the season. We celebrate the glories of the earth when birds take to the wing and crocuses force their way through the crust of snow to announce the arrival of spring. We celebrate the untold number of courageous individuals and groups who have sacrificed their lives to liberate others from oppression and to create a more just and loving world. We celebrate the ability of the human heart to overcome personal tragedy or handicap and affirm once again the ability to love or excel when many others would have given up all hope.”

This is Easter Sunday, and yes, most definitely we remember and honor the life Jesus, that Jewish rabbi and teacher who was a courageous prophet on behalf of compassion, justice and equity for all people. His death on the cross was a cruel and painful tragedy. We can easily imagine the pain of the women who, as the story goes, went to the tomb that Sunday morning to take care of the body of a teacher and friend they had dearly loved. Every one of us here this morning has known the ache and emptiness that occurs when one we hold dear has died.

The next part of the story is perplexing from a rational perspective. The body was not in the tomb. The women experience an angelic-like figure who asks why they are looking for the living among the dead. It is a rhetorical question and points to a deeper insight – that the Truth and Light embodied by an individual during their earthly days is not encased in some tomb or grave but lives on in the lives of those they have loved.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not focus on a physical resurrection of the body for Jesus or ourselves. We know that the atoms and molecules that make up our physical being have all been parts of other aspects of the planet and universe and will continue to re-cycle throughout time. We are in truth stardust and thus holding great attachment to the physical form is both painful and illusory.

We do believe that each person can make a difference in the course of the

unfolding of life on our planet, our wondrous spaceship through the cosmic void. We may be small in the grand scheme of things but we are not insignificant.

We remember Jesus because his life mattered, his teachings mattered, his courage mattered. The facts of his life, the stories about his life, are not historically clear. But the theme of his life is clear and rings down through the centuries with a clarion call – be kind to one another, be filled with the courage of compassion and the light and clarity of Truth.

His energy as human being has somehow blazed its way down through all the thousands of years since he lived.

The Rev. Richard Gilbert says it well in this poem:

“I hope he’ll be remembered –
Obscured by centuries of violence,
Clouded by countless creeds,
Dissected by a thousand scholars,
Preached from a million pulpits,
Mouthed by a million lips,
Crucified by willful distortion
And innocent ignorance.
I hope [Jesus] will be remembered
In simple, unadorned humanity.”

Our task, like Jesus’ task, is to let our individual light shine out with strength and clarity and brilliance. Our work is to clear away the blocks and obstacles that keep us from being our fullest and best selves. Our challenge is to not to judge ourselves, but to unlock ourselves and in so doing we will discover within a vast amount of simple goodness.

This inner simple goodness is how mountains are moved, barriers of hate broken down, and healing accomplished. The gentle hand, the loving voice, the caring eyes are powerful. The ability to serve others is the greatest gift we have been given. The ability to empower others to know their lives matter is an ability that can change the world.

Ashley Smith, the young woman who was abducted by Brian Nichols, the man who went on a shooting spree at a courthouse in Atlanta earlier this month, was able to save her life, and probably the lives of a number of others, by sharing compassion and the greater truth of service with her captor. She read to him passages from a current best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life* written by Rick Warren, a California minister. Warren’s theology is not the same as ours, but his simple theme, a theme echoed by all the world’s great religions, is that the purpose of our lives is to be of service to others. This was Jesus message.

Ashley Smith suggested to Brian Nichols a way in which he might be of service to others even though his service would have to be within prison given the crimes he has committed. She made him pancakes, she affirmed his inherent worth, she somehow helped relight the spark of hope buried deep inside his anger and rage.

Ashley herself has had a painful and challenging life journey. She has been in trouble with the law in the past for petty crimes. She had held her dying husband in her arms, the victim of a stabbing. She has had to live apart from her 5 year old daughter who is the custody of an aunt. Ashley has courageously and successfully struggled with drug abuse. She found her Truth and uncovered the simple goodness within herself and was able to reach out and touch the mind and heart of a very dangerous and desperate man and help him believe that deep in side he has something of worth to offer.

It is an amazing story. It is a story of a resurrection of hope in an unlikely time and place. It is the story of how one person looked deeply at another and saw and offered respect for the inherent worth and dignity of the other.

We do not know what the outcome will be for Brian Nichols. We do know that Ashley's truth helped save her life and helped bring a moment of truth and clarity into the life a very troubled fellow human being.

We in the liberal religious tradition are most definitely recipients of this same simple truth that altruistic love and courageous acts can help our planet glow with the light of possibility and sustainability. Each decision we make, each action we take makes a difference. We make a difference. And that difference will live on long after us, offering "resurrections" of hope for generations to come.

Bob:

This morning during our Sunrise Service, we shared in a simple ritual in which each person present reflected on what they felt might be a block or an obstacle to their ability to share their unique gifts and Truth with the world. We each lit a candle to symbolize the burning away and transmuting of these blocks to our inner Truth and Light. We then each took a small rock crystal from a bowl to symbolize the growing clarity and compassionate courage within each of us.

It was a ritual aimed at helping us know that we can each become mindful of and thus begin the process of releasing the aspects of ourselves that block our fuller potential. It was a ritual that hopefully affirmed the "resurrection" of our hope for sharing our part of the Universal Truth.

Neil Douglas-Klotz has suggested that in Jesus' times, the Semitic understanding of who we really are varied a great deal from the concepts most of us developed after this ancient understanding was filtered through a Greek world view. In the ancient Semitic sense, one does not "have" or "possess" a soul: one is a soul.

Furthermore, there are different aspects to this soul-self, so that the word, (*naphsha* in Aramaic), which is used over 200 times in the Gospels, is sometimes translated “soul” sometimes as “self” and in other places as “life”.

A fuller understanding of the concept of who we are as “souls” includes the concept that we have an essence which, while connected to the particularities of an earthly existence, is equally connected to that “heavenly” vibration which brought the world into being and which might be said to sustain it and us in each now of eternity.

Much has been made of the concept that the proper task of the Christian church is to save people’s eternal souls. Since I don’t believe in Hell, my standard response to this notion has been to think that a better use of our time would be to get people to understand and follow the teachings of Jesus and the other great religious teachers of history, most of whom have shared very similar messages about how we should live our lives. Ironically, the more I understand about the Aramaic language in which Jesus taught, the more I understand that perhaps those who want to save souls and I may be talking about the same thing though we have a very different understanding of what it means.

Again, for Jesus, saving one’s eternal soul meant aligning one’s life energy with that which is loving and compassionate, that which creates and sustains life, that which is the only energy strong enough to last from one generation to another throughout all time.

His message in the gospels is clear once one has this understanding. If we make our lives about accumulating money or power, or anything else that enhances our individual ego and sense of separateness, we will eventually suffer great loss, as we have to say goodbye to everything that has mattered to us.

But if we align ourselves with creative love and compassion then we will literally “not taste death”, for at the point at which our physical being drops away, as it will for each one of us, that to which we have given our lives will continue, amplified by each life we have touched with that vibration of love which is indeed eternal.

All of this leads us into both a more definite and less concrete understanding of how we can each “live on” after death. As Unitarian Universalists, we each have our own thoughts or beliefs about what may or may not happen at the time of our physical transition or death. What we all do agree on, however, is that the way we live on is through the positive energy we have shared with the world through our thoughts, deeds and relationships. The way in which we each live our lives can empower not only ourselves but also our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to live lives of compassion, courage and creativity.

The truth that Jesus shared is a universal truth – shared also in the words and

teachings of Buddha, Mohammed, the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and many others.
This truth radiates down through the ages and through our lives.