

Where's the Good News in the Gospel?
An Easter sermon
Preached by the Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia
At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Years ago, as a seminarian, I served a year long student ministry in Quincy Illinois. At the time, we lived in Oak Park and I would go into Chicago and take the train out to Quincy on Saturday. On Sunday, I'd take the late afternoon train back. One Sunday, by virtue of a mysterious magnetism that seems to pull clergy together – or at least seems to sit me down by clergy on planes, trains, and even at marches – I found myself seated beside an earnest looking young man. We struck up a conversation. I was headed back from my preaching gig he was headed To Chicago for a course at Moody Bible Institute. In no time at all, we were swimming in deep theological waters. It was civil – friendly even – with a feeling of mutual warmth and respect. He seemed genuinely curious. I know I was.

Perhaps it was when I said that I believed that Jesus was a mystic and a teacher who had come to teach people with eyes to see and ears to hear, how to have a direct connection with the Sacred, the Ground of Being, that some people call G_d. Perhaps it was then that a look of powerful longing passed over his face. Perhaps he was remembering one of his own encounters with the Ground of Being.

Then I said that I also believed that the sacred was revealed around the world in different languages, stories, even metaphors – each revelation able to speak to the people of that place and time – whether in the pantheon of the Greeks, the saintly bodhisattvahs, the busy gods and goddesses of India, the spirits of earth, sky, and corn of the first nations here, the in the transformations of music, and the complex calculations of science. Jesus had brought to life – the language of risk, unconditional love, mutual belonging, and profound Unity.

The earnest young man sat in reflection for a moment, then he asked “but what about John Chapter 14, verse 6?” Oh my, I realized in that moment... growing up in a secular Jewish family and studying the Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School had not prepared me for the chapter and verse facility that he had. Still, I had a creeping suspicion of the passage he was citing. I was right – it is in that passage that one of the authors of the Gospel of John gave Jesus these words: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Rats!

I mean, I knew that sentence was in there. But – it's one sentence. One Sentence. Well, you can't argue with someone when they are using a text to prove itself. I didn't want to be disrespectful of the faith of this young man who was finding a loving and positive path in his faith. And you can't just dismiss it by saying – well, you know, 9 out of ten biblical scholars agree that Jesus probably didn't say those words. Well – you could—but that's not the point.

But I could see that the young man, who believed in a mighty G_d, an all powerful G_d who had separated the people's of the earth himself when he brought down the tower of Babel -- was moved by the idea that his G_d – could speak in any tongue and understand the people of any land, and tell the stories that would be living stories to them. To me – that skill has to be one of the natural perks of omniscience.

Still, there was that sentence. Still, I had to try. And I pursued a line of thought that led me to this very Easter Sunday.

Jesus was a dedicated Jew of his time. He spoke in the cadences of his people, he used the stories of the Torah, the ancient symbols understood by generations of Israelites.

He was by nature and chance, a teacher. And like every teacher in all Ancient Traditions, he used metaphors, parables, stories that more often pointed toward something – rather than straight at it. Stories that are puzzling, challenging, that make you think, metaphors that catch you off guard and, before you know it, you can understand something on a deeper level that would just have been a flat concept or a dead idea, of no use in real life. Ideas grow vivid enough that you can see and feel it – like a mustard seed that, compared with other herbs, has a seed that, relative to other herb seeds, is relatively small and when planted is supposed to grow into a small tree, but instead becomes a giant sheltering tree. He did this because any wise teacher knows that you can't carry people to insight, drag them to an experience of deep, spiritual truth, the sacred – whether you call it G_d, the good, the ground of being, natural law, compassion, or the clarity and humanity of reason. People can be told what to believe – but beliefs are most often static thoughts about G_d, the universe and everything. But we cannot be told what to experience –

Reading the Gospel of John again I found that, in many ways the whole of the Gospel of John is a carefully crafted metaphorical, mystical parable about the direct access that each one of us can have to our deepest experience of awe, wonder, peace, belonging, courage, hope, and love. It is a map to two of the greatest powers on earth:

And, of course, the greatest of these is love.

Now, this scripture has been repeatedly misinterpreted and misused. It's been misinterpreted as proof (as my earnest young man had been taught) of Jesus' claim to divinity and to special access to the Father. And yet, in moments of insight, I can see that that would be precisely what he would have resisted. We can be so literal. But we are literal at the great risk of missing out on the truth.

Jesus did not seek to be the focus of worship or the sole gateway to G_d.

He did not seek to pay for human sin with his own blood, nor did he seek to defeat death by rising from the grave. And finally, he did not seek to create a special class of people called Christians. I had been uncomfortable with that Gospel for as long as I had heard it used to justify anti-Semitism. All of those myths about the text have been the source of centuries of innumerable deaths, immeasurable suffering, and the kind of arrogant stupidity (oh forget I used such awful language) that we are seeing in Indiana, Arkansas, California...

But it was a closer reading of John, itself, yielded this understanding for me and helped me, at least in some degree to hear John with new ears and read him with new eyes. I was aided, in part, by Bishop John Shelby Spong's recent book *The Fourth Gospel: The Mystical Jesus* which caught my eye with a title that reflected my own thoughts – though I hoped the book would shed a far more learned eye on it than I ever could.

Opening the Gospel of John, I read "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of G_d ..." We could spend the whole time and the better part of a year on that passage – but I want you to hear this declaration – that this man, who would later be called the only begotten son of G_d, had, as a core teaching – that every single person who

could see in the light that he was trying to shed—was as holy as he, as kin to G_d. That every person could partake of the spirit of life – a spirit that cannot be defeated or dimmed. In his opening lines – John says – what is special about this teacher are his lessons – and his lessons are about the life abundant. It can be hard to feel that life abundant. In the midst of struggle and suffering – the sort that Jesus knew in his lifetime – the suffering of occupation by the Romans and of the cooperation of powerful Jews who sought to keep their power – such a message of life would have been refreshing, exciting, even inciting. It gave each person who had nothing to let go of or who could bear to let go of their illusions of earthly power – (today that would be a prestigious job, a big car, a big bank account – or the ownership of a massive so-called “news” conglomerate) a signpost to something remarkable. We are so used to the idea that there should be “powers and principalities”, “powers that be” – the powerful and the powerless – or, if we do not think there should be – we may believe that these things are inevitable. Jesus claim throughout the book of John is that we each have power – of an entirely different sort.

We need to let the scales fall from our eyes. Over the last few weeks we’ve talked about the Work that Reconnects – the healing work of Joanna Macy. The work is part of a cycle that can take you from despair or a sense of powerlessness to active hope and the strength to go forth. You begin in gratitude and move through sadness – deep grief, times. And then she calls the next stage – seeing with new eyes. Well – these aren’t cornea transplants – seeing with new eyes is recognizing that we have been looking at the world only on the surface and suddenly can see it more deeply. Seeing with new eyes is discovering that there is – beyond the powerlessness that we’re taught over and over again—a power within and among us that we have scarcely begun to tap. When we see with new eyes – we may discover, like the man confined to his bed for 38 years whom Jesus simply commanded to rise and carry his bed. Spong claims that the man represents not the crippling of the body – but paralysis of spirit. Perhaps no one here has had the experience of feeling emotionally paralyzed, afraid to move. Probably some have. We need to get out of bed – the comfort zone that first embraces and then traps us -- to discover that we can move, live, and make a difference.

We just need to wake up. Then Jesus ... came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha... said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of G_d?” So they took away the stone... he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

This is the message of Jesus and the gospel of John – Unbind him and let him go. The general message of John and of the teaching of Jesus is that we must come back from our many different forms of death in life and see the life before us and within us. It is a message of the Active Hope that is the outcome of Joanna Macy’s Work that Reconnects. Awaken to the hoped for world you can see with new eyes, that you are willing to dedicate your life to.

You know the expression “to be born again”? John uses it in Chapter 3 to show the folly of literalism when Jesus answers the questions of a man named Nicodemus by saying “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of G_d.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second

time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus is pretty patient with this man. Like, I might be tempted to say – duh – Nic – it's a metaphor.

The whole of John is a metaphor for letting go of illusions of powerlessness, for learning to fully live, for finding our sources of strength and courage.

And the crucifixion and resurrection – are lessons in the deathlessness and power of love, not in the sacrifice of the pascal lamb – but, and I have always believed this – they are lessons in the willingness to live in love and courage.

The Easter Story –if read in its true context – and without seeking to build a powerbase on top of it – is a message of active hope. A message that even in times of seeming powerlessness, when the challenge is greatest, we are and we create hope.

Jesus challenged the collaborators as well as the occupiers of Jerusalem and he intensified his challenge – placing his claim of the beloved community over and against the claims of the power of Caesar. He didn't do it because he wanted to die – but because he wanted to demonstrate something that political power never wants us to know – what living fully and deeply looks like. To teach that life is most worth living when it is given fully in love on behalf of others.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus often refers to himself in this way – I am light, I am resurrection. I AM. And there he is pointing to an ancient Jewish way of seeing G_d – as that which is – all that is. It reminded me of the Hindu expression Tat Tvam Asi. Thou Art That. In the Chandayoga Scripture it says that there was only Being in the beginning and then out of that it reads: “came the cosmos. There is nothing in the cosmos that doesn't come from that one Being. Of everything that exists, this Being is the innermost Self. Being is the seed, the truth, the Self Supreme. And you, Shvetaketu, you – are that!”

The Resurrection is not a literal resurrection. I hope that isn't too shocking. The Resurrection is the last significant parable that Jesus tells – with his living and dying. And though there might be a hundred ways to put it – Jesus says this:

“I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (By which – I believe that he does not mean if you do this I will love you – but that if you do this you will live in the love I have found.) he goes on: I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

In this greatest love there is resurrection. It's April 5 – but Friday, we celebrated the Passover and I read a passage that Ed Waxler sent me – a passage from one of my favorite speeches – given on that very date in 1968. The words of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Given the day before he was shot:

“I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life... But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do G_d 's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”

Now, that's an Easter Story. Were it not for microfilm, archived recordings, written histories, films, new reels, it could be that in one hundred or so years, Dr. King's story would be one told in mythic proportions. Already, just a couple of weeks ago, at the 50 year memorial walk through Selma and over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, it felt like a pilgrimage, like treading on sacred ground, following in his footsteps, though under very different

conditions. It wasn't Dr King's death that turned things around - by the time he was killed he had already inspired hearts, minds, and lives to work for justice. His death was a consequence of the willingness to face hatred with love. Hatred takes both lives and prisoners before surrendering, yet, love ultimately does win.

The arc of the Gospel of John is a metaphor of resurrection. But it is the story of ours - when the multitude are fed with something more lasting than food, it is a miracle of recognizing what can sustain us on the journey of the soul. When the man finally rises from his bed, it is we who arise and shake off our timidity, laziness, stuckness. When Lazarus rises from the dead it is we who are invited to arise and go out into the light of day. From the first Word of John to the end, we are being asked to walk in his footsteps - which are the footsteps of a teacher, whose life is said to have been long ago - but whose presence is felt even now.

I'll admit that, on that train so many years ago, I didn't have as clear a grasp of the Gospel of John as I have developed over the years. And, I'll also admit that I knew that I was, calmly and with great self assurance, gently challenging the literalism of my traveling companion. He was open and respectful. I could also see that my challenges were a lot to process. I know I said a few words about how G_d was too great to be captured and described in mere words or in one story. And that I knew that it's be great to have hours and hours to talk. And I tenderly changed the subject.

I can't say that, when we disembarked either one of us had converted the other. But then, I don't think either one of us was trying - just talking, sharing. An, in truth, our sharing went beyond the words - to that common ground upon we all stand. As we said goodbye, our connection was almost tangible. Beyond our words, we had connected, we had eaten some truth together, shared in a communion of the soul and the world looked different and we were each different. And we were both children of an immeasurable love.