



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

The empty tomb: holding lament in one hand and hope in the other

Rachel Mackintosh © 31 March 2024

I preached in this church last year on Easter Sunday. My theme was resurrection — I spoke about the power of love over hate. In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Knowing that when life is gone, love is left for shining.”

Since then, as most of you know, I have become a widow. My husband and your minister Clay Nelson died last November. In preparing for this year’s Easter Sunday service, I have read all eight of the Easter sermons he preached here in this church. I have seen that he talked about the necessity of experiencing Good Friday if we are to experience Easter.

In preparing for this service I have also come across a sermon from David Schwartz, UU minister in Boulder, Colorado. He comments that UUism has been called an Easter faith without Good Friday, that we tend to focus on the boundless goodness that follows from having a faith without a creed, that we shy away from lament.

Today we will contemplate the whole of Easter: the sorrow and the pain of the crucifixion, the empty tomb, and the resurrection. Buckle up.

What happened? What is the story?

We, mostly, do not believe in the fact of the resurrection, but we may believe in the truth of the resurrection.

What do we know about Jesus?

Jesus was a threat to an empire that relied on enemies. The Roman Empire relied on war to create peace. Jesus was an enemy of empire, a subversive, working to build the kingdom of heaven on earth — to build a beloved community, welcoming the prostitute and the tax-collector. Jesus was a revolutionary, combating the might of Pax Romana with love. Jesus was a teacher. He taught in parables — stories that were fictional, and in which can be found profound truths.

What story can we tell? What is the story of our situation? What calls us to be revolutionaries? What are we building *our* beloved community for?

My friend Bex writes poetry and they post it on Facebook. I asked them if I could use this poem they wrote just a few days ago:

“How it happens before the storm:

there is the darkening sky

and the light is strange;

it changes what you see.

You feel anxious,

not sure why.

You feel restless.

You might start a fight.

You might...

You might?

Something isn't right.

There is distortion in the air.

And lightning in the distance,

It is somewhere else, not here.

England. The States. Israel.

Not here.”

This is just start of Bex’s poem: the foreboding. There is an empire that is coming for us.

To experience Easter here, in this Auckland Unitarian community, we must also experience Good Friday.

In the story of Good Friday, disciples gathered at the foot of the cross to witness and experience the pain of the crucifixion.

I have joined a Facebook group for young widows and widowers. For many people in that group, the pain of the crucifixion comes out in the question Why? Why me? Why my love? Why now? Why so young? In general my experience is that the people asking Why believe in an interventionist god, an omniscient, omnipotent god. And if you do it makes sense to me that your pain will come out in the question Why? Here at the foot of the cross.

For me, when my husband Clay died last year at the beginning of November, the question was not Why but How. How? as I heard myself howling perhaps for the first time since before I had words, for I had no words ... How will I be able to be with other people when I am a great gaping ragged wound of the sort that makes us turn away from the screen when we watch medical dramas? How will I be able to be with people? How will I be able to be? Here at the foot of the cross.

We commonly understand, from the Gospel of John or — more likely in this non-Bible-reading time — from the manifold depictions in European art, that Jesus’ mother Mary was with others, witnessing the crucifixion. Here at the foot of the cross.

There is a vivid fictional account of Mary’s story in [Colm Tóibín’s \[Coll’ m Toibeen\] novel, *The Testament of Mary*](#). Mary testifies:

“ ... they want my description of these hours to be simple, they want to know what words I heard, they want to know about my grief only if it comes as the word ‘grief’, or the word ‘sorrow’. Even though one of them witnessed what I witnessed, he does not want it registered as confusion, with strange memories of the sky darkening and brightening again, or of other voices shouting down the moans and cries and whimpers, and even the silence that came from the figure on the cross. And the smoke

from the fires that grew more acrid and stung all our eyes as no wind seemed to blow in any direction. They do not want to know how one of the other crosses keeled over regularly and had to be propped up, nor do they want to know about the man who came and fed rabbits to a savage and indignant bird in a cage too small for its wingspan.”

In Colm Tóibín’s telling, this is how Mary experienced the pain of the crucifixion. In confusion. Here at the foot of the cross.

And Bex’s poem continues, though I start from the top:

“How it happens before the storm:

there is the darkening sky

and the light is strange;

it changes what you see.

You feel anxious,

not sure why.

You feel restless.

You might start a fight.

You might...

You might?

Something isn’t right.

There is distortion in the air.

And lightning in the distance,

It is somewhere else, not here.

England. The States. Israel.

Not here.

Then there are droplets pattering.

It smells like a river

on the roof, on the deck.

It isn't here,

but those drops of rain

sure are big.

Someone shouts 'bullshit'

while you are teaching about

respect for trans people.

Someone yells out

'what about blockers'

during a student presentation.

Five men break into a meeting,

shouting slurs.

The wind whispers

there are many banners

calling us pedophiles

folded up in garages across Aotearoa.

What are they waiting for?

Will the wind howl?

What will it say?"

And so in the Easter story, after the crucifixion comes the empty tomb.

A time of waiting, a time of in-between. A time of fear and also of possibility.

And, historically, we understand that the disciples took to the hills. They hid in fear for weeks, months ... in fear of the empty tomb. In fear that empire would come for them too. And, in fear, still carrying the pain.

Any in-between time is a time of possibility. And after the crucifixion, we sit with our pain. And here is the possibility. Franciscan friar Richard Rohr warns, "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it."

About the empty tomb, Clay quoted Australian New Testament scholar, [Greg Jenks](#):

“Empty tombs foster faith — not certainty. Empty tombs do not mark the end of the chase, only the beginning. An empty tomb invites compassion born of empathy for those still looking.”

So from the empty tomb, we have the possibility of transforming our pain, and of beginning the chase. What is our chase? What are we chasing? What are *you* chasing?

Let's chase resurrection.

Let us return to the story of the first Easter.

Two disciples not mentioned previously were on the road to Emmaus. They met a stranger and walked with him for a time. When they reached Emmaus the stranger made to keep walking, and they persuaded him to come in and eat with them. At that meal the stranger took, blessed, broke and shared bread with them. Only after that moment did they recognise the stranger as Christ.

It was in loving fellowship around a meal that they experienced their first Easter, with the realisation that hate had not killed love. Not even Rome, with all its legions, could do it. The love and compassion they [had] experienced in the person of Jesus had not died. It lived on in them. That gave them hope and courage to go on. That is what resurrection meant for them.

And if we come back to our world we see where Bex goes next.

“How it happens before a storm:

it is in your bones what to do.

Bring your family home.

Make sure of the pathways.

Gather. Bring food.

Tie down what needs to be tied,

and put away the rest.

Tend to the edges of your life.

If the storm breaks near you,

you will fight if you must.

And otherwise

hold close to your loves.

The droplets are flying.”

This is the empire we are facing. The droplets are flying. Great injustice is at our shores. Rainbow pedestrian crossings are being erased. Rainbow communities and other communities – Māori, workers, beneficiaries – face attempted marginalisation at best.

What do we build in the face of this threat. How do we stand up? What is *our* resurrection?

For Bex, it is “Hold close to your loves.” It can be that for us. As Unitarians, we are also called to open our doors to new seekers, to strangers, to all who come and wish to share our meal, to build a beloved community.

In our beloved community we can experience resurrection — where hate cannot triumph over love; death cannot triumph over life. Where injustice cannot prevail over justice.

In the words of Rob Schwartz from Boulder, “We are here to raise a lament; that old-fashioned word, lamentation, to raise to the sky a witness to the reality of suffering, to peel back all the false faces of the world that hide that fact. Lamentation is not despair; our work is to hold lament in one hand and hope in the other... walk through the world with sorrow and joy as our everyday companions.”

We carry with us the pain of the crucifixion and the fear of the empty tomb. And we transform this pain, through hope. We transform this pain in resurrection.

Even if we don't believe in the fact of the resurrection, let us believe in the truth of the resurrection. Let us do it together, in open, welcoming and beloved community.

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion groups

How do you hold lament in one hand and hope in the other?

How do you do it in community?