



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Love beyond the Threshold

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The autumn air has settled around us now, though I've noticed it's been unseasonably warm. Just yesterday, I walked through Cornwall Park, watching the leaves turning color before drifting down to carpet the paths. I watched as a father and daughter played with the leaves together throwing the leaves in the air, crunching them under their feet, and enjoying the season. It struck me how different our experience is here – while people in the northern hemisphere celebrate Easter as spring bursts forth, we in Aotearoa mark this season amid autumn's gradual transformation.

Here in Auckland, autumn has arrived with quite the mixed message this year. We've had the warmth lingering longer than expected, and Cyclone Tam reminded us rather dramatically that seasons are indeed changing. Our temperate climate doesn't always follow the textbook transitions, does it? Nature sometimes speaks in exclamation points rather than gentle whispers. Yet even with these weather surprises, we find ourselves in that familiar rhythm, moving from one season to another.

I think there's something meaningful in this timing. As the natural world around us prepares for winter, we gather to reflect on transitions in our own lives. Easter, regardless of our individual beliefs, gives us this moment to pause and consider the boundaries between endings and beginnings.

Looking at those falling leaves in Cornwall Park yesterday, I reflected on how darkness and light, death and life, exist together in these natural cycles that connect us all.

I reflected on how leaves don't simply end their story when they fall – they transform. And perhaps that's what brings us together today: this shared understanding that our lives, too, are made of endings that somehow become new beginnings.

My call to ministry found me through my encounters with death. I have strong memories of being present with my grandparents, and other family members as they took their last breaths. I watched their fears about what comes next fade as they approached their final moments. And as they took their last breaths, I held their hands, felt their transition in my own body, and observed a sense of peace descend.

These moments remain a mystery. Science provides theories but no definitive answers. What happens after death is an even greater mystery. Religion helps fill in these gaps, and for nearly every faith tradition, beliefs about what happens after death inform, at least in part, how we should live our lives.

My former minister, Forrest Church would often say, “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” [pause] This insight became even more poignant when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and told us he had only months remaining.

Outside our windows, autumn whispers to us. While many of Aotearoa’s native trees stand evergreen, steadfast through the changing seasons, we still see transformation around us. The introduced maples and oaks show their brilliant colors. The air shifts. Light changes. Days shorten.

Our landscape reflects our spiritual diversity. Some parts remain constant. Others transform dramatically. Both have wisdom to share.

The falling leaves speak a truth. They don’t simply die. They transform. Their green yields to brilliant displays of red and gold before they release their hold. Their letting go isn’t failure. It’s surrender to a greater cycle.

There is something profound in marking Easter during autumn rather than Spring. It reminds us that preparation for new life often requires release. And Surrender. And Transformation.

I sometimes imagine the deciduous trees feeling anxious about losing their leaves. If trees had therapists, they might express concern: “I’m not sure about this whole ‘letting go’ business. What if my leaves don’t grow back? What if next spring never comes?”

Yet the leaves fall. And the pohutukawa and kauri trees stand nearby, evergreen witnesses to the cycle of their deciduous neighbors. Year after year, they watch the falling, the decomposition, the return to earth that nourishes new growth. Nothing truly lost. Only transformed.

Most of us fear death. Many days I do.

We dread the unknown. We resist the end. We cling to those we love.

I remember my great aunt’s final year. Amazingly, she predicted it. I recall her telling me while handing over a few mangos from her tree that this would be the last mango season she would see. “Don’t be silly, you’ll see a few more!” I said. But it became

clear that my words were said more to comfort me than to comfort her. “I’m not afraid anymore,” she whispered “I’m curious.”

Curious. Not fearful.

Western Buddhist writer Alan Watts addressed our fear within his critique of what he called the “divided mind.” He explained that our dread of death connects to our mindset of expectation. “When each moment becomes an expectation,” Watts wrote, “life is deprived of fulfillment, and death is dreaded for it seems that here expectation must come to an end.”

Death isn’t just the end of bodily life. For the divided mind, it’s the end of hopes and plans not yet realized. The cessation of all our tomorrows.

But what if we could shift our perspective? What if, like the autumn leaves, we could see death not as an ending but as a transformation—a threshold to be crossed rather than a wall that stops our journey?

The cornerstone of Universalist theology is universal salvation, the belief that an all-loving divine force would not condemn anyone to eternal suffering.

Early American Universalists taught that all souls would ultimately be redeemed. While contemporary Unitarian Universalists may question the idea of an afterlife altogether, the values inherent in universal salvation continue to influence us, reflected in our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

What we can say with confidence is that conceptions of metaphysical hell, eternal damnation, or related concepts like original sin are counter to our theology. We know what the afterlife is not.

But unlike other religions that offer more concrete conceptions of what happens after death, we take a more open-ended approach. We don’t say what the afterlife is. We encourage the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, including about what comes after our final breath.

That openness is both comforting and discomfoting. Within uncertainty, fear can arise. The unknown is scary even if we know we won’t enter the inescapable heat of fire and brimstone.

This brings us to Easter.

A stone rolled away. An empty tomb. Grief transformed to wonder.

Whether we understand this story as literal truth or powerful metaphor, it speaks to something universal: our longing to transcend death's finality.

In this ancient narrative, love doesn't end with the last heartbeat. The tomb becomes not an endpoint but a doorway. The stone that sealed it becomes not a barrier but a threshold.

Just a few months ago, I received an unexpected call. The voice on the other end belonged to the mother of one of my dearest friends. There was a tremble in her words as she shared something with me she hadn't yet found the courage to tell her own son: She had just received a terminal diagnosis.

"I have only a few months left," she said.

We spoke for a while, but we barely mentioned her illness. Instead, we talked about her son. About her love for him. That was the very reason she called me.

You see, as she faced her own mortality, her thoughts weren't centered on herself. Her heart ached not for her own pain, but for the grief her son would carry. She wanted – needed – to know he would be comforted when she shared the news.

"How do I help him understand?" she asked me. "How do I leave him without breaking his heart?"

In that sacred moment between us, I shared the wisdom I had received from Rev. Forrest Church: that "love doesn't end with death, It just changes form."

"When you leave your physical body, your son will not experience you just as memory... but as presence."

A mother's love, perhaps the most powerful force in the universe, cannot be extinguished by death. It endures. It continues. It remains present long after final goodbyes are spoken.

I'm here with you this morning not to ask you to believe in the physical resurrection described in the Easter story. That's not our Unitarian way. But I invite you to consider the wisdom in the metaphor. What if love truly is stronger than death? What if the boundaries we perceive between life and death are more permeable than we imagine?

I believe there are two points of confidence about death: first, there is nothing to fear about the afterlife and, second, the process of dying – even when there is some physical pain – ultimately glides into an immense feeling of peace.

My certainty about a peaceful nature of death came in part from Rev. Church's observations on near-death experiences. Studies with those who have near death

experiences often describe being outside the physical body and having sensations of peace, joy, and harmony. They also often lead to significant changes in a person's perspective on life, increasing their emphasis on love and empathy.

As Rev. Church observed: "The patterns of these memories are remarkably similar. No one is eager to return to life. Their experience of the beyond is completely peaceful. They are enveloped in a diverse embrace."

We may make other observations about death from science. Studies show that as death approaches, brain activity rapidly increases, and there is a release of serotonin, a brain chemical that plays a role in our moods, suggesting feelings of happiness or contentment in our final moments. The chemical DMT which is also released at death can cause profound feelings of unity and the dissolution of boundaries between the self and the external world.

While observations and science can help inform our conception of what might lie beyond, it is important to remember that "theology is poetry, not science." My own theology about the afterlife is informed by philosophy, literature, science, and observations, but ultimately is rooted in faith. I have faith that there is nothing to fear about death. What comes next may last for a few minutes or an eternity, but we can be certain, absolutely certain, of one thing: it will be okay. It will be okay.

The impact of love stands central to my own understanding of life after death. The love we share creates a legacy that bodily death cannot touch. In a sermon Rev. Church explained that just as Jesus's love continues after his crucifixion, our love lives on:

"Death is love's measure, not only because at a loved one's death our grief equals our love, but also because, when we ourselves die, the love we have given during our brief span of days is the one thing death can't kill... God is love. And only love remains. Only the love we give away."

I think of a friend who lost his daughter, an experience no one should go through. He once told me that he felt her presence strongly when he's helping someone the way she would have. When he poured himself into his volunteer work helping others, her compassion flows through his hands. In those moments, the veil between life and death thins. His daughter isn't really gone. She's transformed.

Love transcends. Each act of kindness strengthens our bonds with each other and with the broader community. Each moment of compassion weaves us more tightly into the fabric of humanity. We are not separate beings moving through the world alone. We are connected - to each other, to those who came before, to those who will follow. Love forever impacts our community and our universe.

This love needs no grand gestures. A quiet moment of listening. A hand held in silence. A meal prepared with care. These simple acts continue touching hearts long after we're gone. They become our resurrection.

This unique Unitarian theology provides a tremendous lesson on how we ought to live. If love lives on, then our task, while we are alive, is to share as much love as we can. That is our purpose and the meaning of our existence.

Consider again the changing season. The leaves don't clutch desperately to their branches. They flame into their most brilliant colors before letting go. Their release isn't failure. It's fulfillment.

I was recently on a flight with an older couple going to Hawaii for a vacation. I ended up sitting next to the wife. "I'm in the autumn of my life," she told me, "And it's beautiful here."

I thought that was truly profound. In their final years they focused not on fear, but on wonder.

As we continued chatting and I shared how busy I was with work, and her words came with a lesson for me: "Don't wait for autumn," she said. "Live brilliantly now."

What if we approached our own autumn seasons - and eventually our winter - with such grace? What if we released expectations and fear, transforming into our most authentic and vibrant selves before crossing that final threshold?

As we gather on this autumn Easter morning in the most beautiful country on the planet, I offer you not certainty about what lies beyond death's threshold, but a profound truth I've witnessed at many bedsides: love transcends death.

Here we have a certainty about our afterlife. We actually do live forever. We are, in a profound sense, immortal. Our love -- the love we share with our community - continues even after we are gone. This truth transcends theological debates about souls or physical existence. Death cannot extinguish this love. It becomes our legacy, rippling outward through lives and generations. Even when the last person who remembers our name is gone, the love we've given continues its quiet work in the world.

The Easter story, whether understood as literal or metaphorical, invites us to stand at the threshold between these realms and to recognize that the boundary may be more permeable than we imagine.

So, as the autumn leaves fall around us, let us remember: Nothing that is loved is ever truly lost. The leaves return to the earth and become nourishment for what will grow

again. Our acts of love continue to ripple outward long after we are gone, nourishing the world in ways we may never fully comprehend.

In this season of transformation, it is my hope, it is my prayer, that we learn from the wisdom of the autumn leaves: to release with grace, to transform into our most brilliant selves, and to trust in the eternal cycle of which we are all a part. May we share love abundantly while we are here, knowing that in doing so, we create our own resurrection in the hearts and lives of those we touch.

In the face of mortality, may we find not fear but wonder. In the presence of uncertainty, may we find not anxiety but possibility. And in the reality of death, may we find the invitation to love more deeply, more authentically, and more -openly- in the precious time we are given.

For in the end, it is not the duration of our lives that matters most, but the love that flows through them.

And that, my dear friends, is a resurrection we can all believe in.

Amen.