



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"For What Do We Hope? A Service For Easter"

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"Woman, why are you weeping?"

Can you imagine? Really... imagine for a minute that you are Mary in our reading from the Gospel of [John](#) this morning. You are heartbroken with grief. You know your beloved friend and teacher has not gone through certain burial rituals prescribed by his Jewish faith, and seeking to do something - anything - to distract yourself from your sadness you go first thing in the morning, as soon as the Sabbath that prohibited work is over, to tend to your friend's body. Not only do you see that the tomb is open and apparently empty, when you go get others to confirm, they also find nothing! Then they leave, you are now thinking "All I wanted to do was this one simple thing and now I can't do that AND my friend's body is missing and I am SAD and do not WANT to solve a mystery right now!!" And then, then, as you stand there weeping in front of where your friend's body is supposed to be, suddenly there are two people there who weren't there before who are asking why you're crying. Which feels absurd, but the whole thing feels absurd, so you blurt out an answer and THEN you hear someone ELSE you didn't know was there come up behind you all, "Woman why are you weeping" yet again. (Honestly I think in a similar situation I would have kicked this guy in the shins just as a stress response!)

She "suppos[es] him to be the gardener," which must say something about the state of the person before her. But in a moment again, when he speaks her name, then she puts it together. In the midst of her distress and grief and sadness and stress and confusion, she puts it together.

But of course she is weeping. We just talked about big emotions last week. Tears come in response to all these things - distress, grief, sadness, stress, confusion - and other emotions besides! I know I've laughed so hard I've cried - I bet some of you have too!

“If what we see in Jesus is God’s own self revealed, then what we are dealing with here is a God who is really bad at choosing friends. A God who would rather die than be in the sin accounting business anymore. [...] A God unafraid [to get his hands dirty](#) for the ones he loves.”

Unafraid to get his hands dirty. Mary’s also unafraid to get her hands dirty. She doesn’t know exactly what will happen because of her actions. She’s not acting, in that moment, out of hope. What could she be hoping for arriving to do this work days after her friend has been killed? Sure, lots of us reading this know what’s coming - but in the moment, any person in that situation would not be doing what she was doing out of hope of seeing her friend again face to face.

Easter, this beloved holiday of rebirth and resurrection, of the coming of life again after death, is the embodiment of hope and the central point in the Christian calendar. Across the world people are hearing the very words we heard this morning, as John 20: 1-18 are the Common Lectionary Gospel reading for Easter this year. We talked a bit about the Common Lectionary in early December, when we talked about Advent - the Christian season of waiting in the weeks before Christmas. The Common Lectionary keeps Christian churches of many denominations literally on the same page, so Christians everywhere will hear the same scriptures each week, in the hope of building a common shared experience of their faith.

So Advent is a season of waiting, and Lent - the six weeks or so before Easter - is a season of preparation. And Easter, the biggest day of all in the Christian calendar, is all about hope!

What do we hope for?

Remember that Mary was willing to get her hands dirty, even in a situation where she likely felt very little hope. And she wasn't the only one! In the alternate Gospel reading for today in the Common Lectionary, [Mark 16: 1-8](#), we read "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?'"

This is a very practical consideration! They want to do what they can, they are trying to take their big emotions and do something generative with them, and they are ready to do the work - but still they wonder if the stone isn't too big for the three of them to shift, even working together. That doesn't deter them, however! They are willing to go out there and try anyway.

In each of these stories, when Mary is alone and when she is with other women, we can ask ourselves the same question: What were they hoping for?

To help their friend, to help each other, to help themselves. A chance to get their hands dirty doing really human, really important work.

"If what we see in Jesus is God's own self revealed, then what we are dealing with here is a God who is really bad at choosing friends. A God who would rather die than be in the sin accounting business anymore."

I'd say Jesus was pretty good at choosing friends, if they were willing to show up and get their hands dirty for him! And as for the sin accounting business... This is our Universalist heritage: the audacity to believe in a loving God who would NOT send their beloved children to any kind of eternal punishment. A God who doesn't just erase but throws away the balance sheet; a God who embraces imperfection over inaction. A God who is willing to get their hands dirty, who is friends with people who are willing to do the same, that idea (in and of itself) is worthy of praise and celebration.

As Unitarian Universalists, we gather on Easter Sunday partly out of tradition, partly out of habit. We make room – or try to – for many names for god, we welcome many understandings of that which is larger than us all but that connects us all the same, we call on each person to look to the god of their own understanding - and on Easter Sunday we want to consider Jesus, a man willing to do the work, to get his hands dirty, and remind ourselves that we can do that too. We can praise the work of change, the dirt-under our fingernails work, the “we don’t know what we’re going to find when we get there” work, the “we don’t know what to do with our grief but we’re gonna try to do something” work - that’s human work, and that’s holy work, and all of it is worthy of praise.

And what’s the language of praise traditional to Easter? Surely someone knows this! That’s right! “Alleluia” (or “Hallelujah”), which comes from the Hebrew words for “praise” and for “Yahweh” or God. And that’s literally what Christians are doing all around the world today - praising this man, Jesus, praising the promise of new life each spring, praising the work of dirty hands and open hearts.

You have noticed Elizabeth and Gretchen have been handing out these very noisy instruments of praise - because that’s what they are! We are going to make a holy, glorious, joyful noise each time we hear the word “Alleluia” in the rest of the service - are you ready? Let’s practice! “Alleluia!” “Alleluia!” “Alleluia!”

I think we’re all ready to do the work together. Praise be - alleluia!