

## **HOME FOR EASTER**

**A sermon given for Easter Sunday  
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason  
at UU Wellesley Hills on  
Sunday, April 21st, 2019**

**Holidays mean different things to different people. Even here, this morning, when we celebrate Easter Sunday as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, the day contains a host of associations for all us assembled. For some, it might occasion nostalgia for family and spiritual traditions that were important to them growing up, and possibly important to children and grandchildren, too, as they grew. For others, it might sting, reminding them of a certain Christian triumphalism and religious sanctimony or bigotry or worse. For still others, it might prompt annoyance with more fuss than they would like in an already crowded calendar. A few years ago, a friend sent me an e-card of the Easter Bunny bouncing in front of brightly colored eggs. Written over the image was exclamation: “This fool again!”**

**I immediately forwarded it to Mrs. P, who hosted every epic Easter party I’d ever attended, thinking she would enjoy the joke. At her house were the customary trappings of the holiday: big bonnets, bursting bouquets, rainbow-hued eggs in baskets, the sweetest candy, and yes, the occasional Easter bunny perched across from palms that had been woven into a cross.**

Each year, she put on a show-stopper not because she considered it frivolous, but rather because for her, Easter was deathly serious. She considered it the one religious holiday that truly mattered. As a devout Episcopalian and church Deacon, it more than anchored her spring; it organized her life.

“You kids can go wherever you want whenever you want: Thanksgiving, Christmas, July 4th, I don’t care,” Mrs. P said. “But everyone has to be home for Easter. I get everyone home at Easter.” How I got to be one of her kids is a complicated story, but not an uncommon one in my generation. Mrs. P had one son and one daughter and the two of them were as generous in spirit as she was — they had gotten used to sharing their family with lots of us kids, kids whose parents were divorced or remote or deceased or some combination of those, who were fostered for a little while or a little longer, sometimes, in her household.

Mrs. P raised a lot of us of us kids, which is why we called her Momma P most of the time. “What I don’t understand, honestly,” she told me once, “is how a person could go through life without believing in the Resurrection. I don’t think I could make it through if I didn’t believe in that, at least.” Even those of us kids who did not share her particular belief system knew what and how she believed and we came home for her, partly out of respect but primarily out of gratitude, because Mrs. P gave us a sense of what home was, or could be, when love abounded.

In his reflection on Easter, the Rev. Carl Scovel spoke of the way he made “sense of what Christians call the paschal mystery”. Now a

retired UU minister, Rev. Scovel had for 20 years a radio pulpit on a classical radio station in Boston, and from it preached nearly a thousand five-minute homilies, including “After He Died.” What he gleaned from the Easter story was the need for love to both “become universal” and “delocalized” at the same time.

Looking at Jesus of Nazareth, Rev. Scovel understood that “his wisdom and compassion... had to be dispersed, diffused, scattered, if it was ever to become part of the life of the world” and span the years. He saw a corollary to that in own family after his father’s death. After he died, he no longer belonged in the hospital, Rev. Scovel wrote, but belonged more intimately to his surviving wife and children, who could recall “his jokes and his quotes... his sadness or puzzlement”, and in the end, his boundless affection for them all.

His father’s legacy, like the legacy of so many of our beloved, Rev. Scovel declared, became a variation on Jesus’ revered Parable of the Sower, “like this scattering of good seed over the great field” of successive generations, cause for both joy and sorrow at what has gone before.

Groundbreaking physician Ira Byock himself has written extensively about what he calls the “ongoing power of memories”, knowing they persist after a life has ended. “‘People live on within us’ is not just a pleasant nostrum from a Hallmark card or metaphysical assertion. In tangible ways, our relationships with the people we have lost though death continue,” Dr. Byock contends. “Death can’t change that; even death is not that strong. In many ways, both conscious and

**unconscious, people continue to influence our everyday perceptions of the world and our sense of ourselves,” he concludes.**

**As a pioneering figure in hospice care and palliative medicine, Dr. Byock has given a great deal of thought to another expression of the afterlife, namely the way the departed can remain present for good. He recognizes that death does not end a human relationship so much as alter it. If people embrace this inevitable alteration, they can better tend to their mental, emotional, and spiritual welfare.**

**“From a psychological perspective, it is possible to complete relationships with people who have died,” Dr. Byock notes in one of his seminal books. In my more than a dozen years of psychotherapy practice with people who were bereaved, I saw this happen successfully in case after case with my clients. Such completion was likeliest to succeed, though, when the dying actively sought to impart a sense of completion to the living. The bereaved were not always left disconsolate.**

**Although we celebrate Easter in this Sanctuary, we do not do that in the manner customary in churches. We have not journeyed together through Holy Week, starting with Palm Sunday and moving through Maundy Thursday, which commemorates the Last Supper, the Passover Seder that Jesus celebrated with his disciples in Jerusalem the night before his crucifixion. During their last meal, the gospels tell us, Jesus directed his followers: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”**

**This mandate he gives the apostles is the same mandatum that the communion service on Maundy Thursday recalls: to abide in love. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in... love,” Jesus says. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”**

**That Easter hymn that we sung this morning about the green blade rising insists: “Love lives again.... Love is come again.... Love’s touch can call us back to life again.... ” It can, if we allow it enter, if grant it readmission to our lives. But we are understandably suspicious of love, because as humans, we know too well the swing of its pendulum: love and loss and love and loss and love — and where does it end?**

**The Easter narrative is circular, not linear, and not merely because it comes around at the same time each year. With its “paschal mystery”, Easter confounds our usual assumptions about endings and beginnings. I suspect that was part of what Mrs. P loved about it too, that certainty about life that it upended. She had a great sense of humor and loved a good joke, so upending certainty was part of her routine.**

**So when Mrs. P was in the hospital for a short stay just after Thanksgiving and given a dire diagnosis of a particularly aggressive cancer and then a poor prognosis with only a short time to live, it seemed impossible that she would not be with us for Easter, because she always was. We refused to believe that it could be otherwise.**

**Yet within months, right in the middle of the Lenten season, still shy of Holy Week, she was in the hospital and very near to the end of her**

life. Her extensive and extended family was there in shifts, as were her numerous friends from her church and her town, and mostly we knew each other on sight, from all those years and all those remarkable Easter Sundays. At one point during an especially busy day on her hospital floor, Mrs. P turned to me and asked, “Why is everyone here so upset? Aren’t I just going home?”

“Of course you are,” I told her. Mrs. P had taught me that home was the place where love awaited you, where love anticipated your arrival and claimed you as its own, and between us, in that moment, there was no confusion. “You always told me that you didn’t know how a person could go through life without believing in the Resurrection, and here you are, a person who has gone through her entire life believing in the Resurrection. Of course you’re going home.”

One of her favorite writers was the poet May Sarton, and now whenever I think of Mrs. P, I recall Sarton’s poem titled “All Souls”. In it, she writes: “Did someone say that there would be an end, an end, oh, an end, to love and mourning? What has been once so interwoven cannot be unraveled, nor the gift ungiven. Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,” she observes. “Dark into light, light into darkness, spin... As the lost human voices speak through us and blend our complex love, our mourning without end.”

At her crowded funeral, the Episcopalian priest confessed that he had never attempted an accurate tally of how many kids Mrs. P helped raise in addition to her own daughter and son, although he knew her warm hospitality was legendary. The same person who opened her heart and home to us was — as Rev. Scovel would say — delocalizing

love in a new way. Her committal at the cemetery was planned for that Palm Sunday, at such an uncomfortable stretch from Easter, but not too far from her house.

In one of the gospel accounts of the Resurrection, the angels who appear at the tomb of Jesus ask the early morning visitors there: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” It seems a callous question to put to people who are plainly grief-stricken and traumatized. But it is meant to blur our boundaries between the absent and the present.

As distinct as the gospel accounts are, in all three of the synoptic gospels, Jesus followers are told, “He is not here; he is risen.” This marks the beginning of their devotion to him being delocalized. This marks the beginning of a globalized devotion, much to their “amazement”, as the evangelists note.

In a prayer to the “God of Easter and infrequent Spring,” the late UU minister the Rev. Clark Dewey Wells petitions, “Lure us to fresh schemes of life...” More often than we like, necessity lures us because the old schemes have been scuttled by unfortunate, if not tragic, circumstance.

Following a massive fire in Notre Dame this past Monday, worshippers in Paris were forced to find alternate places for their services this Holy Week and Easter Sunday. Their displacement was managed, the devastation to the heritage site was less than originally feared, and funds for rebuilding were rapidly raised. People’s sense of urgency was unmistakable. “Hope is what makes us live,” one

Parisian told a reported on Tuesday. Soon there was also greater public awareness about three historically Black churches in rural Louisiana that were recently lost to arson. Now nearly \$2 million has been pledged for their reconstruction.

Devotion can always be delocalized. In fact, that seems the truest mark of devotion, how adaptable it is, how readily it morphs. When I think of people I have loved and admired who believed the Easter story — not as an article of faith, mind you, but as a personal practice — I see that for them, the Resurrection was not a special event but an ongoing process. Misplaced kids could be raised, as could burned buildings, and they could be raised anywhere. Resurrection was a spiritual path through life.

For me now, Easter is less an answer to questions about the continuous cycle of life and death and more a response to our routine human rhythm of love and loss. When fond and familiar places and faces can no longer be found, we have to reorient ourselves to a deeper reality, not an alternative one. Who ever said there would be an end to love? Or rather — what if ended with love, each time, with everything before and after transient and illusory? To this day, honestly, I do not think of Mrs. P as dead. Today I refuse to seek the living among the dead. Improbably enough, I believe that Mrs. P is always home for Easter.

So like those people hopping around in rabbit ears or strolling the avenue in outrageous bonnets, I am happy to play the fool this holiday, the person who honestly does not know any different in life. Not everyone will feel the same way about this holiday, obviously. But



**I do not think that Easter or those who celebrate it so lavishly are the least bit foolish. I suspect they are in on one of the best jokes ever, and on my better days, I get it.**

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