

Resurrections In Our Midst

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

In Mark Chapter 16 it is written: "when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'

When they looked up they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him just as he told you."

This, this resurrection story, is but one of great literature's accounts of the raising of the dead. But one of myriad, very human efforts to understand death, and to make a promise of everlasting life to the living.

On this beautiful Easter morning, let us open to the glorious, often inexplicable transformation that sometimes – no, often-comes out of darkness, out of fear, out of tragedy, out of suffering.

"When the sun had risen, they went to the tomb." How often are we drawn again and again to the moments of loss in our lives? How often do we return to the bedside, the graveside, the tomb of our deepest pain, our most unresolved most broken places?

Do we not return again and again to that wound that seems to define our lives?

And don't we seek help to roll away the stone...the heavy barrier that blocks the sun, that keeps us stuck inside our cave, our tomb, the barrier that keeps new growth from happening?

Too often we imagine we'll have to roll those very large stones away all on our own. Don't we keep our own counsel, our own secrets, attempting year after year to roll that stone uphill all alone?

But the gospel writer tells us otherwise. He tells a story focused not on an individual, but on a community. The women returned together- just as the last meal brought Jesus and his disciples together, just as the crowd gathered at Golgotha-all along this story, that we think is only about one man, all along it is a story of communities. If we support one another, act together, return together in faith, in empathy and love...we too might find that the stone has already been rolled away.

Let me explain. Let me tell you some stories of faith and resurrection in our midst today. I'll begin with one wonderful story of people working together to face suffering and oppression that leads unto death. It's the story of how a community rolled away the stone of our unjust and often tragic health care system.

This week a few of us attended the ribbon cutting at the new Mansfield Kaseman Health Care Clinic in downtown Rockville. The creation of a health clinic for the uninsured in Rockville has been a dream and a goal of Community Ministries of Rockville for a long, long time.

Our congregation has a long history of membership and participation with Community Ministries of Rockville. We were partners in their founding. Members of our congregation have served on their board. We support them financially through our social justice line item in our budget, and their current director, Agnes Sanes, has attended many of our peace vigils and benefit concerts, and spoken from our pulpit.

There are over 8,000 uninsured people in Rockville alone. They are part of our community and they have suffered because they had no access to health care. They lived in a tomb of pain and vulnerability. Their children attended Rockville schools without the protection of a family health plan. Living in fear because of lack of medical coverage affects the spirit as well as the body. The oppression of poor health blocks the sun, isolates people in their pain, leaves our friends, neighbors and family members to suffer alone.

Since 2004, Community Ministries has partnered with Mobile Medical Care to deliver health services in mobile van units at Crusader Lutheran Church and at Lincoln Park Community Center. Over 1,600 patients were served. Now CMR hopes to serve 5,500 patients annually.

So it was with pride and joy that the community came together for the ribbon cutting at the clinic. The coalition that had been built over the years in the planning phase was there to celebrate. Federal and state officials, our county executive, our mayor and council members – all were represented. And clergy and lay folks from the member churches and temples and mosques of Community Ministries were there as well.

It is a blessing to be an integral part of Community Ministries and the name of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville was called out as one of those institutions sponsoring a room in the clinic by a contribution of \$5,000. You'll have an opportunity to give toward that amount in a few weeks.

It is not a stretch to see this rising of the clinic as a resurrection story for our community. What has been built will serve and save lives for years to come. The stone has been rolled away for the uninsured in Rockville, and Agnes Sanez and all who worked for this health care miracle have gone ahead to Galilee to carry the good news.

Spring flowers are only so extraordinarily beautiful after a long, hard winter. This incredible spring day is a gift made more meaningful because we have been through long days and nights of cold and wind and rain.

Most Unitarian Universalists do not celebrate Easter Week. Good Friday is, for most, just a good day off of work or school. But I can't shake my passion for both Passover and Easter. Both are holidays of liberation and new life. Both begin in stories of suffering and death. Once upon a time, the Jews were slaves in Egypt. Once upon a time, the prophet Jesus died upon a cross.

I need to pay attention to Good Friday and its meanings in order to fully take in the light and good news of Easter.

This week brought a story of suffering and death among a group of high school girls in Massachusetts. One girl, new in the school, new in the country, was bullied and belittled by the "in crowd." She was so affected by the cruelty of her peers that she committed suicide. And those implicated in the bullying are being held responsible for her death. Shocking! Horrible!

Unbelievable!

The cruelties of junior high and high school are legion. "Mean girls" is a category of concern just like "mean boys" and "mean adults" is a category of concern. I don't know if any light will emerge from this particular tragedy, but stereotyping teens or girls as mean, does little to roll away the stone of pain.

There is also a story of compassion and generosity among high school-age girls. It's a story of generosity- a story of prom dresses. A decade ago, a young girl in New York City had the idea of putting together once-worn prom dresses, and matching them with girls who could not afford a fancy dress for a prom or Sweet 16 party.

Over the years, she has collected 20,000 barely-used formal dresses and given them away to girls who need them. It is called operation "fairy dust." And many have helped to make it happen each spring. Some contribute money to help pay for storage for the dresses, a local business cleans the dresses free of charge. Others help to arrange the big event...where girls come and shop, escorted by a volunteer "personal shopper." It is much more than a used-dress swap...it is an act of sisterhood. It is an act of generosity. It is an act of renewal...an act of hope.

The good news of Easter is that life and love overcome death. That from suffering, goodness will rise. The good news of Easter is that in community we roll away the stone, in community we walk toward Galilee to meet new possibilities, to encounter the rising of life over death.

Last week, a member of our congregation was driving on Route 66 into Virginia when he felt something happening to his heart. He eased over to the right and, slowing down, he put on his flashers. And then he passed out. When he came to, his car was up against a concrete barrier, but he was unhurt and people were stopping to help.

A stranger called 911 and an ambulance took him to the nearest ER. His heart did something funny again while he was in the ambulance...so they knew something was amiss with the electrical circuits. At the hospital they gave him every kind of test possible and he ended up with a defibrillator implanted in his chest and a couple of nights in the hospital. He is home recuperating.

Who knows what might have happened if no one stopped to help. But people did stop and they were terrific. He got the help he needed. I don't doubt that those strangers saved his life.

He probably doesn't know their names and they don't know that they may have saved his life. We don't always know the consequences of our actions. We don't know how our small act of kindness or generosity contributes to saving lives.

Those who made the health clinic a reality won't know how many lives are touched, how many homes are made happier. How many people gained new faith in humanity.

The girls who donate dresses to be given away won't know how much it matters to the girls who receive them. They won't know that they have given memories of a lifetime. They won't know the beauty and happiness to which they have contributed.

The people who help a stranger won't know how much it means...how much has been saved...how much hope has been passed on.

Former Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter have written a new book titled, *Made for Goodness*. It makes a strong case for the essential goodness of people. In spite of suffering and killing, in spite of hate and prejudice, in spite of oppression and greed...Bishop Tutu offers this simple and compelling message: We are made for goodness.

This, is our Easter message.

"We are made for goodness!"

What would it mean for the world? What would it mean for our community? What would it mean in your life...if you believed, if you lived, if you knew that you were made for goodness?

The message intended in the life of Jesus is captured in the Golden Rule...the fundamental message of all faiths everywhere:

"Love your neighbor as yourself." "And also love your enemies."
Live the goodness you are made for.

So May It Be/Amen/Blessed Be