

Rolling Away the Stone

Easter Reflections
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The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
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Reading

We have shared with you on other occasions this year stories told by Rachel Remen, the pediatrician turned counselor to those living with cancer, and those who care for them. Our story this morning comes from Remen's own life, and appears in her book, Kitchen Table Wisdom.¹

Remen grew up in a secular Jewish family, though she would draw great strength from her memories of her grandfather, an immigrant rabbi to whom she was very close though he died when she was only seven.

While she was in college, still only 16, Remen collapsed one day from what would eventually be diagnosed as Crohn's disease, a devastating affliction of the intestinal tract that is chronic, recurrent and painful, with many complications. She was in a coma for six months. When, miraculously, she came out of it, her father insisted that she come back home and abandon her quest to be a doctor. But her mother stepped in. To her father's astonishment, she disclosed that over the years, she had saved up what you might call "egg money," set aside from household funds. She would use *this* money to pay for Rachel's education. So Remen was able to graduate, and go on to medical school.

But it was not easy. It took every ounce of strength and endurance she could muster. She says that at first, she reacted with rage at this disease which now stood in the way of her dreams.

I needed to consult my disease on the simplest matters. Would it allow me to eat a piece of cheese? Did I have the strength to walk up this flight of stairs? . . .

Perhaps only an adolescent can feel the sort of rage I felt then. I hated all

¹Rachel Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), pp. 29-31.

the well people, hated the side of my family that had passed me these genes. I hated my body. I was in this state of rage for almost ten years.

Shortly before my final year of medical training, things changed. I had been offered the opportunity to be senior resident at a fine training hospital. Yet I had barely enough strength to do the work I was presently doing. Here was one more dream stolen. That afternoon I drove up to the old beach house that had been given to our hospital for the use of the faculty and staff. In turmoil, I walked wearily along the water's edge, comparing myself to others my own age, people of seemingly boundless vitality. I came up wanting. I remember thinking that this disease had robbed me of my youth. I did not yet know what it had given me in exchange.

In response to these painful thoughts, a wave of intense rage flooded me, the sort of feeling I had experienced many times before. But for some reason, this time I did not drown in it. Instead, I sort of noticed it go by, and something inside me said, "You have no vitality? Here's your vitality."

Shocked, I recognized the connection between my anger and my will to live. My anger was my will to live turned inside out. My life force was just as intense, just as powerful as my anger, but . . . [like] the power of a dammed river . . . this power was trapped. . . . [In] the form of anger I could not use my strength to build the kind of life I longed to live. And then I knew that I no longer needed to do it this way. I knew with absolute certainty that my pain was nobody's fault; that the world was not to blame for it. It was a moment of real freedom.

I took that job. When things got rough, I asked others for their help. I had been too angry and bitter to do that before. It was a very important year. . . . That rage served me well. It defended my integrity. It said no to the limitations of my disease. But something else would be required to say yes to my life.

Anthem

Sermon

On that first Easter morning, the story tells us, "as the day was dawning," Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb, to anoint Jesus' body, and

found an angel there instead, and they were frightened. But the angel said, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. . . . He has been raised from the dead. . . .” “Go quickly,” the angel said, and tell his disciples. And they did.

In the days that followed, the stories go on to tell us, Jesus appeared to his disciples, who were hiding in an upper room. He said, “Peace be with you,” and showed them his wounds, where he had been nailed to the cross. He appeared to others, who had gone back to being fishermen, and told them where to fish. And in a story that is told again and again, he appeared to two of his disciples. They did not recognize him as he walked with them toward a village called Emmaus, listening to them talk about the events of the last few days. Only as he sat down to eat with them at the inn, did they recognize him – and as they did, he vanished.

This is what the stories tell us. What are we to make of them? It is hard enough for Christians, but we are Unitarian Universalists, proud people of Reason, often skeptics by disposition. While Christians dwell in the Easter story for three entire months, from Lent through a five-week Easter season, we nowadays visit it at most for a brief hour on Easter Sunday, along with Passover and Spring.

Of course, it’s not that any number of weeks we might spend in pondering it would make it easy to believe in the Resurrection. Truly there’s much we’re asked to take on faith. But not necessarily a literal faith. We’ll come back to that.

As someone raised in our own tradition, I suppose I never have believed it. Yet though I knew in my head that no amount of rational analysis could prove that it really happened, I think I secretly hoped, in coming to my Unitarian church at Easter, to hear something that would explain it, and let me believe.

A colleague in California, writing tongue in cheek in a recent issue of Quest, the newsletter of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, suggested that we might

replace all the tests now imposed by our denomination for credentialing as a Unitarian Universalist minister, and substitute just one: “Explain Easter.”

But of course, he didn’t mean explain how Jesus rose from the dead. He meant, explain how your UU theology empowers you to offer hope to those who suffer. We live, he said, in a “hard and hurting world.” The challenge of our lives is “showing that love is possible. Over and over again.” That’s an Easter faith.

Faith in the power of love is one of the many dimensions of Easter. Easter is my favorite sermon of the year, just because it has so many dimensions, and all of them are about finding hope – and I’m not even speaking of the idea that it was God’s will that Jesus die, to atone for our human sins. Atonement theology is not a part of my Easter faith.

For me, Easter is not a conundrum to be explained. It is a faith to be lived. Today I want to speak of the dimension of new life, that underlies the image of resurrection.

It has taken me many years to realize that I don’t have to believe in a literal resurrection, and I don’t have to explain it. What happened to Jesus’s body doesn’t really matter. The story of Jesus’s resurrection, and the Passover story, speak to us, if we will let them speak to us at all, not for their literal truth but as stories that draw us into them, in faith that they could be our stories, too. It’s that faith that can give us hope.

The story of Jesus’s resurrection reminds us that whether or not we are Christians, for all of us there are stones in our lives which have kept us trapped in suffering or meaninglessness. If we can roll these stones away, we too can find resurrection.

The story of the exodus reminds us that no matter what our oppression, there is a promised land, a land of hope. It can be ours, or our children’s, if we

can find the courage to leave behind us the security of our bondage and begin the wilderness journey toward the promised land. Always I am powerfully moved when I hear Dr. King's words to the striking garbage collectors of Memphis, and their families, on the night before he died. "I've been to the mountain top," he said, "and I have seen [s-e-e-e-e-n] the promised land. . . . And I may not get there with you, but I want you to *know, tonight* that we as a people will get to the promised land!" The next day, he was felled by an assassin's bullet, but in the strength of faith, his people have kept on struggling through the wilderness. Today, these forty years later, they are close enough to see it. The whole civil rights movement was an exodus story, and it was faith in the exodus story that provided much of its strength.

But you don't have to be Jewish or Christian to find hope and draw strength from the exodus story, or from the Easter story. They are universal stories. You only have to have faith in the resilience of the human spirit, which is what they celebrate. But the images of resurrection, and of exodus, help to make them seem real. As we revisit them, and as we lift up the countless stories of other people who have rolled away the stones and unbound the chains that have held them back, it's easier to believe that we can do it, too.

We don't know why it happened to Rachel Remen. That's one of life's mysteries. She was walking along that ocean beach, when suddenly it just came to her that she could see her life in new way. With her new insight, she was able to roll away the stone of anger that had blocked her way. She was able to say yes to life, and get on with living from her dreams. For her it had nothing to do with the Easter story or Jesus. But hers is an Easter story, nonetheless, and if it could happen to her, it could happen to us.

There are Easter stories all around us, here in this meetinghouse this morning. And there are stories that could become Easter stories. Maybe yours. I'm thinking of people who through Twelve Step programs are pushing back

stones of addiction. People who like Remen have found new life, after a diagnosis of Crohn's or cancer, AIDS or bipolar disease, after a heart attack or stroke, a divorce or the death of a loved one. People who have lost their eyesight or hearing or mobility. Even this congregation itself, coming together after a terrible fire. Whatever the stone we have refused to let it trap us as helpless victims. We have pushed it away. We have found new life and new hope.

Whatever our theology, even if Easter never happened, Easter always happens. Easter is for everyone.