

PASSION AND RESURRECTION: THE CONNECTION

A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Many of you may not know the story behind Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ*.

It seems that Mel was led into the wilderness for forty days, where the devil came to him, in order to tempt him. Satan said, "I offer you great riches. All you have to do is sell a thousands-of-years-old story, a story that has already been given to the world for free. We will be able to sell it through churches, so that will make it appear good. You take out the love and the peace and the hope and the promise of the story, and you can sell the violence and the hatred and the pain. You can use Christ's suffering to sell *your* version of the faith."

And Mel replied, "Deal."

OK, OK. That little joke, like a lot of jokes, isn't exactly fair. Mel Gibson was not out just to make money. He is a genuinely, intensely devout conservative Catholic. The torments of Jesus' tortures speak eloquently to him, and he was called to present them to others. He has a right.

However, the joke illuminates part of the reason I hate and deplore Gibson's movie. (The other part involves the movie's anti-Semitism: going to artistic lengths to make the Pilate, the Roman wielder of power appear compassionately conflicted, while portraying the Jewish leaders as merely self-involved savages.) I devoutly hope, with all the devotion at my disposal, that no one in the room today will enrich Gibson's coffers by going to this cruel and unilluminating movie. (Trust me, I'm your minister.)

The main reason I hate Gibson's movie is that it elevates and exalts suffering, while essentially ignoring the transforming power of life and hope.

One of the primary reasons for all religion, through all ages, has been to remind us that love and hope and peace and promise exist, in spite of the undeniable pain and violence and hatred and suffering of this world. Religion in its wholeness helps us remember that there is winter in human life, and death—and that there is also the springtime of renewal. True faith of every stripe reminds us of the mystery of God's grace, of joy and release that come to us unbidden, often in our darkest times.

Some of us were reared with the idea that Jesus was killed to wipe away the original sin into which we all are born, thus bringing eternal life out of death. (Or we have often seen or heard that idea around us.) Let me give you an alternate interpretation of that theological notion, one at odds with Gibson's, and more universalist. Marcus Borg, one of the most eloquent and generous-spirited of the Jesus Seminar scholars, suggests in his newest book an interpretation that allows us to understand Jesus' execution and resurrection as an event conveying hope to all people:

[I]n its first-century setting, the statement "Jesus is the sacrifice for sin" had a quite different meaning. The "home" of this language, the framework within which it makes sense, is the sacrificial system centered in the temple in Jerusalem. According to temple theology, certain kinds of sins and impurities could be dealt with only through sacrifice in the temple. Temple theology thus claimed an

institutional monopoly on the forgiveness of sins; and because the forgiveness of sins was a prerequisite for entry into the presence of God, *temple theology also claimed an institutional monopoly on access to God*. [Emphasis mine]

In this setting, to affirm “Jesus is the sacrifice for sin” was to deny the temple’s claim to have a monopoly on forgiveness and access to God... It meant: God in Jesus has already provided the sacrifice and has thus taken care of whatever you think separates you from God; you have access to God apart from the temple and its system of sacrifice. It is a metaphor of radical grace, of amazing grace.

.... It is...ironic to realize that the religion that formed around Jesus would within four hundred years begin to claim for itself an institutional monopoly on grace and access to God. (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* Harper San Francisco 2003, pp. 94-96.)

Borg’s Christianity tells us that we all have access to the Holy, to that high and mysterious Great Whatever before which we stand in humble wonder. We—you and I—have access to it, apart from any church or temple, however stridently that institution may declare its exclusiveness. Jesus’ death is “a metaphor of radical grace, of amazing grace.”

And are we not all in desperate need of gifts of grace? Is it not clear how often things happen that we simply do not control, however strong our will? Must we not declare our faith that life can ultimately arise from the various deaths we experience?

Last week, I conducted a memorial service for a 45-year-old friend, an amazingly creative and generous spirit who had risen above his brain tumor for nine years. The week before, we in this congregation mourned and reflected on the heart-breaking suicide of 45-year-old woman whose life had been a torment. In my office, I hear stories of spirit-killing childhoods, of authoritarianism and abuse and abandonment. I also hear stories of “sin,” of acts that separate an individual from the good, that cause remorse and sorrow, conscience-stricken hearts—acts I personally understand all too well, little deaths of the good. We need more than the strength of our own wills—although we do need that—to heal from the brokenness of human grief and regret. Whatever our individual faith’s theological foundation, we all need Easter’s message: there is hope; there is light; there is spring; there is life.

Every one of us has known the crimson flaying and the flat grayness of loss: a beloved person, a cherished animal, a relationship upon which we had pinned our life’s hopes, the job we knew we could count on, the vigor and beauty of our youth, a place we hoped to settle in forever, the health we took for granted.

And we have also known the grace of life and hope’s return. This mysterious miracle happens in so many ways. It happens through loved ones accepting us as we are until we feel the healing flow through us. It happens from words we chance upon just as we are ready to hear them. It happens through opening our hearts to others, extending a hand. It happens through the bonds of community. It happens when we hear the stories of other people. It so often feels as though it comes from source beyond our own strength and will—but we experience it here, on this earth, in these bodies.

Sometimes it happens because of one of nature's wonders. Consider the story of the rhubarb.

About the time Bob and I got married, thirteen years ago, someone gave me a little rhubarb plant, which I unknowingly planted in road mix, down by the junipers. Bob saw it and said, "Honey, there's no way in the world that poor plant can make it there. Even the junipers had to struggle to get a toehold." Well, I wasn't having any of *that*, never mind how much I didn't know about rhubarb or any kind of Idaho soil. I spent years "proving him wrong." I watered and I tended and I coddled. The leaves reached the giant size of, well, about two or three inches in diameter.... But it was alive, and alive I would keep it! Bob and I had fun with our years of mock controversy over the "world's largest teacup rhubarb."

And then, in May, 1998, my younger sister Kate died—the person with whom I had spent my life singing, both harmony and dissonance. Kate came into this world—and left it—convinced (with sometimes mixed feelings) that her big sister could do anything. But I could not keep her from dying.

I grieved beyond words, beyond thought, into a desolation from which there seemed no resurrection.

That year, I was furious at my little rhubarb—apparently for staying alive under my care, when I couldn't keep Kate alive—and I simply shrugged my shoulders and had nothing to do with it. It was also going to die and good riddance, too. All through the hot, hot summer, then the rigors of winter: no water, no fertilizer, no care, not even a glance in its direction.

The following spring began to arrive—and with it the beginning of my spirit's resurrection, thanks to the life-giving offices of time, and of friends and counselors and loved ones (many of you in all three categories sitting here this morning). The softening of my hardened heart made me regret that I had killed the hardy, silly little plant I had made so much of for so many years. I hesitatingly, slowly, walked down to visit the site—to visit the grave.

Lo, and behold! Those fabulously-red little shoots were perking up above the ground, just as though I had never killed them. The wave of relief and joy that flooded my heart amazed me. I didn't create spring, and I can't destroy it. Kate would not arise, but life would. Kate's and my years of singing, laughing, fighting, crying, talking, loving would arise in my soul and in the souls of the people I touch.

The next year, 2000, I transplanted the rhubarb into decent soil. On Good Friday of this year, the biggest leaf measured 7 _ inches from stem top to leaf tip—larger than the biggest one at its prime last year. I think Kate would have been tickled to death at the ongoing rhubarb saga, and I can just see her wide smile, as I give the plant its weekly feeding or daily watering, or gaze at it through the kitchen window.

The Kate-Elizabeth-rhubarb story is like Gibson's movie and like life: it contains pain and heaviness of heart, and the can't-face-another-day desolation that are part of the human/divine condition. It also—like life but *not* like the movie—embodies the fact and miracle of resurrection. Some churches sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today"; we sing "Lo the Earth Awakes Again"—and we're all saying the same thing.

What I want and hope for all of us this morning is that our hearts can partake of the spirit of the little rhubarb—the spirit of Easter. I pray this for all of us: that we may

know in ways large or small, that darkness grows into light, grief into peace, and death into new life.

May it be so.