

Unpacking the Message: Easter Sermon
April 4, 2010

It's Easter in early spring, always a conundrum for those seeking nature metaphors to explain resurrection in some rational manner. But neither snow nor cold weather can truly dampen the spirit of Easter because our hope remains steadfast regardless of weather.

This is a glorious time, both for nature and for our spirits as well. The tiny green buds faintly resting on tree limbs are back, the crocus and daffodils are back, the birds are back, and Obama got his mojo back. This hopey, changey stuff is working just fine, Sarah. Thanks for asking.

It's a chilly Easter in America in more ways than one. The cold winds of indifference blow across the land as human services are cut for those who have so little to begin with. A black congressman and a gay congressman are targeted by hate mobs that spit on them while shouting slurs and hurling stones. The moral fibers unravel as our nation rejects the very kernel of Jesus' ministry: To love our neighbor as ourselves. We need a resurrection of civility and compassion as we try to chart a future course for our nation and navigate the shoals of international tensions.

Resurrection is a concept which is, of course, not limited to Easter, but Easter makes it so much easier to discuss. For it is on Easter Sunday when even religious liberals attend church hoping to be inspired by resurrection although it's a message they do not fully grasp. I have heard through the grapevine that a Unitarian church in New England, somewhere in New Hampshire, I believe, posted a message outside on their sign that offers the title of the upcoming sermon. It said: "Join us for the Easter Service. We don't know what happened on the third day, either."

I'm afraid we get too hung up on the mystery of the third day and regard the legendary empty tomb as though it revealed a message like Ground Hog Day: A sign of what is yet to come. And it's so debatable.

For me the message of Easter is that we are saved by hope, for it is hoping that revitalizes our spirits and gives us (literally) new life. And yet hope itself is such a tricky concept because it defies any rational explanation and there's really nothing tangible about it. Hope's elusiveness is magnificently described in Paul's Epistle to the Romans chapter 8 verse 24: "We are saved by hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" In other words, hope only exists in intangible forms. If something is already in hand then "hope" does not apply. If you can see it feel it touch it... then there is no need for hope. You've got it.

Hope feels like one of those theological puzzles: Hope is indispensable because it lifts our spirits and gives us new life – it is, essentially our salvation. But hope is invisible, does not come in a jar, cannot be examined, and so it runs contrary to reason. G.K. Chesterton places hope in the only context in which it is found. He

writes, "It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all." And that is the message of Easter, even for religious liberals.

Hope is discerned in the context of hopelessness. Hope does not denote happy talk or wishful thinking as in: I hope to get an A on my exam, or I hope West Virginia wins the NCAA finals tomorrow. Hope is that which we cannot see yet keeps us afloat in times of hopelessness. Hope allows us to endure through the worst of times and remain standing.

At its bare essence, hope promises a future; there is an other side to hopelessness because hopelessness need not be the final word. In the hopeless times of slavery, African Americans could not have survived without hope. During the hopeless times of Apartheid, South Africans could not have persevered without hope. During hopelessness of the Third Reich, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, and intellectuals could not have pulled through without hope. Hope was tied to a future...a future beyond the hopelessness. If I may be so bold, it is hope that colors the future as holy.

And so when Dante describes the gates of hell as saying: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," it means there is no future. There is no possibility of escaping the hopelessness in which you are mired. An eternity of tomorrows will not change your state of hopelessness. That is the real definition of hell.

Hope carries strength and power because it offers a future when a future cannot be perceived in the midst of impossible conditions. St. Thomas Aquinas writes: "The object of hope is a future good, difficult but possible to attain...hope does not tend to the impossible.

Hope ties directly to our faith. Is it not really a matter of faith that allows us to see what is possible beyond our hopelessness? Please remember one simple definition of hope: Hope is a small vision. Hope is a small vision of a new possibility that gives us the strength to endure. Good Friday provides us with a graphic image of hopelessness, namely the crucifixion. Easter feeds us hope in response to hopelessness. Even in the hopelessness of death, literally or figuratively, there comes a new hope in future possibilities. Hope is our salvation:

- It offers us strength to endure and survive the hopelessness of being nailed to the cross with that small vision of a new life.
- It offers us strength to endure and survive the hopelessness of winter's deathlike pall with that small vision of springtime.
- It offers us strength to endure and survive the hopelessness of poverty, bigotry, and war with that small vision of a new world of justice and peace.

Without the vision of hope, generated by a faith that there is a future; the doors are still open; without that small vision we would be dead in the water: Death triumphs,

hate triumphs, hell triumphs. The loss of hope wreaks tragic results. A few examples:

Why is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* a tragedy? Because Juliet drank of a potion that would only make her appear dead. It brought on sleep for two and forty hours. She was in a death-like coma. When Romeo discovered her, he saw no hope at all, only death, and he failed to realize that he was not seeing the whole story. Unable to envision a future or imagine possibilities, all hope was extinguished and he then swallows the poison himself and dies. In his state of hopelessness, no faith or vision would save him. *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy because the perception of death...the appearance of hopelessness is not the whole story.

The German Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin, obtained a visa to the United States in 1940, and in an effort to elude the Gestapo, he decided to emigrate from neutral Portugal. To do so he would have to travel through Spain. He and a few other Jewish intellectuals made it as far as the Pyrenees where for some unknown reason the border patrol closed the gates allowing no one to enter Spain. Benjamin, in the midst of hopelessness committed suicide that night. The future was closed. No possibilities existed any longer. Except...that on the next day for again some inexplicable reason, the gates opened up, and the group with which Benjamin traveled, made it safely to Portugal. When the gates at the border were slammed shut, it was not the whole story.

Hope is what gives us strength to endure the worst. But we need faith to provide a vision of the future and not interpret a mere perception of death as ending all possibilities.

It is with this sense of the tragic that I regard the recent rash of suicides on the campus of Cornell University. The beautiful campus has suspension bridges across rugged gorges that make up the landscape. A few weeks ago, during exam week, three students on different occasions jumped off the bridges to their death. A total of six students have jumped to their death in just this academic year. In trying to analyze the "why" of this madness, experts are blaming the stress of exams, the seemingly long and endless brutal winters, and the evaporation of internships and jobs during this bleak recession.

In other words, these kids saw no future and so death triumphed. No small vision of another possibility entered their consciousness, and so hell prevailed when all hope was abandoned.

Surely we have all observed the correlation between hope and the future. As we have less and less confidence about the future, the power of hope seems in decline. As Christian fanatics arm themselves for a war against our government, determined to take back the country...as Muslim fanatics continue their jihad against the west...as the earth's resources continue to diminish and global warming discounted as a real threat...the power of hope sinks with every skirmish and every suicide

bomber, and every failure to bring nations together to reduce greenhouse emissions.

And yet, the president who had the audacity to hope, and made hope his campaign strategy, succeeded by fanning the visions of a future with new possibilities. He won the presidency because he reminded us that hope always sits smack in the middle of hopelessness.

I disagree with my Unitarian colleagues who like to profess that they are on board with the Christian story but only up until Good Friday. Jesus dies. Period. End of story. Come Easter, Unitarians in all their scientific and rational thought processes like to say they part company with their Christian friends.

I don't think so. Easter is merely another way of stating that Jesus' death is not the WHOLE STORY. In the midst of hopelessness, there remains a future and new possibilities. If the Passion Week ends on Good Friday, then like for Romeo and Walter Benjamin, and the students who committed suicide at Cornell, all hope is vanquished. And if we are really prepared to abandon all hope, then we are living in hell. Easter reminds us that we are saved by hope. Even in the face of death, a small vision of a future can capture our hearts and imaginations. Even death is not the whole story.

Winter gives way to spring.

The dawn follows the night.

Health care is reborn.

Jesus is resurrected and so are we. In our own experiences of hopelessness, in our personal Good Fridays, we are saved by hope.

I personally find hope a miracle whenever it comes to visit, and I feel the impending tragedy whenever it fails me. I know my life would be hell without that small vision of future possibilities. And so I believe that St. Paul was right when he wrote the Romans that hope was indispensable because it was our only salvation, and at the same time, hope is unreasonable, defies logic and all empirical evidence because you cannot see it.

Much like healthcare reform. A week ago I was hoping for health care reform, and now that it materialized, it would sound positively foolish to say I hope for health care reform. Now I simply hope for civility in implementing the health care changes which is no easy thing to hope for. The lesson learned, however, is that when the party of "No," which became the party of "Hell No" pronounced health care dead....it was not the whole story.

The message of Easter, once unpacked and separated from myth and fantasy, reminds us that hope and hope alone is what saves us from wretched, unbearable and unthinkable conditions. Be careful when you perceive death and hopelessness. In all likelihood, it isn't the whole story.