

Love Will ALWAYS Rise Again
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It is Easter morning, a day when Christians the world over celebrate the story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, buried three days in a borrowed tomb after being murdered by the police state in Jerusalem at that time.

The basic story reports that the women who were Jesus' followers went to his tomb early on the day after the Sabbath to see if they could clean and anoint his body with oil according to Jewish custom. They got there and found the tomb opened and Jesus' body nowhere within.

The story varies here, with some versions saying an angel greeted them outside the tomb, and another saying that a young man in brilliant white greeted them inside the tomb, but the constant was that Jesus' body was gone and the angelic figure told them that he had been risen and would meet them later.

Being reasonable people, they ran off after being confronted by an apparition in a graveyard, and they may or may not have told the rest of Jesus' friends what had happened.

I want to consider this morning the very corporeal implications of this story.

If Jesus had been wrapped in a cloth immediately after his death and stuffed into a tomb on Friday afternoon, I'd like you to consider what sort of shape he would have been in after three days in the ground.

Much like the story of when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, his body would have been a bit of a mess. He'd been stabbed in the side, beaten with scourges and whips, had a crown of thorns jammed down onto his head, and been pierced through hands and feet.

Back to life or not, that's going to be an unpleasant sight on Sunday morning.

As Unitarian Universalists, we sometimes struggle with this story. We are not strong believers in these kinds of miracles – those created by an intercessionary and omnipotent deity. Our Unitarian forebears taught us to apply logic and reason to our reading of the scriptures, so we tend to reject big parts of the Jesus story, and instead replace the name of “God” or “Jesus” with the less challenging word “love.”

OK, so if we were to rename Jesus as “Love,” let's think about what love might look like after three days in a tomb.

Much as Caitlin Seida re-imagined hope in her poem “Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It's a Sewer Rat,” I imagine that the love that emerges after three days in a shared tomb would be similarly grim: dirty, befouled, wounded, crusted with blood and mud and with nasty cheap wine stains around his mouth from his final moments.

The love of the resurrection is not angelic hosts in spiffy white robes. That kind of love is the love that comes back from the grave to do some important stuff. It's not going to be worried about appearances or polite notions of acceptable presentation. Those images were created by renaissance-era artists to tell the story using images that the people of the day would appreciate – and more importantly – pay for.

The love that rises on Easter morning is the love that comes out of an experience of utter betrayal, rejection, humiliation, and abandonment, but remains strong.

The love of Easter is the love that stands up, wipes a bloody lip on its sleeve, spits out a broken tooth, and keeps moving forward.

The love of the resurrection is the love that endures through hard and ugly times.

This is not romantic love.

This is not the kind of love depicted by fluffy little chickens or white bunnies.

This is love that woke up and had to brush away vermin and god knows what all else may have been in that tomb.

There is not blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus in this story, looking like he just stepped out of a spa that cleaned both him and his clothes.

No, this is the Jesus, the love, that got led through town by a rope, tied to a giant slab of wood, and spit upon by passers-by.

This is the love that will fight through the mud and the blood and the guts of real life to show up on the other side and hold us close.

With apologies to Caitlin Seida, I have used her poem about hope being portrayed as a sewer rat to apply it to the kind of love that continues to rise, despite all efforts to quash it.

Love is not a delicate thing held aloft by chubby pink infants with wings and carefully draped bits of cloth, sprinkled among humans to bring joy.

Love is a sturdy thing, forged in pain and determination, like a newborn infant emerging into the world after hours of discomfort and covered in stuff we'd rather not consider.

Love is formed through labor and contractions and pushing and sweat and tears and curses and torn flesh.

Love is sitting awake at night as a precious one struggles to breathe as they sleep, offering prayers to whatever divine being there might be to please, PLEASE save this person – let them live, let them recover.

Love will pay any price, we bargain with God, hoping for an intercessory miracle. Please cure the cancer. Please take away their pain. Please keep them safe.

Love is not neat or clean. Many times it is smeared in mud and blood and worse, as we hold it close, not caring about our own comfort or

appearance, so long as the one we care for comes through this crisis of the moment.

Love can cause pain – not unlike one of those wooden screw gadgets used to crack nuts at the holidays. Love will take the hardest nut and compress it, squeezing it, until cracks form in the shell and the light gets in and the sweet meat of the nut is exposed for us to enjoy. Love is not the nut, here. It is not the delicious morsel hidden within. Love is the consistent, even crushing, pressure of the screw, pressing down to crack open our hearts that we might share with each other that which is contained within.

Love is described in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in words that are familiar to many:

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.¹

Those words get used in wedding ceremonies and sometimes memorials, to describe the beauty and strength of love.

The apostle Paul was a prolific author of letters to his far-flung start-up churches, but he did not offer simply idyllic stories about the rewards of faith. He spoke also of the work required to know the love that humans seek, *agape*, the love of god.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became [adult], I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹ The Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NIV

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.²

Love is constant, Paul says. We may talk about it like we know something, but our human efforts to describe it will fall short of completeness. The things we think are smart ideas will show themselves to be incomplete. When we grow in knowledge and maturity and spiritual depth, he says, that love will show us ourselves in a mirror, in the fullness of our humanity and all of our flaws. Embracing that imperfect image is what allows us to be fully known, fully seen, fully loved.

It is easier to love than to be loved sometimes. Many of us are taught that we do not deserve love unless we do something to earn it. That's not true. As beings brought forth by a creative universe, we are every bit as magical and special, and deserving of love as the most remote bit of stardust, or the babe we hold in our arms.

As large as the love we give can be, we deserve to receive that kind of love and more. Let me say that again: You deserve huge love. You deserve glorious, messy, raggedy, overwhelming love.

But we should not expect that love to show up like a Valentine's Day heart-shaped box of chocolates. That love is going to show up looking like it has played four full quarters of full-contact football: bruised and battered and maybe missing some teeth. Love is tough stuff.

Love is delicate, as well, but not delicate like a flower petal, but more delicate like a bomb.

Imagine that – a bomb of love, set off in a place where it will affect a large number of people – everyone within range gets covered in love, and then they carry it outwards from the blast site, and share it with those they meet.

Love is the carrier of such pestilent notions as grace, compassion, forgiveness, and deep joy. It is the thing that holds the hand of a dying parent or kisses the germy nightmare that is a child's scraped knee.

² ibid

I once heard Dorothy Allison speak at a writer's conference. Dorothy Allison is the author of "Bastard Out of Carolina" and "White Trash," both books that cut open the hide of human experience and peer at its guts with unblinking honesty.

Dorothy Allison was one of the keynote speakers at this conference of Queer Writers, and the handful of words I remember from her address were these: "I want to use my words to break the world's heart; and then put it back together again."

That is the kind of love I am talking about – the kind that can break the shell of the nut, but in a way that releases the magic within, understanding that sometimes things need to crack before they can open fully.

Love is not some delicate, beautiful butterfly.

Love is the barn cat with one eye and battle scars, who sleeps curled in the sun during the day, knowing that the violence she wreaks in the dark is her part of a loving community.

Love is accessible to everyone. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to walk a mile on your knees as Mary Oliver describes, to be worthy of love. You are.

And love is not exotic and rare. It is everywhere and it is tough as hell. Love is not like an orchid or a rose, but is more like the dandelions that push up through the sidewalk, or sprout in the hollow on top of an otherwise barren boulder. It can make magic out of a half teaspoon of dirt, a couple of raindrops, and a sunny day. That's what love is like: persistent, humble, beautiful, and everywhere if you look for it.

That's the kind of love I want you to embrace and share. That glorious, rebellious, illogical, persistent love. The kind of love that doesn't worry about tomorrow or next week. It just blossoms today and trusts that more magic will happen tomorrow, if not for this particular flower, than certainly for many of its kin.

On Easter morning, love rises again, in the legend of a savior reanimated after three days in the tomb. That love is going to be messy and bloody and covered in mud and dirt and humiliation and shame, but still it will emerge – whole in its brokenness, holy in its shame, and loved, even in its self-doubt and fear.

We are all children of a creative and amazing universe.

We are created in the image of love that we call the divine.

That same love that is beyond understanding and beyond logic, rises again and again, a part of our human nature, a part of our creation.

Let us welcome it and embrace it, today and again.

Amen.