

“Rolling Stones”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, April 24, 2011

I thought Keith Ballard, the Superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools, had a hard job explaining Project School House...but he should try explaining Resurrection to a church full of Unitarians! You may've noticed that this year, Easter and Passover occur in the same week. Both are stories about finding freedom and new beginnings. Passover is about the Exodus of the Jews out of slavery in Egypt, and it reminds us that people do get free of slavery. People get out of slavery to debt, slavery to addiction, to abusive relationships, to mental illnesses. People even get out of slavery to bad theologies. And when the enslavement ends, a new life begins.

How is this like Easter? Let's look again at the Easter story from Mark: “But who will roll away the stone from the tomb?” say the two Marys and Salome on their way to wash the dead body of Jesus. It turns out that when they arrive, angels have come and rolled away the stone. Resurrection is about rolling away the boulders that are getting in the way of new life: the ones that are keeping us trapped, enslaved, and dead inside. What stones need to be rolled away in order for your spirit to come fully alive? Is there a stone of sadness or anger that's keeping you from becoming the person you are capable of being?

What's your stone – your block? Is it fear of death? Is it the loss of someone you love? Or a need to always be in control? Is it a lack of money? Or is it some victimization you experienced as a child that taught you to give over your power to others? Is it a teacher or a parent or a lover who squelched your passion or sense of self-worth? Or are you scared of your heart breaking open if you allow yourself to love? Or do you think of yourself as a failure? Maybe your stone is not having enough time. Do you have enough time to let your heart sing and your soul soar in this precious life? Or fear of abandonment; you may think, “if they know who I really am...If they know what I'm really like and how I really think...they may leave me or stop loving me. It's happened before...” Or workoholism? Alcoholism? Depression? A diagnosis? What boulder is keeping you enslaved... trapped... dead?

What is resurrection? It's rolling away the boulder-sized obstacles that keep us from being fully alive; that are squelching your creativity, your divinity; your success. And it happens to all of us at some point. Nobody gets through this life without experiencing some of what Jesus experienced. It's a long list: Jesus was betrayed, abused, accused, beaten, hated, tried, teased, tested, tempted, taunted and tortured...Named, blamed, and framed. Humiliated, deprecated, and assassinated.

You name it, and he probably lived it.

Hopefully we don't go through *all* of the things Jesus went through, but nobody reaches age twenty without going through some of them. People we love die, people we trust fail us, relationships end, our bodies fail us. We make mistakes, have doubts, get scared, get caught, get hurt. And resurrection is the phenomenon that tells us that while all these things happen, they are not the end of the story. What we think is the end is often just a beginning. When Jesus died, his followers thought "it's over." "He's dead...he was not who we thought he was." At that moment it was clear their lives were not what they hoped and expected them to be. Have you ever felt that? Their choices – to leave their families, their careers – were wrong. Have you ever felt you made a bad choice? Their efforts in vain. Their dream was shattered. Do you know what that's like?

And yet, it turns out, his death was not the end of the story. In fact, despite his ignoble end, Jesus continues to touch people's lives in the 20th and 21st centuries. He inspired Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa...and others who inspire us all. Resurrection is the deeper truth, that what seems like the end is often not the end. Pema Chodron writes:

"I remember so vividly a day in early spring when my whole reality gave out on me. It happened when my husband told me he was having an affair. We lived in Northern New Mexico. I was standing in front of our adobe house drinking a cup of tea [she explains]. I heard the car drive up and the door bang shut. Then he walked around the corner, and without warning he told me that he was having an affair and he wanted a divorce. I remember the sky and how huge it was. I remember the sound of the river and the steam rising up from my tea. There was no time, no thought, there was nothing – just the light and a profound, limitless stillness. Then I regrouped, picked up a stone, and threw it at him.

If you don't know who Pema Chodron is, she's one of the most renowned and respected religious writers and teachers in America today. When asked what set her on a path of finding a spiritual community and a practice, she always says, "It was because I was so angry with my husband. The truth is he saved my life." That's resurrection: it is a movement of the spirit. And it tells us that even death is not the end.

My father and brother and stepmother started the Sienna Project four years ago, after the death of my little daughter Sienna. It began with the idea of building one school a year for Mayan Indian children in rural Guatemala, where my brother lives. Last year, a church in Colorado decided to participate by raising the money to build a Sienna school, and they ended up raising enough money and volunteers to build two schools. These schools are changing the lives of little boys and girls who had no access to education. In fact, they will be changing the lives of generations of children. For me it has felt like a

way in which a girl who only lived and loved for three glorious years on this earth continues to make a difference. It was a life that ended too soon, and not in the way anyone expected, but what seems like the end is often not the end.

And just last month a colleague I do not know very well came up to me and said, "I've been meaning to tell you that I heard about the Sienna Project from your dad, and I was really inspired. My husband lost a sister tragically when they were growing up. It's been twenty years, but she's still a big part of the family, and there's been a huge hole." "I know", I said. She explained that after hearing about what my brother and father had done, she decided to have a conversation with her in-laws to see if they might do something to honor the legacy and memory of their deceased daughter. The daughter who died was an accomplished violinist who had been given a scholarship to college that she did not live long enough to enjoy. And with the tears streaming down my face, she told me that they started a program that's giving scholarships to young, promising violinists whose families could not afford it. Seeing the tenderness pouring down my cheeks, she said she hoped I didn't mind her bringing it up just then, and I explained that's not it at all, I'm crying because this is just one more way that I see Sienna's legacy of love continuing to have an impact.

Even death ...is not the end of the story.

And with those tears, another stone was rolled away from in front of my heart, and light poured in where before it was only darkness.

We dress in our finest clothes and sing hallelujah on Easter because we are thankful for the human capacity for resurrection. Spring comes and goes every year, and it is quite miraculous. But resurrection of the spirit in the aftermath of loss and despair, and the knowledge that life triumphs even over death, that's what we celebrate today in Jesus' name. Because not rolling away the stones that hold us back leads to a living death...the death of the spirit... a soul death. It's a denial of life's truth, of your life's truth. In fact, it's hell!

Does believing in the power of resurrection save us from hell? You bet it does. It saves us from the living hells that can consume us in this life. It saves us from staying enslaved or entombed behind the heavy stones of loss and fear and victimization, and so much more. It saves us from letting the story end too soon, and it reminds us that love works in mysterious ways and goes on eternally.

Jesus, like all of those we love and lose, are no longer where they were before. They are now, wherever we are. And when we remember them, and do good works in their name, they have risen, and will rise again. So be it with your soul! Happy Easter! I love you. Amen.