

## “After She Died She Was Everywhere: An Easter Homily”

This morning I want to tell us how I came to believe in Resurrection.  
I'll just let that sink in for a moment.  
And if you're thinking: wait, am I in right church?  
Aren't Unitarian Universalists the ones who are inclined to  
Shed some doubt, some skepticism, even some unhealthy avoidance  
When it comes to Easter?  
Let me ask you to just stay with me,  
Stay with me and let me tell you about a woman named Grace.

Do you know how sometimes someone's name describes  
Exactly not just who they are but how they are?  
Well, that's how it was with Grace.  
She was tall for a woman – nearly 6'.  
She had long, graceful arms; long, graceful legs.  
In adulthood she began wearing her gold, blonde hair  
In a bee-hive, a style she never really relinquished even after  
Everyone else had.  
She had long, graceful eye-lashes.  
She had large, gracefully-shaped eyes  
That looked on you with openness and curiosity.  
Grace walked with grace, she sat with grace,  
At mealtimes she folded her fingers together  
With grace and said grace with grace.  
She was so graceful that she even did ungraceful things  
Like change baby diapers with grace,  
And commute to work for 25 years with grace,  
And raise four daughters with grace,  
and bury one husband too early with grace,  
And marry another who wasn't quite right for her with grace.

When we were children we would go to Grace's house  
Every Easter where, after a meal of honey ham and potatoes  
And some vegetable we kids sneaked into our the napkins  
In our laps instead of into our mouths,  
She would send us out into the wide, open yard to find  
Eggs she had dyed the night before in blended pink and blues  
And yellow and purple and green and orange and red.  
And then she would call all of us, children and adults alike,

Back inside and there she would lead us to the table  
And have us BeHold! the large, coconut covered cake  
In the shape of a baby lamb, a lamb we were told because  
Easter is about new life and new beginnings,  
And because Jesus was said to have  
Been more concerned about the one lost sheep  
Than the other 99 who were found.

*“Grace, if you give me two slices I think I will better understand what  
This cake is supposed to mean,”* we kids said to her.

*“And if you give me three I will never forget!”*

Grace always gave us three slices. She even cut cake with grace.

I never did forget the cake, nor did I forget the meaning,  
But I did grow older and I did see Grace less.

One year we were on vacation for Easter.

Another year I spent with friends.

Another year I was away looking at colleges.

And the next year I was gone.

In other words, life moved on. Things changed.

Traditions changed. I changed.

And in the later years I only saw Grace once or twice a year.

There were cards on birthdays.

There were gifts at Christmas; bad gifts, actually.

One thing Grace couldn't do with grace was give gifts

You actually wanted. Oh well.

But what prevailed most of all was distance.

Days turned into weeks turned into months when I'm sure I didn't even

Think of her, because her body, her presence, her grace

Were so far away from me.

It had been a year and a half

Since I had seen Grace – too much traveling to do,

Too many adventures to have, too much life to unfold –

When I awoke early one morning

in a foreign country thousands of miles away,

the phone ringing in my room.

I stumble to the phone. I pick it up.

*“Hello?”*

It is my mother's voice on the end of the line,

Quiet. Still.

*“Nathan, she says. “Nathan, I’m sorry.  
Your grandmother Grace has died; last night in her sleep  
Grace died.”*

And before I tell you what I experienced in the weeks after that,  
It is worth saying that questions of Easter and resurrection  
And what it all means  
Were at this point in my life, like they are maybe in yours,  
Absolutely inconsequential.  
And that is because I was more interested in rejecting the ideas  
Than I was in discovering the meanings.  
And there’s a difference.  
And this difference has all to do with how you and I experience  
Death, because Easter is about death,  
And also how you and I experience life after death,  
Because Easter is about that, too.

Go back with now to that room.  
Blood rushing from my brain. Feeling faint. Pulse rising.  
Breath increasing.  
Even though I was already 23 this was my first death.  
In a fog I pack a bag and get the first plane home.  
I fly for hours and hours. I am so far from home,  
I have been so distant from Grace.

Forget Sundays in church. Forget the smells and bells.  
Forget everything the pastors  
And priests have told me.  
These are the real religious moments,  
These moments high in the air  
Eating airline food with not enough leg-room  
While asking: what does it mean to live?  
Asking: where do we go when we die?  
Wondering how it is Grace’s body was taken  
From us so suddenly one night in her sleep,  
And wondering also how it is  
That I am feeling suddenly so close to her.

Maybe something similar has happened to you.

Maybe you, too, have noticed how after someone you love  
Has died you suddenly feel close to them,  
Imagining what they might be feeling in a certain situation,  
Remembering their laugh,  
Recalling their favorite words,  
At times sensing their joy when you have joy,  
Their sadness when you are in pain.

It was like that for me in those days and weeks after Grace's body  
Was gone.  
When we prayed at the funeral I imagined her next to me,  
Her hands gracefully clasping together,  
When we cut the cake at the reception (because she loved cake)  
I recalled her taking the long knife and slicing us three slices  
Each, gracefully,  
Even now when I enter an open room I imagine her entrance –  
Not stomping in, not running in, but gracefully sweeping in,  
Her long legs, her long arms moving toward me, "*Nathan,  
Come give me hug; it has been too long, you have been away too long.*"  
It is like this now with Grace. Her body is gone,  
But now she is everywhere.  
She was my first death.  
But in this way could also say she was my first resurrection,  
Her love for me and my love for her were resurrected and present  
And, yes, alive.

Sometimes I think one of the reasons the Easter story that Rita  
Read for us is so easy for us to disavow and reject  
Is that maybe it feels so unlike our own experiences like these.

We hear Rita say out loud the name *Jesus*  
And we filter that name through the ways  
The Christian right talks about him, or the way the  
Church or Temple of our childhood defined him  
And we don't connect the Jesus we have rejected  
to the fact that he was a Jew, my friends,  
And that the last supper was a Passover Seder,  
And that he showed us to free the prisoner, welcome the stranger,  
Have dinner with the outcast, wash the feet of the prostitute.  
How we have allowed the name Jesus to become a taboo

Word in our culture, and even in some of our congregations,  
I cannot explain, I cannot understand.

And then we hear Rita say out loud how  
Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary mother of James  
Went to bring spices to the tomb of Jesus, just to visit,  
And pay their respects  
and we don't connect  
That to the journeys we have all made to the graves  
Of our loved ones, the drive there, the flowers in our lap,  
The flags, the pictures we bring. How we pull the car into the  
Cemetery slowly, quietly, even silently out of respect.

And then we hear Rita say out loud how the women  
Got there to find the stone rolled away from the tomb  
And men in dazzling clothes asking: *why do you look for living  
Among the dead?*

And somehow we hear that, we get all literal and we say:  
*'I don't believe in stuff like that, so I guess I don't believe in the Bible'*  
And we don't connect that to those moments when we realize  
Standing at the grave of a loved one how  
We are looking in the wrong place, we are looking  
For living among the dead, if we only go to the graveside  
To recall their presence, their memory, their love.

And then we hear Rita say out loud how *on the third he rose  
From the dead*, and maybe we smirk or roll our eyes  
And set it aside as some crazy story  
Because we don't connect it those late at night plane rides  
When, heading to the funeral,  
We suddenly we feel closer than ever to the one  
Who has died – to our grandmothers, our parents, our brother, our sister,  
Our friend, our child.

Forget everything we learned or didn't learn in Sunday school.  
Forget the priests and the pastors who told you want to believe  
Or not believe.  
Forget the smells and bells.  
Maybe this is a kind of resurrection we can believe in.  
Maybe this what life after death looks like.

Says my colleague in ministry, Forest Church:  
*No one knows about life after death.*  
*But about this we surely know: there is Love after Death.*  
*Death is love's measure.*  
*Not only is our grief when someone dies testimony to our love,*  
*But when we ourselves die,*  
*The love we have given to others is the one thing death cannot kill.*  
*Only our unspent love dies when we die.*  
Our spent love lives on forever.  
My grandmother Grace taught me that.  
I know someone in your life has taught you that.  
Easter and the story of Jesus teaches us that.

It reminds me of a moment in ministry a colleague described  
To me once – with it we close.  
How some years ago a friend's father died,  
And the family, following his instructions,  
Told the undertaker to have his body cremated and to  
Scatter his ashes from some windblown point.  
And so the family waited for the windiest day of the month,  
And with the undertaker they climbed to the highest hill  
In the town, the hill that was open and tree-less.  
And just as a large gust came over the hill,  
The undertaker opened the lid and flung the ashes into the wind.  
Afterwards the man's granddaughter said a memorable thing.  
She said:  
*"Now I know where I can look for Papa. Now Papa is everywhere."*

Easter teaches us there is life after death. Easter teaches us  
there is love after death. May we believe in Easter.  
Amen.

## Easter Exultet

Shake out your qualms.  
Shake up your dreams.  
Deepen your roots.  
Extend your branches.  
Trust deep water  
and head for the open,  
even if your vision  
shipwrecks you.  
Quit your addiction  
to sneer and complain.  
Open a lookout.  
Dance on a brink.  
Run with your wildfire.  
You are closer to glory  
leaping an abyss  
than upholstering a rut.  
Not dawdling.  
Not doubting.  
Intrepid all the way  
Walk toward clarity.  
At every crossroad  
Be prepared  
to bump into wonder.  
Only love prevails.  
En route to disaster  
insist on canticles.  
Lift your ineffable  
out of the mundane.  
Nothing perishes;  
nothing survives;  
everything transforms!  
Honeymoon with Big Joy!

~ James Broughton ~