

HOPE IN THE DARK

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

Opening Words:

I love almost everything about Easter: the rapturous music, the colorful pageantry, and the budding promise of spring. I've also developed a fondness for Easter bonnets, perhaps a legacy of my somewhat austere upbringing as a Conservative Mennonite. I've tried to find a way to justify Easter bonnets on theological grounds, but I can't. Never mind. I like them anyway.

I've decided that Easter Sunday is my favorite Sunday of the year. As many of you know, my favorite holiday is Thanksgiving — the festival of gratitude. But Thanksgiving doesn't fall on a Sunday. And besides, if you are going to rise from the dead, it somehow seems wrong to do it on a weekday.

For those of you celebrating Easter at All Souls for the first time, let me give you a roadmap. In many churches today, the unofficial anthem of Easter proclaims that "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." We don't often use the term Jesus Christ here at All Souls. Our preference is to speak of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was an itinerant Jewish teacher who cared for those in need. He urged his followers to become, as the poet William Blake put it, the human form of love divine. When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment in the Hebrew scripture, he responded, "Love God, and love your neighbor."

We call him the Jesus of history in order to distinguish him from the Christ of Christian doctrine. Christians believe the Christ — the term means Messiah — was both fully human and fully divine. By living a perfect life, dying a blameless death, and rising from the dead, Jesus the Christ became savior of humanity and sovereign ruler of all creation.

If you find this scenario hard to accept when presented as actual history, which it usually is, you're in good company. But my guess is that you did not come to All Souls this morning because of what you don't believe in. Like me, you have come because somehow, inexplicably perhaps, you believe in Easter. Our purpose this morning is to discover the Easter we can believe in.

Sermon:

One of the most powerful photographs ever published shows a group of civil rights protesters in 1963 being buffeted by powerful spray from fire hoses unleashed by authorities in Birmingham, Alabama. The shutter speed used to shoot the photo was slow enough that the water shows up as a blurry torrent, yet fast enough that the protesters show up in stark relief. It's the kinetic force of insistent oppression meeting the immovable presence of defiant resistance. The photo was taken by Bob Adelman, who died one week ago at the age of 85.

Adelman was part of a small cadre of courageous photographers and journalists who headed south during the 1960s to document the brutality of segregation and the march toward civil rights. "I realized that my involvement would be very dangerous," Adelman once said, "but I had a long think with myself and decided that this was something worth risking your life for... I shot with one eye on the lens, one eye on history, and my heart was with the movement."

Adelman and his colleagues went along as civil rights activists, staged sit-ins, embarked on freedom rides, mounted boycotts, and went to jail. With cameras and typewriters, they bore witness as fire hoses opened up, police dogs attacked, state troopers lashed out, and protesters ended up dead. The rest of the nation saw the terrible trauma that racism was inflicting upon black people in the South. Over time, people's hearts and minds began to change. A different future became possible.

The most famous poem ever written about Easter stems from a similar series of events in Ireland. During Easter week of 1916, about a thousand Irish Republicans, who wanted to secede from Great Britain and establish an independent Ireland, mounted an insurrection. At the time, most Irish people felt indifferent about the matter. They would have been content to remain part of Great Britain. But the British put down the Easter insurrection with such ruthlessness, executing many of its leaders within a week, that public sentiment began to change. Six years later, in 1922, the territory that later became the Republic of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom.

In his poem titled *Easter, 1916*, William Butler Yeats symbolically links the insurrection of 1916, which came to be known in Ireland as the Easter Rising, to the Christian commemoration of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Just as the horror of the crucifixion made way for the hope of resurrection, Yeats suggests, so the execution of the Republican insurgents made way for the hope of Irish independence. Yeats marks this transformation by a refrain that recurs throughout his poem: "All changed, changed utterly," he says. "A terrible beauty is born."

The story of Easter doesn't begin on Sunday morning, when three women went to Jesus' tomb and discovered that his story hadn't ended after all. It begins in darkness and despair on Friday afternoon, when Jesus is dying and all hope seems lost. It begins not with what's possible, but with what's terrible.

In this sense, we are badly in need of Easter. Lots of terrible things are going on these days, both in our nation and around the world. We see the pictures every day — pictures of bombings in Brussels, chemical attacks in Syria, lead-laced water in Flint, decimated villages in Gaza, rape camps in Nigeria, migrant children dead on Turkish beaches, young men of color dead on American streets, and so on.

It's true that none of these things needed to happen. If Good Friday hadn't happened, Easter morning wouldn't have been necessary. We can imagine a world where people make room for each other, provide for each other, and take care of each other. We can imagine a world where people are kind, loving, and trustworthy. But that's not the world we live in. We live in a world where terrible things happen.

And besides, terrible things don't only happen to other people. Sometimes they happen to us. Sometimes people we trust betray us, or people we love spurn us, or people we count on let us down. Sometimes we get bullied, or ridiculed, or taken advantage of. Sometimes we get bad diagnoses or have bad accidents.

And sometimes terrible things happen because of us. We fail to keep commitments, bring disgrace upon values we profess to champion, and hurt people we love. The question isn't whether we can avoid all the terrible things in life, though we should certainly try our best to prevent them. The question is how we respond when they do happen.

By facing what's terrible in our lives and our world, we create the possibility that something beautiful will emerge in its wake. Make no mistake: Easter isn't an invitation to welcome what's terrible or even, God forbid, do terrible things just so good things can happen as a result. The point of Easter is that what's terrible doesn't have the final word. As long as we remain alive, something always happens next. And if we hope for it and work for it, the something that happens next can be beautiful.

In her book *Hope in the Dark*, the writer Rebecca Solnit surveys the disheartening developments of the past century: climate change, growing income inequality, the dehumanizing influence of automation, and so on. "Hope doesn't mean denying these realities," she says. "It means facing them and addressing them."

She goes on to say, "It's important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction." The hope I'm interested in, she says, doesn't insist that everything is getting better, but hope does counter the insistence that everything is getting worse. Hope takes account of the complexities and uncertainties of the present, but leaves an opening for a better future to emerge.

Most of all, hope is an invitation to act. Solnit says, "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others." Solnit concludes by invoking James Baldwin's famous saying that "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is

faced.” Solnit adds, “It’s important to emphasize that hope is only a beginning; it’s not a substitute for action, only a basis for it.”

According to the Gospel accounts of Easter morning, the young man at the tomb told the three women who had arrived to anoint Jesus’ body that he was no longer there, because he had been raised up — as though his body had been taken elsewhere. Then the young man said to the women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Jesus had often told his disciples that he would never leave them — that his presence would always be with them and his spirit would always remain among them.

Go, the young man said. Tell Peter, and tell the disciples. Let everyone know that the work will continue. In that moment, everything changed — changed utterly. A terrible beauty was born. What seemed like the end wasn’t the end after all. Something terrible had given rise to the hope that something else might be possible.

When terrible things come our way in life, we need to face them and call them what they are: terrible. We need to grieve whatever we have lost, or repent whatever we have done wrong, or cry out in protest against whoever or whatever has harmed us. But then we need to look for the opening, the possibility of a better future, the chance to act. Along the way, we need to keep a picture in our minds of what hope might look like — a picture of what beautiful might look like.

In the wake of what’s terrible, look for what’s beautiful. That’s the invitation Easter offers to us. On this day and yes, on every day, look for the promise of what’s possible.