

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

To Rise

Bible – New Testament

Luke 24: 1 -5, 10- 12

24 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body.^[a] ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women^[b] were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men^[c] said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.^[d]

¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.^[e]

Bhagavad Gita

BG 2.22: As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one.

BG 2.24: The soul is unbreakable and incombustible; it can neither be dampened nor dried. It is everlasting, in all places, unalterable, immutable, and primordial.

BG 2.27: Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable.

Faith traditions around the world speak of death and rebirth. It is a common theme in Abrahamic religion, and global indigenous traditions. A major purpose of religion and faith is to contextualize human life. One of the reasons religion of all kinds are obsessed this way is because as human beings, we are blessed and cursed to be conscious of knowing that we are alive and knowing that we will die. We are aware of our mortality for the better portion of our lives and as a result, we spend a lot of time trying to give some kind of shape to what happens when we die.

And so, many traditions have as a central theme some kind of promise that is made about what it means to die a human death. As we hear in the words of the Bhagavad Gita, there is a promise of an everlasting soul. A soul that may cast off worn out bodies in the natural and inevitable cycle leading to rebirth. In the Easter tradition of Christianity, there is a promise of eternal salvation in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the acceptance of Christ. Still other traditions point toward the cyclical way in which nature dies and returns to life through the seasons and how human life as part of that natural cycle must return to the earth to make

new things grow. These are the promises of reincarnation, rebirth and resurrection that give the people who live following these traditions a sense of sureness, a framework to face adversity and a sense of purpose, peace and joy in their lives every day.

And what then of Unitarian Universalism? What is the life and death promise of our tradition? The Seven Principles don't speak of death or birth. They don't name love. Unitarian Universalism holds no language of redemption and no framework for accepting failure. We use the 6 sources of a "living tradition" to claim some of this language:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

This is all very wise and academic and all, but I'm still left wondering, how does this help us to rise when we are truly down? What is there for us to hold on to in a time when we literally have to figure out what it means to resurrect our in-person church life in a hopefully soon to be post-covid world? What is the promise for us at the end and at the beginning of life? These are the hard questions for human faith.

Being that one of our six sources are the words and deeds of prophetic people I want to direct you to Maya Angelou. It is fitting that today is the 93rd anniversary of Maya Angelou's birth. (Happy Birthday Ms. Angelou.) Many of you will already be familiar with her poem "Still I Rise" which seems quite appropriate on Easter Sunday. But, I'm not going to read this poem today. Despite language that may put some in mind of resurrection, I don't think it is actually appropriate. I believe this transcendent poem speaks specifically to black womanhood in a way that really should be reserved for the voices of black women and their experience. It is not my voice. I also want to respect Ms. Anglou's estate and not run afoul of any kind of infringement on this precious piece of writing being a part of this service as a recording. I will share a link to the full poem in the chat and with the recording of this service that will be on YouTube later. But, I would like to quote a line from the poem:

"Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave." – Maya Angelou¹

¹ Poetry Foundation, "Still I Rise by Maya Angelou," text/html, Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation, April 3, 2021), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>.

In this line, Maya Angelou explains her very being as the promise. It is almost a prayer.

“Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

In one brief tidy line of verse, she places herself in the now, reflects to the once was and anticipates the possibility of what can be. She captures most elegantly, what it means “To Rise”. To rise from one place to another and to be the agent of that change. And I want to be sure that you hear or read Maya Angelou’s words here and receive them beyond the reference to slavery. Not to diminish the reference she makes to enslaved ancestors, but because I think in liberal circles, we have a tendency to get caught up in our own narratives of race and justice. We see language specific to racial oppression and that becomes the only thing we see. I would ask you to hold the slave reference lightly as I do as someone whose personal history also holds slavery...for indeed if you are in the United States, you do. But getting stuck on slavery here obscures the breadth and universality of what Maya Angelou prophetically shares in these lines. There is epic and instructive meaning for us her words:

“Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

Maya Angelou places herself in the now (she is bringing...), reflects to the “once was” (the gifts of her ancestors) and anticipates the possibility of what can be (dreams and hopes) from even a place of most abject horror (slavery). This is the yeast that will always allow her to rise. A profound promise of being rooted in legacy, lifted aloft on the wings and wisdom of aspiration. To rise is to live into the promise of being.

Reincarnation, rebirth and resurrection are the promise of specific traditions. They are the specific promises of abundant and ongoing spirit that many of you may hold as your own and as part of your practice as a Unitarian Universalist. We all need anchors in a precarious world of change and unpredictability. I don’t want you to change that. But I believe there is also more for us. Because our tradition exists intentionally with its arms and ears and heart wide open, I believe we are invited into what Maya Angelou describes, where the fact of being is in itself the great promise in us all. Bringing with us the past, always building toward the future, while remaining present and humble to our now. We rise because we know pain; we rise because we have known grief; we rise because we have been hopeless; we rise because we know we too will someday be ancestors. And we rise because we embody the spark of life; we rise because we are birth; we rise because we are every hope; we rise because we are peace; we rise because we are love.

We rise because we are the promise of being.

Christian pastors around the world today are declaring, “Jesus has risen” and this is a call to embrace how the prophecy has been fulfilled. This declaration proclaims a new world, a new order and a renewed promise. It is the answer to the promise that for people of Christian faith,

there is salvation, there is future, that the suffering of the past was not in vain and that the joy of the future has come.

And this message of salvation and resurrection is particularly meaningful in our current world. All faith communities, including our own have their work cut out for them in the next stretch of time. We are all faced with asking ourselves "how will we rise?" We are all looking forward to "after covid." And with that looking forward there is nostalgia to look back; to recreate or bring back to life what once was. To go back to before. But maybe we can ask a question like the one in Luke 24: 5 - "*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" Or maybe we can find reassurance in the changes we face from the Bhagavad Gita, "*...at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one.*"

Our faith, our community, our future will and cannot not look, sound or feel like it did before. Yet with all that change our faith, our spirit, our sense of being one body of humankind, is alive and it is here and it is now. We are in this moment the seed for a future, bringing with us what our ancestors gave us, building today for what we can be tomorrow. We are part of this grand cycle of creation and loss, imagination and death. But our job wedged between then and whatever happens next is to live into our promise. And so, we rise. We rise because we are the promise of being.

Happy Easter and blessed be.

-ALD