

Not in the Tomb

Rev. Lisa Doege

Apr. 4, 2010

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

It's a tricky business, this life and death thing. A chrysalis looks like death but gives birth to life. The soil is full of rocks or clay or sand or roots but brings forth life. Seeds and bulbs look like death but give birth to life. Bare limbs and branches look like death but bring forth life. Jesus was dead but the women found him not in the tomb, not in that place of death but were asked instead, "why do you seek the living among the dead?" Life sometimes presents the mask of death. With such being the frequent state of affairs, how is one to know places of death from places of life?

We're often confused. We look for life in places of death all the time. We look for life in addictions, in abusive relationships, in stultifying jobs, in worn out habits and dull routines. But life doesn't dwell in any of those death-places. Oh, it can be found there, but it doesn't dwell there.

See, more confusion. Maybe the key is this: life can be *found* in place of death and seeming death but cannot be *sought* there.

It seems a fine distinction, I know. But bear with me. He who seeks life, redemption, forgiveness, love, or peace in alcohol, drugs, gambling, ultimately fails in that quest and finds death or near death or death of the spirit instead. She who seeks life, fulfillment, love, acceptance in a dangerous or co-dependent relationship will find only death, death of her spirit, death of her soul, death of her personality, death of her person, unless she's very lucky. Go looking for life in places of death and in the end you will only find death in one or more of its disguises.

But, and this is important, if you happen to *find* yourself living in a place of death, living with an addiction, in an abusive relationship, in a dead-end job that's killing your spirit, living with habits and routines and ways of being that are slowly killing your soul, you can experience new life—even in those places of death. Life does blossom out of unlikely packages. Crocus push their way up out of cold brown lawns to bloom in unlikely March or early April. Recovery is possible. Breaking the cycle of abusive is possible. Taking a deep breath, training for a new career, and quitting that old spirit-killing job is possible.

Think for a moment about the times in your life that have been most death like.... When you've been lost in the depths of despair, when all hope has been wiped away, when devastation ruled.... Perhaps a loved one had died. Perhaps a job had been lost. Perhaps a terminal diagnosis had been made. Perhaps a significant relationship was coming to an end. Perhaps addiction had brought you to a place of brokenness and sheer exhaustion. Perhaps depression had emptied your life of all meaning.... No one would go to those places looking for life. But life *can be found* in each of them. In each

of those tombs life can arise and walk forth, so that a tardy visitor might be asked, “why do you seek the living among the dead?”

I know a woman who had a miscarriage followed by a healthy full term pregnancy resulting in a still birth followed by a healthy third pregnancy ending in the live birth of a healthy baby girl. She once told me of that third pregnancy, “Lisa, if a woman in a similar situation tells you she’s scared, believe her.” That woman and her husband lived for a couple of years in a place of death. A place no one would go seeking life. And yet they found life there—enough of a spark of hope, enough of a whisper of faith to result in a life now twenty years old.

Slowly, painfully, with the proper care, only in the proper given time, like the bulb, like the bud, like the butterfly, life emerges from the tomb of grief, of addiction, of depression.

The women sought Jesus in the tomb, but he was not there, in that place of death, because he was among the living. Death and resurrection. Good Friday and Easter. It’s such a human cycle. We live it over and over again throughout our lives, in big ways and little ways, in minor ways and dramatic ways. I believe the resurrection impulse is innate and powerful. We want to live. We have tremendous capacity and desire to live, through and in spite of amazing displays of death and destruction. But we get confused sometimes. Nature is confusing enough about what is living and what is not. We live in confusing times on top of that.

We get all sorts of messages about what is life-giving—new cars, bigger houses, better brands of beer, smaller, faster computers, exotic vacations, higher salaries, more attractive bodies, more attractive mates, smarter children, designer clothes, designer drugs, fad diets, the corner office, alternative lifestyles, green living, potent vitamins and mineral and supplements, bottled water. All of them pitched to us as bearers of life and life-abundant, and all of them, I believe, to one degree or another, taken to an extreme or at the expense of another person or more moderate life, really death in one of its disguises.

We look for life for our families and ourselves in busyness, activity, and possessions. We look for life for our families and ourselves in motion and guidelines and magazine articles full of good ideas. And some of us may find life in one of these. But most of the time I think we find only a different degree or melody of spiritual death. So we might ask of ourselves like the women in the story of the resurrection, why we are looking for life in places of death?

We’re looking because it is our nature to seek life; we’re looking in the wrong places because we’re confused. Because the media have “obfuscated and unclarified” the facts, as Click and Clack would say. We won’t find much life in the popular commercial and media promises. It simply isn’t there. And our own lives will become less, not more, vital. And then the miracle of Easter happens. Then life does appear. Not in any of the ways we’ve been promised it, but in the birth of a child, the beginning of a new

relationship, the repair of an old one, the decision to have family dinner one night, a letter from a long lost friend, a few minutes conversation, an hour alone doing nothing. Nothing dramatic; just the budding of new life, where before there was death masquerading as life.

Each June when UU ministers gather prior to General Assembly we are honored to hear from one colleague representing all those ministers ordained twenty-five years earlier, and one colleague representing all those ministers ordained fifty years earlier. Their reflections are funny and sad and wise and inspiring. Often the speakers chosen by their ordination cohort will speak of the shaping events of their ministers. For one generation it was the civil rights movement. For another the war in Viet Nam. For another the wide-spread entry of women into our ministry. For yet another the devastation of the early years of AIDS. I wonder sometimes what my ordination cohort will claim as its defining moments. 9/11, certainly. Perhaps Hurricane Katrina. Perhaps school shootings and church shootings.

Violence is nothing new; human beings have been hurting, terrorizing and killing other human beings since the beginning of recorded history--and no doubt longer even than that. Political violence too is nothing new. This wave of young people, professors, and seemingly random adults unleashing terror and committing mass murder in places that are dedicated to youth and education and faith, places traditionally experienced as safe havens, as sanctuaries, as centers of order and possibility fostering growth, this wave of unthinkable violence, however, may well be among the things that characterize this period of history in decades to come.

I've observed these event only from a distance--on the television screen, in the newspaper and pages of newsmagazines, on the internet; at the closest in the words of a friend and colleague who was at Tennessee Valley UU Church that Sunday in July 2008 when a shooter opened fire during the service. I've been safely isolated, separated by time, geography and the random happenstance that has so far kept me innocent of such horror. And I've not followed any of the news stories of any of the school shootings closely. I'm not expert, but I know this much is true. Life blooms again in those schools that became tombs, those churches that become tombs. That's why the principals' of those schools have been able to call the principals of the latest one so violated with words of comfort and advice. Because they not only lived through their particular shooting, they *survived* it. The schools and churches weren't shut down forever, razed, wiped from the Earth as if the experience could be wiped from the memory of those who lived it. Instead, in one way or another, they were cleansed, rededicated to their purpose, blessed anew.

If we went looking for life at the Red Lake school or Virginia Tech or Tennessee Valley UU Church or Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in the hours and days immediately following the shootings, we would not find it. But in time, only in proper time, slowly, painfully, life budded again in each of them, places that for a time were a tomb. Easter comes.

In most of our lives Good Friday and Easter are not as dramatic as a school shooting and the subsequent healing. But they are holy days nonetheless. Times when we encounter our souls at their bare moments of need and raw moments of joy. Times we should celebrate and honor. Let us do so today, for all the good Fridays and Easters that have gone before.

Many, many generations before Jesus, Moses said to the Israelites, "I call upon heaven and earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Really it's a choice each of face every day. But when Easter comes into your life, whenever it may come, the choice is already made; life is given. All that's left for you to do is sing Alleluia.

Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, indeed. Go forth and rejoice, for surely you are risen, again and again and again. Amen.