

RESURRECTION: THE ULTIMATE METAPHOR
REV. DON ROLLINS
APRIL 16, 2006

From Robin E. Vann Cleef comes the poem, "Easter Evidence":

*I look for Easter evidence.
The whole world is looking, too,
searching for some sign, some sure signal
that Christ is alive.*

*But all I ever seem to see are other persons.
and every so often along comes someone
whose life is a resurrection song,
a hallelujah.*

*I guess that's all we have,
I guess that's all we need,
I guess that's what I need to be as well.*

Dear Nora friends,

After twenty years or so in one profession a body might start to think there's little new to be seen, but this morning's service is solid evidence of how wrong one can be. Take for example a minister emailing an Easter sermon to be read by a member of the congregation she or he serves. But strange as it may be, if Noah Rosenbloom is standing before you, lending his usual

dignity to this strange enterprise, it can't be all bad. (Thank you, Noah. And, yes, doggone' it, read that last sentence aloud!)

The term sermon doesn't seem to fit what I have to say here, for this is really a journal from the frontlines of a loved one's dying days. I'm not a preacher just now. I'm a witness to a soul's parting hours and a family's struggle to draw close in a time of loss, grief and mystery. For a good man, in all ways like you and me, equally divine and demonic - a man who married my sister some forty-two years ago and thus became part of my life, too, that man lay bloated, jaundiced and dying. His name is George Davis. And we, his family, are living the Good Friday experience - a deathwatch, to be frank - with no sure signal of Easter.

But I have not burdened Noah with impending gloom this, of all mornings, for Easter is manifest even here, even now, in this circle of family and friends. Easter is in the stories we tell on George and each other. Easter is in our raucous laughter as we update one another on our train wreck lives. And Easter is in the way we pluck up our courage now and then, *an unconscious testimony to the fact that we are still among the living*. So even as we surrender a good man to our shared human destiny, we find in one another a resurrection song and a hallelujah. So let us speak of Easter.

ASH WEDNESDAY

As I grab my things on the way out the door to the airport I snatch up my most recent copy of *Quest*, The Church of the Larger Fellowship's publication for religious liberals who live at a distance from any Unitarian

Universalist congregation. I think nothing of it until, at about 33,000 feet, the young man next to me reaches into his briefcase for a copy of *Signs of the Times*, which I recognize as the Seventh-day Adventist denominational magazine. A supplicating Jesus graces the cover. He's in what appears to be a stone tomb, looking skyward with arm extended. Beneath Jesus, in bold three-color text, are three questions: How real is the resurrection? Did it *really* happen? Or is it just another myth?

Jesus the Adventist. Could be. Wait, Adventists are vegetarians. Jesus, the vegetarian Adventist? I ponder this thought as a welcome distraction from the grief that awaits me when this plane lands. Then, caught up in a ridiculous if nearly automatic reflex, I reach into my own bag, fully expecting to counter my fellow passenger's reading tastes with one of the liberal rags I carry for just such occasions, say, *Utne* or *Mother Jones*. But instead I come up with the April issue of *Quest*, complete with an article on Passover and the Seder on the front and this poem from retired UU minister, Dick Gilbert, on the back:

*A tomb is no place to stay,
 Be it a cave in the Judean hills
 Or the dark cave of the spirit.
 A tomb is no place to stay
 When the fresh grass rolls away the stone of winter cold,
 And valiant flowers burst their way to warmth and light.
 A tomb is no place to stay
 When each morning announces our reprieve,
 And we know we are granted yet another day of living.*

*A tomb is no place to stay
When life laughs a welcome
To hearts that have been away too long.*

As the chap across the isle begins to snore, it occurs to me that resurrection is the ultimate metaphor for religious liberals drenched in the Easter story, and Dick Gilbert's poem tells us why: *the Resurrection story is not about new life, it's about finding life amidst that which was dead!* The brilliance of the old tale lie in its similarity to the Phoenix – the bird that rises, not from new life, but from death itself; to resurrect is to craft life from the ashes of that which is, for all we can discern, stone cold dead. Addiction gives rise to sobriety. Bitterness gives rise to blessing. Self-centeredness gives rise to humility. These major transformations do not occur because of something new, they rise in us because of the suffering, uncertainty and fear that would beset and deaden us.

This shift away from Easter as a story of new life and toward a tale of life-from-death is on my mind as the plane touches down. It sustains me when my mother calls to tell me that I'll be riding from Columbus to Jackson with some of my sister's friends, who will be returning from a week in Florida. It sustains me during the two-hour drive, while the erstwhile evangelical couple vent their fears that my brother-in-law may not have "found Christ" before slipping into a coma. Resurrection as life-from-death attends me as I pretend that nothing is all that different as we pull into my sister's driveway. But only death is present as I shed tears on the flushed and bloated cheeks of the sleeping man my sister married some forty-two years ago.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

George remains stable overnight, his vital signs going up and down but not so much as to bring the release we both long for and dread. We curse the good politicians and people of Ohio for not following Oregon's lead in leaving end-of-life decisions to those whose lives are ending. We proffer morphine according to schedule, spray a water mist into George's mouth to aid breathing and apply love in the form of tender strokes and soft words.

Four generations of more weary people would be hard to find just now. Even in her eighties my mom can endure the wait, but her nerves are frayed, her patience less. The five-month-old plays with a ball while the grandfather he'll never know lies dying just a few feet away. The old, the young and all the rest are here with few scripts to follow; we don't generally linger, or, to put it in Neil Young's words, we think it's better to burn out than it is to rust.

We know it won't be long now. The kidneys have been drained and the breaths are getting more shallow. And I wonder why that death-from-life version of resurrection keeps playing in my head.

Knowing that I would be writing to you from this physical and spiritual place, I brought a veritable file of things about resurrection. And it was there that I found UU minister, Frances Manley's sermon, "Rebirth and Resurrection". And it was there that I realized where I had first come across the notion of a death-from-life Easter experience.

From Frances Manley's 2003 sermon:

...rebirth is only part of Easter. The other part is resurrection...Rebirth is something that happens again and again in the eternal cycles of the natural world and in the deep cyclical movements within our souls. Resurrection is very different; it is something that happens once, a radical break in the natural order of things, leading – always – to transformation. It is not a waking from sleep but a return from the dead.

...Easter, for me, is not about whether Jesus of Nazareth literally, physically rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. We couldn't prove that one way or the other if we wanted to. What I'm interested in, what moves me, what helps me to understand what it means to be human and gives me the strength in the most challenging times is the story. I ask: How does this story happen in me? Who and where am I in this story? What is the promise of this story? What is the danger?

Sitting alone with George not long after rereading my colleague's insightful words I realize that in this season, Easter's new birth side is obvious and abundant. But in that room where the very young play and the not-so-old die, Easter's resurrection side is harder to spot. And yet comes the deeper questions, set in this surreal context: How does this young child and this dying man happen in me? Who and where am I in *this* story? What is the promise of this scene? And what is the danger?

Toward the end of her sermon, Frances Manley makes the point that, unlike the seasons and cycles of new life, resurrection is not inevitable. She tells us

that “...there is a kind of safety and a kind of rest in letting the dead stay dead. For the traditional Christians the man Jesus of Nazareth died to rise again as the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. What has died and risen again is transformed, and there is loss in that as well as gain. The promise of the resurrection is not that the stone **will** be rolled away, but that it **can** be – if we will but let go of whatever within us is holding us fast in the first place. The promise of the resurrection is not that what has died within us will come to life again but rather that it can – if we are but willing to let go of what once was and embrace whatever transformation comes.”

These are the words on my mind as we alternately laugh and cry. These words, and the strange assurance that life will come of this sad farewell. Not the God of new life and this vernal season, but the God that stands in silent solidarity with our risky encounters with the resurrection experience.

GOOD FRIDAY

George Orland Davis died this morning at approximately 1:30. He was 62 years old. His final moments were peaceful, his last breaths, barely sighs. He often made light of his initials – G.O.D. – and would almost certainly get a grin and a yuck from the fact that he died on Good Friday.

My sister entered that dark place where the prayer of the heart is that the whole thing is but a dream. Her high school sweetheart was never diagnosed with liver disease. His energy and spirit were never sapped, little by little, from his body. Modern medicine never failed in its attempts to rescue him. He never became sicker and sicker, even as he began to take steps to free

himself from old patterns of self-abuse. And these were not her mother, children and brother who were holding her, consoling her, whispering to her that she must let him go. My beloved sister is in that dark place, praying that the past tens months have been nothing more than a very bad dream.

George's embattled body is tenderly and professionally prepared to leave the home he and my sister had built in the late 60s. We have laughed with him, argued with him and grieved over him in this house. So long as I live I will never forget his penchant for doo-wop music, stock cars, gold and parading around in his underwear like the rest of us do in clothes. He has made me welcome in this house despite my own immaturity and belligerence. With my sister, George has made this house the scene of holidays, anniversaries, birthdays and class reunions. These and legions of other memories have made this house a home, a home in every way as holy as any church in the land. Bar none.

But these memories are distant here in the small hours of our literal Good Friday experience. To look for resurrection in this house tonight would be to add insult to injury, so deep is our grief. We lament. We console. And we oh, so slowly grasp for equilibrium by discussing the few remaining details for George Orland Davis' funeral.

My sister will be the last to emerge from the place of the tomb. I grimace as I watch her pour out her heart. I have no words of comfort as it dawns on her that she cannot go on this, the latest of George's life adventures.

My mother and I return to her house at 4:00 A.M. Not yet ready to sleep,

I return again to the files I brought to help me write this account of these days. And I read, once again from the April *Quest*, the story of UU minister, Rebecca Parker's account of the night her sorrow reached its breaking point, and she resolved to drown herself in Puget Sound. All went according to plan until she reached the spot where she says she would "*...sink down into the darkness and go home to God.*"

Parker's suicide plan was interrupted by what she first thought were "oddly shaped sawhorses" except for the fact that they kept moving. Upon closer inspection she found that the "sawhorses" were really the telescopes belonging to members of the Seattle Astronomy Club! Add to that their cordial invitation to look through their telescopes and share the wonder, and she decided that it was neither the time nor place to do herself in.

This morning that is still in literal darkness, as I pray for sleep and my grieving kinfolk. I pray that we are, one and all, strong enough to see in this dark place the beginnings of resurrection. And I pray that we become to my sister what the Seattle Astronomy Club was for Rebecca Parker, a buttress against the sharp and seemingly unrelenting pain of the unthinkable come to pass.

EASTER

I close this unorthodox "sermon" still uncertain as how Easter will come to my people and me. We, as a whole, may never claim title to an insight so undeniable as to be called a resurrection experience, for we cannot all be ready for that kind of risk just by wishing it so. Still, perhaps we can do

something like what yet another colleague, Maureen Killoran, calls “practice” resurrection; maybe we’re ready to name and address the parts of our lives that are in need of transformation – a knot in our parenting, a breach in a relationship, a barren place in our work life, the way we treat our body. The point is that we practice surrendering the dead in order that the dead is *transformed* into a source of strength and not a pocket of pain.

If my tribe and I can find in George’s death a spark that will fire our commitment and creativity, Easter will have come to this house on the hill. If we recognize that spark as the agent of changing in ourselves that which we once thought unchangeable, then we will have taken unto ourselves something of the resurrection experience. And if we can bear to incarnate this, the ultimate metaphor for living, then perhaps we can even *be* something of the resurrection experience.

Keep us close as we stay the course of our grief work. Smile that you once shared this fragile earth with a soul such as George Davis. Tend to your spirits and welcome me back to the circle of caring that touches me across the miles.

And may your Easter be a resurrection experience.

Blessings,

Don