***Roll that Stone Away***

**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on April 1, 2018**

I envy Christian ministers this time of year. When Easter rolls around they can turn to the liturgical calendar and hit upon dozens of messages and images related to Jesus’ resurrection to use for Easter Sunday sermon material. Then there is the Unitarian Universalist minister. Our tradition doesn’t have a liturgical calendar to consult and how does one reach such a theologically diverse congregation with a single message? Let alone a resurrection message? After all it is Easter-a memorial of the resurrection since ancient times. Each year I reach deep to bring Unitarian Universalists a meaningful message on Easter, being careful to massage our theological sensitivities and our understanding, and sometimes, our rejection of traditional resurrection stories. I could tell you of the pagan roots of Easter that lie in celebrating the spring equinox, for millennia an important holiday in many religions. The spring equinox is the end of winter and beginning of spring. Biologically and culturally, it represents for northern climates the end of a “dead” season and the rebirth of life or a resurrection. I could offer an Easter message claiming the importance of fertility and rebirth. All around the country this morning Unitarian Universalists are hearing stories of spring, sprouting flowers, and the symbolism of the egg.

I find the variety of stories and interpretations of Jesus’ resurrection intriguing and sometimes comical. Take, for example the story of one young Unitarian Universalist. His Sunday school teacher was teaching a lesson about Easter and asked her class: “Who knows the story of Easter?” The boy jumped up and down waving his hand as he knew he had the answer. The teacher called on him and he replied, “Easter is the holiday where Jesus comes out of his cave and if he sees his shadow we will have six more weeks of winter.”

I like this story. It’s a bit misguided but downright funny! It reminds me that each of us has our own resurrection story and more importantly each of us have an opportunity for resurrection, rolling away the stones that block our healing and wholeness and allowing the warmth and a sudden leap of understanding to happen. The stone is the obstacle between us and spiritual vision. You may share the Christian belief that Jesus died and was resurrected or you may simply see this as one of many stories. No matter what we believe, the proof of victory over death is visible and unavoidable. This season of rolling the stone away and “rising again” allows us to witness the miracles that are around us. The image of "rolling the stone away" represents the undoing of the deceptive obstacles that seem to stand between ourselves and our personal freedom. We undo these obstacles by recognizing that they are real and devastating. Rolling away the stones that seem to seal us in a dark tomb reveals the life and love that lies beyond us. You know, all of us have stones that block us from getting where we hope or want. Stones of fear or pride or lack of confidence. Stones of arrogance or anger or addiction. Sometimes it is the very little things in our lives that keep what is best in us buried in a tomb.

My colleague the Rev. Mallory LaSande tells us “My life is a series of deaths and rebirths: times when my old life is over and a new life must begin. And the awesome promise of the Resurrection is that it will begin again. I’ve talked about a time of great darkness in my life—a time when there seemed no future. That was for me a time of hiding among the dead. I didn’t want to be noticed and I couldn’t ask for help, so I withdrew from the fullness of life and hid there in the darkness. That wasn’t the only time I have died and been reborn, but from that time on I have known that however painful it is to be reborn, I will be.” I’ve been in this place a few times. I wonder if you hide in the darkness hiding among the dead.

Imagine that you are trapped in a tomb hewn out of rock, completely sealed off from contact with anyone or anything. You are utterly alone. It is pitch black; you cannot see a thing. You hear nothing. The air is cool and musty, and an odor of decay permeates the place. You realize that this tomb is your life: a life encased in a separate body cut off from everyone and everything, beset with problems and pain (think of some specific problems and pains that you are facing right now), and marching inevitably toward demise. We are sometimes trapped in the tomb of our lives, and it seems that there is no way out. We have tried to escape from this tomb countless times in the past, but failed so utterly that we gave up in despair long ago.

Now, you see a faint light approaching. The light grows as it comes nearer until you are at last able to recognize its source. The light is your resilience held by the love and wisdom of true and inner self and those around you here today. You’ve struggled to recognize this light, and in the light, you see your life and your struggle. You see the entrance to this tomb is sealed by an immense stone of solid, impenetrable stone that has trapped you in this dark, miserable tomb for years. Self-compassion, the willingness to be free, have come to help you roll the stone away. You look back and that stone has disappeared and you are standing in your own light and the light of your companions.

We only need to look to the writings of our ancestor Ralph Waldo Emerson to understand the light. Emerson had come from a long line of clergymen. He entered Harvard when he was 14 and became a minister at 26. He was a popular sermonizer. But he abandoned the ministry to lecture and write. He was considered one of America’s foremost orators, and his journals form one of the world’s great documents of spiritual growth. Emerson describes this experience, of light, as a state of consciousness, a state beyond the familiar states of waking, dreaming, and sleeping. This is Transcendental Consciousness. In this natural state, which he describes as “the simplest form of human awareness,” the mind has settled inward, beyond all perception, thought, and feeling. The mind becomes restful yet remains fully awake and alert. “Whenever a mind is simple,” Emerson says, it “receives a divine wisdom.” Emerson teaches us to create and to trust the light from within, relying on our own divinity versus attaching ourselves to a reliance on external energies.

A lesson of Easter is that we can get up every day and go about taking care of what is around us and in front of us. Maybe we can roll those stones away by caring for what is real. A central teaching of all religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, paganism, Hinduism. Taoism – all of them claim that we meet what is sacred when we give ourselves away. When I think of removing obstacles, rolling the stone away, resurrection, and living in hope my mind and heart immediately race to the hymn *We Shall Overcome*. If we pay close attention to the lyrics of the hymn we can better understand our ability to recognize, count on, and experience the hope and trust that radiates from our resilience and our being connected to one another. It is perhaps most famous for being one anthem of the American Civil Rights Movement when both blacks and whites endured the bites of dogs, the lynching of their comrades and loved ones, the burning of their homes and churches, and the murder of their beloved leaders including our very own Rev. James Reeb, a UU minister. They lived in a tomb with no light, no companions, no way out. They endured because they were able to trust in a turn of events. They trusted that the place they were in was not their destiny. They were able to transcend their oppression and move toward freedom using their ability to transform from within. Oh, deep in my heart I do believe WE shall overcome some day. WE are not alone. WE shall not walk alone. WE are not afraid. WE shall overcome someday. It is clear to us that if we rely on the strength and surety of ourselves we will rise above and triumph over the gaps in the road and deep valleys of life’s journey. It is our understanding of and desire for true resurrection that guides us towards trusting in being better off, healed, and free of fear. Hope.

Don’t be too sure if you’re struggling with awful certainties of depression or loss or grief or confusion or broken promises or unfulfilled promise or anything to which we humans of the flesh are heirs, or even death. Stay willing to be surprised, open, resilient, responsible (able to respond), supple…like tender green shoots…stay ready to rub your eyes in disbelief…like poet Archibald MacLeish:

"Why it was wonderful! Why, all at once there were leaves,

Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small alive

Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful,

You can’t imagine. They came by the wood path

And the earth loosened, the earth relaxed, there were flowers

Out of the earth! Think of it! And oak trees

Oozing new green at the tips of them and flowers

Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers, limp

Stalks flowering. Well, it was like a dream,

It happened so quickly, all of a sudden it happened."

Miracles abound.

We are at our best when we refuse to build walls of stone and truly practice self-care and love and care for what is outside ourselves–our friends and family, our community and our congregation. When the stone is rolled away – whatever that stone is – we are free, positioned to be made whole. Let us be witness to the miracle of resurrection and create our own Easter stories.

May it be so.