

Surprise!
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
April 5, 2015

But now we smile in delighted surprise!
and Marchesi brings envelopes with a full days pay
though it is still noon.
Can't you picture the women,
laughing in the street before they head off
each in the direction of a different tolling bell?
Smiles on their faces.

An Easter surprise.
A beautiful poem, a lovely story.
Something to make your day a little brighter.
Right?
Some human decency and kindness.
Friendship.
Generosity.
Love.
Music.
Laughter.
Joy.

The poem, of course, brings to mind one of the most
powerful parables
of Jesus of Nazareth:
the workers in the vineyard.
The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says, is like a wealthy
landowner,

who hires some workers and promises them a full days wage.

And in the middle of the day, he sees some workers without work,
and hires them, too.

And at the end of the day, he pays all of them a full days wage:

no matter how many hours they worked,
they all get paid the same.

The kingdom is like that, the parable proclaims.

Universalists love this story: the kingdom is for everyone.

The story ends with Jesus rebuking the jealousy of the full-day workers:

I paid you what I promised, the landowner says,
why do you care that I gave the same, that I was kind, to the half-day workers?

But I like to think of the story from the perspective of the laborers who were hired midday.

They went out that morning to work, but nobody stopped at their corner.

The stood there in the heat, waiting for work.

And they wonder how they will feed their family that night.

Some of you, I know, have been there -
without work, waiting, hoping, trying, but nothing coming up.

You've been there, you are there, and you know how hard it is.

So when the landowner comes, in the middle of the day,

they take the job - a half day of work is better than none,
but they still worry - it is not enough.

They anticipate a half-days pay, of course -
why would they expect more?

They anticipate a half-size meal for their loved ones;
they'll go without, but the children will eat,
getting something, but not enough.

But surprise.

Surprise.

They line up, and receive a full days pay.

Same as everyone else.

This, says Jesus, is the kingdom of heaven.

It is surprisingly generous.

The holy, the sacred, is love:
surprisingly generous.

Love is more than customs.

There is enough.

There is enough.

Love beyond custom, beyond belief, beyond the rules of
what we expect.

Surprise!

This is the message of Easter.

Surprise!!!

Surprise.

Some thought Jesus would lead a military revolution
against the Romans.

No.

Some thought he would usher in a world of peace.

Not so much, unless you mean in your heart.

Some thought he would fade away, like so many other
prophets, into the dustbin of history.

Not exactly.

Some thought they would open that tomb, find his body,
and bury it in the ground.

But that's not how the story goes.

Mark, 16:8 is the original ending, and Mark is the first
gospel written down.

The tomb was empty.

That's it.

Surprise.

Emptiness.

Space.

Not what you expected.

In Carl Scovel's story:

who understands the gospel?

Not the one you might expect.

The egg, like the tomb, has space.

He's not here.

I like the original ending.

No appearances.
No meeting on the road.
Just not there.
Where is he?

Well, that's up to you.
In your heart? Sure, if you want.
If you feel him there, then there he is.
If not, that's OK. I don't think he would mind.

Or maybe he is a voice of the conscience of love,
sounding along the ages?
Just as that voice sounds along the ages from Athen's
market and Buddha's tree,
it sounds from the shores of Galilee,
echoes in our living and loving.
Maybe that's where he went.

Or maybe we don't know and it doesn't really matter.
Maybe where he went is where he was:
A very human being, and thus, as Carolyn said in her
testimony - more real than before?
An example of what it might mean to live our lives
infused with the spirit of love,
overflowing the boundaries of what was, and creating
something new.

Easter is surprising.
To rise from the dead is . . . not expected.

This is why it is good news!
Death, death at the hands of empire, this we expect.
The breaking out of love, this we do not expect.
For things to go as they are, we expect.
For a revolution in the heart, we are surprised.

Jesus is surprising.
A carpenter's son from Galilee? Really?
Born in a what? Barn? Come on.
And those followers? Tax collectors and fishermen and
hangers-on.
Why, I heard he even hung out with a prostitute.
Can you believe it?
That's . . . unexpected.

The holy is surprising.
The sacred is surprising.
Tao, God, Gaia, Krishna, Kikopelli,
and all the rest of the gods, powers, names of divinity -
they are surprising.
Hidden in the deep,
wrapped in mystery,
tricksters,
unknowable,
surprising.

When I have felt the presence of the holy,
I was surprised.

What about you?

When have you been surprised by something you'd call holy?

Maybe it was something in nature.

The first crocus - you knew it would come, but still, somehow - alleluia - look!

The breathtaking sunrise.

The beauty of a forest in spring.

Maybe it was art.

Good art is surprising, right?

The impressionists, painting feeling as much as fact were greeted with the exclamation:

I didn't know you could do that!

When a piece of music breaks the so-called rules in just the right way -

whoa.

When the plot of the book, play, show takes a great twist and we are surprised beyond words. What? We didn't expect that!

There's something holy in that creativity.

Or maybe it was people -

the surprising love of another, the generosity, the forgiveness asked for, or given, that we did not expect.

The reaching out when we thought we couldn't, or didn't deserve it,

and we are stunned.

People can be so surprising -
more loving, more courageous, wiser than we could have
imagined.

And the holy is enacted.

Revealed in human living, in creativity, and in the world
we share together.

Of course, not all surprises are good ones.

Of course.

Some are earth-shatteringly bad news.

I don't want to try to say that all surprises are good,
because that would just be a ridiculous thing to say.

Because sometimes it is bad news.

The ancients understood this too,
the arbitrary nature of existence.

But the good and the bad come together;
without bad surprises there would be no good surprises,
either.

Joy and sorrow woven fine.

And on some days, I know,
we might wish for that - just nothing changes,
but that is just not the way it is.

Sorry, but it isn't.

Things change, and sometimes they change in surprising
ways.

That's just the truth.
And we could wish them away,
but I'm afraid that's not going to work.

So instead of wishing away surprises, I invite you this
Easter to embrace them.
Embrace them all, so you can really celebrate the good
ones.
To see them as evidence of revelation.
Revelation - that what is hidden is revealed.

When the boss gave the workers a full days pay for a half
days work,
the dignity of all was revealed.

When the boy brought the empty egg, his deeper wisdom
was revealed.

When the tomb was empty, the futility of death's power
over love was revealed.

When art opens our soul, the power of creativity is
revealed.

When nature makes us stop, or sing, or stand in awe, our
interdependence is clear to see.

When people are surprisingly generous, our true nature
as lovers and neighbors
shines out to the world.

And when there is pain and tragedy in the world, our
fragility,

and often, our compassion, is revealed for all to see.

It is not only in the rose, it is not only in the bird,
Not only where the rainbow glows,
nor in the song of woman heard,
but in the darkest, meanest things,
there always, always somethings sings,
always somethings sings.
This is the message that Easter brings.

So said the bard of concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson,
and so we to sing today.

Revelation - to unveil what is hidden, to show what is un-
shown.

We rush along in our lives, from moment to moment,
expecting the day, life, the world to just go along as
planned.

We don't notice the world around us as much as we
could,
and we don't notice the beauty of each other -
or, even more so, of ourselves,
as much as we should.

But then something pulls us out of our routine
and we see as if for the first time.

This is the power of revelation.

This is the message of Easter.

Unitarian Universalists believe, along with other religious
liberals,

that revelation is continuous.
Which is to say, that it is not only thousands of years ago
that miracles happened, or that the presence of the
sacred was felt in the world,
but that the holy is everywhere and everynow,
in this moment,
and the next,
in every person and possibility.
That the world and life speaks of what is miraculous and
sacred
all the time, not just long ago.
As Einstein said, "take your pick: either everything is a
miracle, or nothing is."
We say, everything. Everything.
And we sing, alleluia.

The spring comes, alleluia.
Life comes again, alleluia.
Forgiveness, hope, peace, wonder, comes as an
unexpected visitor- alleluia.
Possibility comes - alleluia.
Surprise! alleluia!