

**The Chrysalis, the Empty Tomb, Transformation
 March 27, 2005
 The Rev. Suzelle Lynch
 Unitarian Universalist Church West**

Readings – Easter 2005

I. from *Three Elegaic Poems* – III, Wendell Berry

He goes free of the earth.
 The sun of his last day sets
 clear in the sweetness of his liberty.

The earth recovers from his dying,
 the hallow of his life remaining
 in all his death leaves.

Radiance knows him. Grown lighter
 than breath, he is set free
 in our remembering. Grown lighter

than vision, he goes dark
 into the life of the hill
 that holds his peace.

He's hidden among all that is
 and cannot be lost.

II. From *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott, pp. 95-6 (adapted)

“Twice I have held the ashes of people I adored – my dad’s, my friend Pammy’s. Nearly twenty years ago I poured my father’s into the water near Angel Island, late at night, but I was twenty-five years old and very drunk at the time and so my grief was anesthetized. When I opened the box of his ashes, I thought they would be nice and soft and, well, ashy, like the ones with which they anoint your forehead on Ash Wednesday. But they’re the grittiest of elements, like not very good landscaping pebbles. As if they’re made of bones or something.

“I tossed a handful of Pammy’s (ashes) into the water way out past the Golden Gate Bridge during the day, with her husband and family, when I had been sober several years. And this time I was able to see, because it was daytime and I was sober, the deeply contradictory nature of ashes – that they are both so heavy and so light. They’re impossible to let go of entirely. They stick to things, to your

fingers, your sweater. ... We tried to strew them off the side of the boat romantically, with seals barking from the rocks on shore, under a true-blue sky, but they would not cooperate. They rarely will... They cling, they haunt. They get in your hair, in your eyes, in your clothes.... Pammy's ashes clung to us. And so I licked them off my fingers. (I licked my friend's ashes off my hand, to taste them, to taste her, to taste what was left after all that was clean and alive had been consumed, burned away.) She was the most robust and luscious person I have ever known."

III. From an anonymous author (found in *Life Prayers*)

When I die if you need to weep
 Cry for your brother or sister
 Walking the street beside you
 And when you need me put your arms around anyone
 And give them what you need to give me.

I want to leave you something
 Something better than words or sounds.

Look for me in the people I've known or loved
 And if you cannot give me away
 At least let me live in your eyes and not on your mind.

You can love me most by letting hands touch hands
 By letting bodies touch bodies
 And by letting go of children that need to be free.

Love doesn't die, people do
 So when all that's left of me is love
 Give me away.

SERMON

One day in late Spring, back in the time before I became a minister and still lived in Seattle, my best friend begged me to help her tame the green wilderness that had taken over her porch, driveway and back yard. Now, I haven't lived in Wisconsin long enough to know how it is with yard and garden care here, but in the rain-soaked Pacific Northwest, if you don't keep up with pruning and trimming, the plants in your yard can easily eat your house. And that's what my friend Maxine needed help with. And so, equipped with pruners, hedge clippers, rakes, shovels and wheelbarrows, five or six of us descended upon her home one sunny Saturday to try to undo fifteen years of benign neglect and vibrant plant growth.

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Max was nervous as we whacked away at her jungle. She wanted her yard back. She wanted to be able to pull her car into the narrow driveway alongside her house. But she felt bad at the green carnage as leaves, branches and flowers fell under our blades and were piled high again and again in a truck bound for the “clean green” section of the landfill. Mostly she realized that she couldn’t oversee the work taking place on all four sides of the house at once, and so she accepted our ministrations with only a little kibitzing and crankiness.

But I’ll never forget her scream of dismay when she witnessed the butchery one of our friends had wrought on the white camellia tree next to her front porch. The tree, once a thriving, bushy, eight-footer, which bore scads of creamy blossoms in season, had been reduced to a mere nub poking up from the ground.

Maxine cried. Our friend felt terrible. He thought she had told him to cut down the camellia and save the forsythia bush that was next to it, when she’d really meant the opposite. And now the glorious camellia tree was gone.

Eventually everyone recovered, and all was forgiven. The clearing went on, to very good effect – indeed, Max discovered yard space she never knew she had. And she and I and everyone who was there for that grand yard-clearing party told and re-told the story of that gathering again and again over the years. Somehow it took on a meaning greater than the events of the day would seem to warrant – it became a symbolic story, a rebirthing story of sorts. The story of Maxine emerging into light and life as the protective thicket she’d hidden behind for so many years was clipped, pruned, and hacked away by her trusted friends. When Maxine died in 1999 we told the story at her memorial service -- and it had that same magical quality.

Theological writer Frederick Buechner once wrote, “As human beings we know time as a passing of unrepeatable events in the course of which everything passes away including ourselves. As human beings, we also know occasions when we stand outside the passing of events and glimpse their meaning. Sometimes an event occurs in our lives (a birth, a death, a marriage – some event of unusual beauty, pain, joy) through which we catch a glimpse of what our lives are all about and maybe even what life itself is all about...” (*Wishful Thinking*, p.23)

That was the magic of Maxine’s yard-clearing party – it was an event of unusual beauty: an event in which the power of love and friendship changed her life, and our lives as well. It was an occasion through which we could stand outside of time, and glimpse the meaning of our lives.

Late last summer I had the honor of participating in another such event, when I helped Mark and Chris Overs scatter the ashes of their father, Bob, on the family property in Menomonee Falls. As many of you know, Bob Overs was a longtime

member of this church who remained active and involved here until only a couple of years ago.

Bob's ashes -- his "cremains" as the funeral industry calls them -- were on the kitchen counter when we arrived. There they were, in a preposterously small box. How could it be that I could hold in my hands all that remained of the earthly self of a man who had lived a long and passionate life. A man who had been a counselor, a social activist, a son, a father, a loving husband, a friend, an inspiration to so many people still living. How could my hands possibly contain him?

His sons and three of his friends and I took his ashes down the hill to the pond to scatter them, and I was reminded of Anne Lamott's experience. For try as we might to make them scatter -- his ashes came back to us, settling on our clothes and our skin; settling in our hair and on our shoes. But it was all right. Like Anne Lamott, who, in the presence of the bald truth of her friend's death, responds by literally taking her friend into herself, by licking her friend's ashes off her hand, sometimes our love for those whom we have lost is so big and so intimate that doing such a thing doesn't seem strange at all. It felt right that even as we were returning Bob Overs to the embrace of the good earth, part of him was staying with us, clinging to us, reminding us, in the words of the poet, that the hallow of his life remains in all his death left behind, including us.

Easter, far from being a simple celebration with chickies, bunnies and chocolate eggs; far from being a tale of rising from the dead meant to be taken literally -- Easter is more purely and truthfully and simply one of those powerful events that allows us to stand outside of time. Easter is a lens, a window through which we might glimpse a powerful truth about our lives, and life itself -- the truth of resurrection.

Most of us are familiar with the classic Christian Easter story -- that Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth who preached a gospel of love and performed miracles that gained him a passionate following, was arrested in Jerusalem by the Roman authorities. He was tried and found guilty by those authorities, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. His friends and followers were shocked and scared and grieving.

Imagine that you were one of them. Your life had been one of weariness and grinding poverty, and then you learned of and began to follow this teacher who proclaimed your infinite worth, your belovedness to the God he called "daddy." Everywhere you went with this teacher, broken people found hope and healing, and every day you were with him, the truth of your own potential wholeness became brighter. And then suddenly he is dead, a humiliating, painful, tortured death, and your world is shattered. You must flee, for fear that the authorities who killed him will persecute you also. But you cannot flee. Instead, you wait,

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you hide, and then you go to the borrowed tomb in which his body was placed in the hope that you can do one final thing: prepare his body for burial, caress him one last time, and say goodbye. But when you arrive, the tomb is open, the stone rolled away, and his body is gone.

What happens next? The different Biblical gospel writers say different things. Different kinds of Christians believe different things. I say none of this matters. For what we know happened is that somehow, despite all the odds, Jesus' followers carried on, they took his teachings into their lives over and over again down the centuries, and his message of radical love and justice is still with us today. When I think of them, and what Jesus might have said to them, I think of the words of our reading by the anonymous author: "When I die if you need to weep / Cry for your brother or sister / Walking the street beside you / And when you need me put your arms around anyone / And give them what you need to give me. ... / Love doesn't die, people do / So when all that's left of me is love / Give me away."

This is the real resurrection: Jesus' followers lived through the shattering grief of his death and they gave him away. They gave the love he gave them to one another, and to all those whom they encountered. Faced with the empty tomb, his followers' whole world was gone – but they went on.

How could they do this?

How do any of us go on when faced with crushing loss? Not only when faced with the deaths of those we love, but illnesses, failures, ruptures in relationships - - all the myriad, inevitable or unexpected changes our very human lives gather to us the way a snowball gathers mass as it rolls downhill.

Often we respond with a desire to control things, to stop the change from happening, or to deny it.

I cannot help but wonder if this isn't what is happening with the parents of Terri Schiavo, the poor soul in Florida whose life and death have been struggled over and debated in the courts and in the press so much in recent days. I can only imagine the depth of their feelings of loss, and those of Terri's husband. Each of them believes they are doing the right thing for Terri, who can no longer speak for herself. It is a story that has stirred the emotions of many in our nation, as has the local story of Terry Ratzmann, the man who killed himself and so many of his fellow churchgoers here in Brookfield earlier this month, and the story of young Jeff Weise, who killed nine people at his school in Red Lake, Minnesota, and exchanged gunfire with police before killing himself as well. When events like these take place, we are shocked and full of sorrow. We struggle to respond, to respond from compassion and not fear. We remember the great power and preciousness of life. We remember how very hard it is to let life go.

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Twelve years ago, when I was an intern minister at the UU Church in Dallas, I had the honor of being with a young man named John through the last months of his life.

John was a member of the Dallas Unitarian Church's Humanist group. By far their youngest member, and their only openly gay one, he made his way quietly and graciously among that circle of staunch old humanists, earning their respect and caring. He never told them he was dying with AIDS.

When John became too ill to come to church, I began visiting him at home. Sometimes when I would call to set up a time to visit, his mother would answer the phone. She always said, "He's was too sick to see anyone," and then she would hang up on me. She was a devoted Catholic who approved even less of her son's Humanism than she did of his sexual orientation, and her hostility towards me was evident. I quickly learned to call back later in the day, when John's partner was home.

John and I talked a great deal about his memorial service when it became obvious he was dying. He told me he didn't want a Catholic mass said for him, but that I'd better not try to talk his mother out of it. He also told me that he'd made his mother promise to come to the memorial service for him at the Unitarian church.

The Saturday afternoon of John's memorial, the church was quite empty. John had not attended for long, and he was a quiet man who did not make friends easily. The Humanists were there, of course, dotted in bunches of two and three around the cavernous sanctuary, and John's partner was there with a friend or two.

John's mother hurried in at the last minute, and gave me a wan smile. "The mass Father said for John on Wednesday was just lovely," she said. "I can't imagine why John insisted that you hold a service here, too..." During the service itself she didn't seem to be listening. She had one of the hymnals open on her lap, and was paging through it. It was hard to not feel annoyed with her, even as my heart went out to her over the death of her sweet son.

But when the service concluded, she rushed up to me and took my arm. "It's all right," she said. "It's all right now." Her voice was full of emotion, her eyes full of tears. "What, Mrs. _____?" I asked, "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"It's all in here," she said, pointing to the hymnal. "I looked and looked, all during the service – and you know what, it's all right. We sing the same songs." She reached out and I held her as the tears began to run down her face. Her resurrection had begun, sparked by something as simple as a familiar hymn – a

connection to her son's alien religious life that allowed her to see him as he really was, instead of as who she'd always wanted him to be. A connection that helped her begin to let him go, without losing him.

Our lives are endlessly full of deaths and rebirths. We fail, we falter, we change – we go into the tomb, certain that life as we know it has ended. But at some point, the tomb is opened, and we discover it's empty. We're not buried in our grief any more, not stuck in our losses, unsure of what to do. We somehow, miraculously, have gone on into the next cycle of living, growing, striving, giving....

One Spring day, about a year and a half after my dear friend Maxine died, I went to Seattle on my day off with the intention of going to the Seattle Art Museum. But instead, I found myself longing to visit Maxine's old neighborhood, and her grave in the nearby cemetery.

I parked across the street from the house Maxine had owned, the old, run-down house that had been like a home base in Seattle for me for fifteen years. I noticed that the new owners had not only begun to rebuild the sagging front porch, but that they had completely wiped out the backyard jungle – which grew back to its former luxurious wildness only a few years after the grand yard-clearing party we'd had. I went for a walk through the neighborhood and was just about to return to my car for the trip up to the cemetery when I noticed that the camellia tree next to the front porch of Maxine's old house had been resurrected to its glorious, eight-foot, bushy self, and was in full creamy bloom.

And so I went up to the house and rang the bell. The young, red-haired woman who answered looked surprised and confused to see me instead of the electrical contractor she'd been expecting. I introduced myself as a friend of the former owner, knowing that the house's new owners had heard all about Maxine from the friend who helped sell the house after her death. I asked if I might pick a camellia to take to Max's grave.

Of course she said yes, and so I picked a camellia branch and we talked a little, we two women whose lives were joined by the memory of a woman she'd never met, by a nearly hundred-year-old house we both loved, a house she and her husband were transforming into a home for the baby they hoped to conceive. She thanked me for stopping by, and said she'd tell her husband, too – for he had been very moved by the stories he'd heard about Maxine. On my way back to my car, blossom in hand, I cried and cried. My resurrection, too, had begun.

Life does not come with easy answers, or with an instruction manual or even lessons we can take to help us as we go. All of the most important things we must learn the hard way, through change and loss and mystery and miracle. And though our many trips around the sun reassure us that Spring will always come,

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we also learn that there can be no real Spring in us, no new growth, no deepening of life's meaning, until we face the empty tomb.

Sometimes I feel as though I will mourn my friend Maxine forever, for she was so very dear to me. Yet I know also that at some point in the years since her death I allowed the book to close on the beautiful chapter of my life that included her so prominently. And while that knowledge, like the knowledge of any deep loss, sometimes makes me feel rootless, it also reminds me that resurrection, new life, is possible and real.

This is what I hope for and pray for for all of us – for all of you, for the family and friends of Terry Ratzlaff, of Jeff Weise, of Terri Schiavo: for all people in our world.

For we know that in the midst of all the stir and struggle of human living, Spring does come, Easter comes, Passover comes. The earth turns, the grass begins to green, the birds begin to nest, and somewhere, the camellias are beginning to think about blooming again. The urge to live that is our good Earth's constant desire brings hope and renewal to us as well.

Easter is here, bringing the steady promise that rebirth is the inevitable way of our humanness. Easter is here, reminding us that the hallow of our lives remains even after we are gone – we, and those we love, cannot be lost. Easter is here, reminding us that life is stronger than death, and that resurrection comes when we give away the love that has been given to us.

Easter is here, let us rejoice and be glad.

Alleluia, and Amen.