

“Becoming Alive Anew”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on April 4, 2021

I want to wish you all a happy Easter. If the weather forecasters are correct, what a wonderful, blustery spring day this is going to be. Spring has definitely arrived for Easter this year. I stopped by the Fellowship building on Friday and noticed that some of the flowers out front are blooming. The blossoming of the first flowers of spring exemplifies the theme of my sermon this morning, becoming alive anew. Spring is a time when vibrant life is emerging all around us. This is definitely a time of year to celebrate, and the holiday of Easter celebrates what spring demonstrates. Easter is a holiday that celebrates life emerging from that which seems to be dead.

The story that underpins Easter is contained in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is the story of Jesus' crucifixion, his body being placed in a tomb that was then sealed by a large stone, and his resurrection on the third day. I imagine that many of you have some familiarity with this story. I won't go into the details of the story this morning for two reasons—first, because it is a familiar story to many and second, because the details are different depending on which of the Gospel accounts you read. But there is a common element to each account of the story and that is that Jesus, after having died, came to life again. And after coming to life again was taken up into heaven. The part about being taken up into heaven is very important. It is important because his resurrection and ascension into heaven was taken by Jesus' followers to indicate that by believing in and following Jesus they too would be raised from the dead and have new life in heaven.

The idea of life after death, and more than that, eternal life in the glorious bliss of heaven, can certainly be appealing. From the moment we are born we extend incredible effort every day to continue the life we have. So the idea of having life forevermore, well, that gets one's attention.

But from the early days of Christianity, all the way up to today, there have been some who have had difficulties with one or another aspect of the Easter story and its meaning. For example, our Universalist forebears had difficulty with the idea that only those who believed in and followed Jesus would be reconciled and reunited with God upon death. The difficulty centered on the attributes that these Universalist forebears attributed to God. God was considered to be eternal, all knowing, all powerful, all merciful, fully righteous and all loving. These attributes of God made it difficult for some to accept that only a small number of all humans would be granted access to heaven while the vast majority would never be reconciled with God. The tension that exists between these attributes of God and the salvation of a select few led to a number of questions. Here is one. How could a God with the attributes I just mentioned, especially the attribute of being all loving, possibly condemn any human being? From the Christian perspective, God is responsible for the creation of all of us. And we are all imperfect. For at least some of those Christians who considered the question I just mentioned, the answer was clear. God loves, accepts and will redeem all humans, not just a chosen few. Our Universalist forebears rejected the notion of hell. This freed them from concern or worry about an afterlife. Their attention and their energy was devoted to this world not an afterlife. And they were intent on following the teachings of Jesus while living in this world. They focused their attention on teachings such as “do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” As we all know, their perspective did not become the predominant belief or practice in Christianity. The concept of universal salvation, which the Universalist portion of our name is based on, has been a heretical belief for close to 1,900 years.

Yet while Universalists had and continue to have a different interpretation of this particular aspect of the Easter story, they didn't throw the entire story out with the bathwater, so to speak. Many Universalists hold Easter to be a very important holiday. Easter is important, not because it establishes the chosen from the unchosen but because of its focus on life arising anew.

So today, with spring underway and new life popping forth all around, I invite us to consider what it might mean to become alive anew. We might want to consider this idea on more than one level. On the

personal level we might ask ourselves: What might it mean for me to become alive anew? At a bit larger level, I would suggest we might ask this question. What might it mean for this Fellowship to become alive anew?

The first question requires a personal answer from each one of us. While there may be similarities between our various answers, no two answers will be identical. In actuality, on any given day the answer we arrive at for this question may be different from the day before. I wouldn't think of attempting to answer this question for any of you but would offer a portion of how I would answer the question for myself today.

What would it mean for me to become alive anew? Before I begin to answer that question, I want to share some of what underlies what I am about to say. Because of the COVID pandemic, I have significantly restricted my activities and my person-to-person contact during the last 12 months. While I have spent many, many hours connecting with people using technology, not being physically in the presence of others has been difficult and even painful for me. Every day I am aware of the loss that goes along with limiting my direct close contact with people I know and care about, including the members and friends of this Fellowship. This extended period of very minimal direct contact with others has resulted in a part of me feeling deadened or numb. For months I have been looking forward to the day when this self-imposed physical and social distancing will no longer be necessary. I am very grateful to have recently received the second of my two-part vaccination. And yet, while I am grateful that I am now vaccinated, I recognize that there are many who have not yet been able to get vaccinated for one reason or another. The discrepancy between my gratitude for having gotten the vaccine and my concern for those who are still waiting, might initially seem like something to push aside or seek to rid myself of. But I am experiencing this emotional discrepancy as a sign of becoming alive anew. For months it wasn't just my physical contact with others that was restricted, the range of my emotions was restricted as well. Today I can feel my range of emotions bursting the bubble that had been containing them. Today, as the discrepancy of emotions I just mentioned illustrates, my range of emotions is expanding. In talking with others who have recently received their vaccinations, I have heard stories similar to what I just shared. It is my hope that in the very near future anyone who wants to receive the vaccine will be able to get it. As more and more of us become fully vaccinated we can begin to reclaim aspects of our lives that were set aside during the past year.

Now let's shift our attention to the second question. What might it mean for this Fellowship to become alive anew? It has been more than a year since we last gathered in our building on Sunday mornings or any other day for that matter. The Board, committees, social groups and Religious Exploration classes have either been taking place online or not at all. Very few of us spend any time in the building and even those of us who do spend less time there than we did in the past. But as more and more people become vaccinated, the COVID virus case numbers will diminish. And as the case numbers diminish the risk of contracting and/or spreading the virus will diminish as well. With this in mind, the Board recently made the decision to begin planning for the resumption of in-person services beginning in June. At this point the plan is to hold in-person services and see how that goes before allowing other types of in-person gatherings in the building. There is a lot to consider and plan for in this return to in-person services. So I am grateful that the Board has decided to take the process of re-opening the building one step at a time.

I don't know about you, but I am looking forward to the day when I will be in the sanctuary of our building on Sunday morning along with many of you. On the whole, we have done an admirable job of maintaining most of the main aspects of the Fellowship over the past year. That said, there have been some areas where it just hasn't been possible to continue activities or events we were accustomed to before COVID arrived. While the Fellowship hasn't been in a full hibernation mode this past year, certain aspects of what we were accustomed to doing have been either absent or very minimal for the past year or more.

Like many of you, I am looking forward to the reawakening, the re-enlivening, of the aspects of this Fellowship that have been dormant this past year. After so many months of slumber, I imagine that the reawakening will take a while. I think it is doubtful that the Fellowship activities and events which have been in hibernation will suddenly wake up one day, emerge from their den, and be as vibrant and energized as they were previously. It is more likely that things will be a bit sluggish at first as we all try to reorient ourselves to the realities of having coped with COVID for a year and continuing to deal with its lingering presence.

So while I don't know how, as a community, we will become alive anew, I am confident we will figure it out together. As we begin to plan and prepare for meeting in-person again, I would invite each of us to think about what part we might play in the reawakening, the re-energizing, and the re-enlivening of this community that will soon occur. Since the period of hibernation has been very long, it is quite possible that our minds may be a bit groggy. We may not be able to immediately think of how we might devote time and energy to the reawakening process here at UUFB.

In case you might be having trouble coming up with ways you can participate in this reawakening process, let me offer a few suggestions. One thing you might consider is attending in-person services once they begin. I recognize that, for a number of reasons, this won't be a reasonable or appropriate option for everyone the first Sunday we are back in the building. When attending in-person services becomes a reasonable and appropriate option for you and your family members, I encourage you to take advantage of it. A second option is to get involved in the various groups that are meeting now or will begin meeting again once the Fellowship building is opened to such groups. There are multiple groups a person might consider getting involved in. These include the women's group, the men's group, the humanist group, and the Buddhist group. Some of these groups are meeting via Zoom currently and others will begin again once we are meeting in-person. And there could be a group you would like to see the Fellowship add. Let us know your ideas and if you are willing to put effort into making your ideas happen. Another possibility for investing time and energy could be any of the various UUFB committees and task forces. You can find a list of the committees on the UUFB website. And you can ask me or a Board member about the task forces that are currently active. These are just a few ideas you might want to consider.

As I observe and enjoy the progression of spring, I see this season of the year as a model for what we might want to imitate in the days ahead. As spring progresses and the threat of the COVID virus recedes like the snow and ice of winter, there will be opportunities all around where we can play a role in the emergence of new possibilities. I encourage each of us to imagine and envision ways we can become alive anew. In the days ahead may we seek out and find ways to bring more vibrancy both to our own lives as well as to the lives of those we are in community with here at UUFB and beyond.

So may it be.