

“Death and Renewal”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Happy Easter to all of you on this unusually chilly mid-April morning. Today is one of the three most significant holidays in the Christian tradition. The other two are Christmas, which is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, and Good Friday, which commemorates Jesus’ death. Easter celebrates Jesus’ resurrection from the tomb three days after his death on the cross.

The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is contained in each of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. When an event, any event, is written about by more than one author, it is common for each story written about the event to be different. That is the case with the story of Jesus’ death and what occurred three days after his body was placed in the tomb. In spite of the differences in the stories that are contained in the four Gospels, there are a number of elements that are common to each. The first common element involved Jesus being crucified by the authorities in Jerusalem and his subsequent death on the cross. After his death, his body was removed from the cross and placed in a tomb. A large stone was then placed at the entrance of the tomb. On the third day after his death, it was discovered that the large stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb and Jesus’ body was gone. Subsequently, each of the Gospel stories tell of how Jesus, physically alive, appeared and spoke with a number of people. Two of the Gospels, Mark and Luke, specifically mention Jesus’ ascension to heaven. The Gospel of John refers to Jesus talking about “ascending to where he was before.” The points I have just mentioned are the basic elements related to the story of Jesus’ death, resurrection from the dead, and bodily ascension to heaven.

The story of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension are foundational to the Christian religious tradition. Over the centuries, and to this day, individual Christians have had different perspectives about this story. While some Christians believe that all of the elements of the Easter story are literal and absolute fact, others do not. This difference of perspective and belief goes back to the time the events contained in the story supposedly occurred. The Gospel of John states that Thomas, one of the apostles, doubted that Jesus had been raised from the dead until he actually witnessed the resurrected Jesus and the wounds from the crucifixion. That Biblical verse is where we get the phrase “doubting Thomas.”

Most Unitarian Universalists don’t give the story of Jesus’ resurrection much time or attention. Typically, our attention and concern are on this life and this world, not on the claim of an afterlife in heaven. Whatever your perspective or belief about the Easter story, I invite us to take time this morning to consider an important theme that it contains. The theme I am referring to is larger than death and resurrection. The theme I am referring to is death and renewal. The theme of death and renewal is found in stories from religious traditions and cultures around the world. It is so common and widespread that I am convinced there is something about the theme that is important, or maybe even essential, for us to attend to. Many of the stories about death and renewal predate the Easter story by hundreds to even thousands of years.

Stories that address this theme can be found in religious traditions from ancient Rome, Sumeria, Babylonia, Egypt and Greece. In early sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, one can find the concept of reincarnation. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, reincarnation, in religion or philosophy, refers to “the rebirth of an aspect of an individual that persists after bodily death—whether it be consciousness, mind, the soul, or some other entity—in one or more successive existences.” And on this continent, the story of the Corn Mother of the Cherokee Nation, Selu, offers an example of the death and renewal theme. The story tells of the specific instructions Selu gave her grandsons about what to do with her body after her death. According to the story, the instructions, when followed properly and with reverence, resulted in the very first crop of corn, a sacred food which is still an important staple of the Cherokee People today.

Just as in the four Gospels, the innumerable stories involving the theme of death and renewal are different from one another. Each story involves its own characters. Each approaches the theme from its own

particular perspective. Each has some message, or some lesson, that it seeks to convey. In the short time we have together today, it would be impossible to consider the theme of death and renewal either in depth or in its breadth. And yet, as it is Easter, as we are hopefully nearing the end of the global pandemic, and as we are witnessing the senseless and unconscionable military invasion and subsequent death of so many in Ukraine, it seems both appropriate and important today to attend to this theme. Even if we only begin the exploration of this theme, it seems to me that our time will have been well spent and worthwhile.

I want to state here that from this point on, when I talk about death and renewal, I will be talking about death broadly. Death can certainly be the end of a life. But death, as I will share soon, can also be the end of something that is less tangible, such as an idea. The way in which I will be talking about death for the remainder of this sermon has many similarities to what I shared last week in my sermon titled “Awakening and Surrender.” Literal death may be the ultimate surrender. But both surrender and death can come in many forms, and at many points in one’s life. So from this point on I would invite you, in fact, I would encourage you, to think of death in a very broad way. And I would invite and encourage you to consider the multiple ways that death, both literally and figuratively, has shown up, or is showing up, in your life, and in our lives today.

The way I thought of death was significantly expanded more than forty years ago when I had the opportunity to hear a professional presentation by a psychiatrist. The presentation was one of several I heard at a conference I attended as part of my continuing education as a clinical social worker. I had recently taken a job as the director of a program providing assistance and support to families who had a newborn infant on the neonatal intensive care unit of a local hospital. That unit was often referred to by the acronym NICU. Many of the infants on the NICU were born weeks short of full term. Some of them didn’t leave the hospital unit alive. The psychiatrist’s presentation was very educational. But it was much more than educational, it was very moving as well.

The psychiatrist began by telling us that he had worked with numerous families who had a child that had been born prematurely. All of these premature infants had to be admitted to the NICU in order to address their high level of medical complications. He had assisted the parents of these infants as they struggled to deal with the emotions that were associated with such a situation—emotions such as anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, sadness and even grief.

What made the presentation so moving was the way he shared about the experience of having his own newborn infant on the NICU. He told those of us in the audience the experience made him realize that as soon as an infant is placed on the NICU, the family experiences a death. As soon as the infant is admitted to the NICU, the parents have to deal with the death of their dream—the dream of being able to physically and emotionally bond with their infant in the hours and days immediately following the birth. The psychiatrist stated that, in his experience, the death of a dream can be as devastating, and sometimes even more devastating and difficult to deal with, than a physical death. I recall that when he made that claim, there was a moment of uncomfortable silence in the room. He supported that assertion by telling us that when there is a physical death there is usually a dead body that can be seen. The death is visible and it is outside of you. People in all cultures have customs for what to do with the body and how to support those who have lost a loved one.

But when a dream dies, especially a powerful and deeply held dream, there is no visible body. When a dream dies, others may not know a death has occurred. There are few, if any, customs in most cultures for supporting someone whose dream has died. And added to all of that, when a dream dies, the death occurs primarily, if not exclusively, within oneself.

In over 30 years of attending educational presentations in my social work career, that presentation was the only one I attended where the speaker received a standing ovation. That presentation opened my eyes, and my heart, to the deaths that the parents I was working with had experienced and were doing their best to cope with. And, as I said previously, it expanded the way that I perceived death.

I share this story because I believe it may help all of us identify deaths we may not recognize in our own lives—deaths we have experienced previously or are experiencing currently. I know that the pandemic resulted in the deaths of incredible numbers of people. Last time I checked the death toll in the U.S. attributed

to COVID was estimated to be between 980,000 to 1 million. That is an incredible number of human deaths. But there is no count of the number of dreams that have died as a result of the pandemic. I don't know how many times I have heard parents say that as a result of the COVID virus, their children have lost the opportunity to have a normal childhood. That is just one example of how the pandemic has killed dreams that we hold.

This may seem like an incredibly big leap at this point, but I want to return now to the story of Jesus' death and his reported resurrection. As I think about the followers of Jesus, I think of the deaths they experienced. I say deaths, because there were at least two deaths. Those deaths were, first, his physical death, and second, the death of the dream that he represented for them. His followers believed that Jesus was their messiah. Many of his followers held the dream that he was going to deliver them from the oppression and the suffering they were experiencing. They most likely thought he would deliver them from the oppression and the suffering they were experiencing in his and in their lifetimes. With his physical death, that dream died as well.

I have spent a lot of time so far on the issue of death. At this point you might be wondering where renewal comes in. It comes in, as it often does in so many of the stories that are told about this theme, with a dramatic change in what one would expect the ending to be. When the death occurs, and in the Easter story when the death of the dream occurs, a new dream emerges. In the Easter story the dream is no longer about the current lifetime. The dream is transformed. The dream is now of an eternal life with God in heaven.

It is quite likely that a significant number of you have questions, doubts or even disbelief regarding heaven and eternal life. I am not suggesting you change your beliefs on these issues. Instead, I mention the death and renewal of the dream many of Jesus' followers may have experienced as a way to have you recall your own experiences when a dream you held died. How did you cope with that death? Was a new dream born from the former dream's remains? The emergence of new dreams following the death of formerly held dreams is a good example of how renewal occurs. Like the story of the phoenix in Greek mythology, the mature phoenix must go up in flames so that a new phoenix may arise from its ashes.

With all of the uncertainty and all of the destruction that is present in the world today, many dreams have died or are near death. Some of those dreams have not yet been placed in a grave. The work we need to dedicate ourselves to begins as we recognize and grieve the deaths that are occurring or have occurred. It is through that recognition and grief work that renewal will emerge. This is one of the important lessons contained in many of the stories of death and renewal that have been told around the world for generation after generation.

The question then is will we dedicate ourselves to the work that is before us. Will we support one another through the process of recognition of, and grieving for, our losses? Will we, both individually and collectively, birth a new dream? The answers to these questions are not yet known. There is a great deal of work that will be required if the answers to these questions are "yes." May the many stories of death and renewal that have been told for centuries provide encouragement, support and guidance in the work that lies ahead.

So may it be.