

## **“Brokenness and Mercy”**

*An Easter Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

*March 27, 2016*

As I mentioned last year, I *love* Easter. Of the Christian holidays, Easter has always been my favorite. I’m not talking about the relative merits of Easter baskets to Christmas presents. Clearly Christmas would win out on the ranking of gift-giving. Rather, to me Easter was a better story . . . and definitely a better worship service. My mom was an energetic organist employed by whatever church we attended, so my worship experience on Easter Sunday always included robust organ music. The organ, King of the Instruments, can command a space unlike any other. And on Easter out came the BIG pieces—and, if we were lucky, the brass would play as well. This feast of celebratory music supported the religious message of the day with its unbridled joy and declarations of a certain hope in an eternal life.

But over the years, that certainty of that message has waned for me. Indeed, I think many Unitarian Universalists struggle with Easter. The idea of resurrected bodies is an outrageous idea to modern scientific sensibilities. Resurrection is a stunning claim—whether you’re accepting or rejecting its truth. In addition, the widely taught understanding of Jesus’ death as a human sacrifice to appease God seems morally offensive to many. What kind of loving God demands the bloody execution of God’s only son as a ransom for the moral debt humanity allegedly owes to God?

So why then do we celebrate *Easter*? Does such a story really merit a festive celebration of brass and song, flowers and alleluias? For me, Easter is not about the need for a bloody sacrifice to pay a ransom to satisfy a divine lawgiver. Nor is Easter about celebrating how a resurrected corpse promises the possibility of life after death. Rather, I believe Easter is important—even to Unitarian Universalists and even to atheists—because Easter expresses a core spiritual truth: our brokenness does not need to be the entirety of our story.

Within the Christian tradition, the celebration of Easter comes at the end of a series of events. Before the brass and the alleluias of Easter, there is a 40-day season of spiritual reflection as well as a recounting of the story of the week leading up to Jesus’ Easter morning resurrection—a week that included a celebration of the Jewish Passover with his followers, followed shortly after by the betrayal of a number of those closest to him. During the trial for his life, the religious leaders denounced him to the occupying Roman government and the gathered crowd called out for his blood. Convicted of claiming to be

the King of the Jews, he was executed on a cross between two other men also convicted of crimes. Jesus' mother stood watch as he died.

The story of the days before Easter is in fact a story of a man arrested for a crime he arguably did not commit, judged by a biased and corrupt court, denounced by a vocal public opinion, and executed by the state. It is in fact a story that can still be found today.

It is the kind of story that you might find in the book *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is a lawyer and human rights activist who has spent decades fighting on behalf of incarcerated persons. First exposed to the system of capital punishment as a law student, Stevenson made it his life's work to help those who are often forgotten, invisible, and hated. In his work, he has sought to overturn wrong convictions as well as to seek more merciful sentences for those condemned to death or to life in prison. Stevenson and his organization have not only helped innocent people go free, he's also led the way to the Supreme Court outlawing capital punishment and life sentences for minors.

If you've not yet read *Just Mercy*, I strongly encourage you to do so. Although . . . reading a powerful story like Stevenson's can leave a person wondering "geez . . . what good *I* have done in the world?!?" But just when you might be tempted to hold up Stevenson as a kind of super-human activist, he writes this:

*I realized something sitting there while Jimmy Dill was being killed at Holman prison. After working for more than twenty-five years, I understood that I don't do what I do because it's required or necessary or important. I don't do it because I have no choice. I do what I do because I'm broken, too.*

Unable to save Jimmy Dill, a poor black man who was grossly underrepresented in his initial trial, Stevenson is no super-human hero who always wins against injustice. Nor is he fighting injustice from a platform of what's "required or necessary or important." Stevenson does what he does "because [he's] broken, too."

Before we get to Easter, before the celebrations and the flowers, there is the story of injustice, of betrayal, of brokenness. And, aren't we all broken? We're broken by heartbreaks of all kinds—betrayals and loss, breakups and disappointments. We're broken when life as we've known it turns upside down by news of a diagnosis or a death. We're broken when we're assaulted by words that cut deeply into our soul as well as fists or feet that cause us bodily harm. We're broken by dreams that dissolve or never manage to become real. We're broken by loneliness, depression, and hopelessness. We're broken

when we're made to feel like we don't belong, that we're not good enough, or that we're simply not worthy of love or life.

"We're all broken by something," Stevenson writes, "We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. . . . The ways in which I have been hurt—and have hurt others—are different from the ways Jimmy Dill suffered and caused suffering. But our shared brokenness connected us."

Here in this room we too have all hurt someone and have been hurt. While we do not know all of the brokenness that each of us carries within, we do know some of the brokenness that is present here today. As a community, we have carried each other through the deaths of loved ones who died later in life and those who died much too young. We have held each other through the diagnoses of cancer and of terminal disease. We have listened to friends when they lose a job or go through a divorce. We know brokenness. We are all broken.

And yet, brokenness does not need to be the entirety of our story. This is a message we find in the Easter story. After the betrayals and condemnation, after the execution and death, after all that has broken Jesus, broken the hearts of those who followed him, and broken the bonds of the community he created, the story is not over. His followers gather; they share meals and stories; they *remember* his teachings. And they continue to live as he taught them to live. They teach others the stories and the teachings. The life of Jesus goes on through those who believed in him and what he taught them about love and compassion, about caring for the least of us, about seeking peace and healing. Jesus' brokenness—indeed his death—does not keep life from flowing forth.

Traditional understandings of the Easter story emphasize not only the return of life after death, but also Easter as an expression of God's mercy—a mercy that "forgives our sins" and calls us beyond our brokenness. Rather than being condemned for the many ways that we have harmed another or been harmed, the promise of Easter is that brokenness will not be the entirety of the story.

Bryan Stevenson talks a lot about mercy in his book. Stevenson tells many stories of people who have done some terrible things, who have harmed others, who have broken the law. But as he tells their stories, he also puts these acts into the context of a person's life. There is the story of Avery Jenkins who was orphaned as an infant, grew up in foster care, and appeared to suffer from unaddressed psychological issues. In a psychotic episode, Jenkins killed a man. Quickly convicted, his initial trial made no mention of his history or psychological issues. And there is the story of Charlie, a frightened 14-year old boy, who

shot and killed his mother's boyfriend after witnessing the boyfriend beat his mother bloody and unconscious. These are stories of brokenness. Stories of broken people who were harmed and who also harmed others.

By writing stories of incarcerated persons that show their humanity and the contexts of their lives, Stevenson challenges us to take a wider look at the people caught within the criminal justice system. He writes, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

What if you were defined only by the worst thing you've ever done? What if there was never any mercy for your missteps? What if you were never given a second chance? Or a chance to explain, to put your actions into context, to make it clear that you are more than that one act?

We have all done wrong. We are all broken. Knowing this matters. Stevenson writes,

*"There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us."*

In our brokenness, we learn mercy.

To me, this is the story of Easter—a celebration that our brokenness is not the last word about who we are. We are more than the worst thing we've ever done. We are more than the worst thing that has ever happened to us. In our brokenness we learn mercy. We learn that all of us are broken. We learn to treat one another with compassion and kindness. And we learn to not be so quick to condemn.

So there in the Alleluias and the boisterous brass is this promise: you are broken *and* you are not irredeemably condemned. You are a part of an eternal embrace of a Life that flows forth into new seasons. This embrace of Life is the resurrection. There is resurrection whenever brokenness does not have the last word. There is resurrection whenever a person holds fast to hope in another season. There is resurrection whenever a community gathers together to carry each other through a time of brokenness and into a new chapter. There is resurrection whenever life and love, mercy and hope remain.

Brokenness is a part of life for all of us—even the life of Jesus. But brokenness is not the entirety of the story. There is also the promise of resurrections that emerge from the power of hope and love that keep us going beyond the brokenness.

And this is why I love Easter. Whether or not there is life after death, I believe that we all need this hope in a life that is more than our brokenness. We need moments like Easter that remind us to celebrate the wonder of renewal, the emergence of new seasons, and the ongoing gift of life all around us.

So may we celebrate. Alleluia. Amen.