"In the Wake of Tragedy"

An Easter Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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On a late afternoon in October, I lay half-awake in my seminary dorm room. With unfocused eyes, my gaze fell beyond the foot of my narrow bed towards a window overlooking a tree-covered yard. As if I were watching a movie, an image unexpectedly appeared: a bruised and beaten body falling leaden to the ground in death. I understood this to be Jesus just taken down from the wooden cross where he had been executed. As I watched, a voice beside me spoke, "Stephanie, do not leave me like this."

This is the only religious vision I have ever had. And, I know for many of you the very idea of a vision seems crazy. Frankly, it does to me, too. And yet, I did have this singular experience that has haunted me ever since. It haunted me when it happened—some twenty years ago when I was new to seminary and wrestling with a liberal Christian faith that felt fragile and fraying. It haunted me when I was a doctoral student reading objectively about anthropological accounts of religious experience. And, it haunted me as I became a Unitarian Universalist minister whose understanding of Jesus had shifted solidly to that of a teacher and prophet rather than as a unique savior and Christ.

Still I am haunted by the imploring voice, "Stephanie, do not leave me like this."

For many Unitarian Universalists, Easter is a challenge to celebrate. Resurrection of the dead seems scientifically untenable. And, the classic Christian view of Jesus dying as a bloody sacrifice to appease God can seem barbaric. So what exactly are we celebrating?

Modern scholarship on the historical Jesus places his life and teaching within the context of a colonized nation beholden to Rome. Within this context, Jesus emerges as a bold and compassionate teacher who calls for a love of neighbor that resists the dehumanizing powers of empire as well as a rigid, rule-bound religion that serves the priestly class more than the spirits of people. Through the centuries of texts and traditions about Jesus, I try to listen for and imagine the very human experience of hope, longing, and loss recorded in the stories.

The Easter story is remarkable for what it conveys about human responses to the death of a leader in whom so much hope had been placed. You may have heard of the phrase WWJD—What Would Jesus Do? It's a catchphrase to remind Christians to follow the example of Jesus in the behavior. But, when I think about Easter, I think instead of WWID—What

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Would I Do? What would I do if the man I've been following around the countryside at the cost of my job, my city, my friends, and my family was arrested and killed by the state? What would I do if the teacher who inspired me to believe a better world is possible died young and unexpectedly?

One of Jesus' followers, Peter, stayed near to Jesus. Watching the process of his arrest and trial at the edges of the crowd, Peter may have risked being nearby, but he denied knowing Jesus. He didn't risk his own life or wellbeing. A judge in the proceedings, Pontius Pilate, asked questions, listened to the crowd, listened to the few cryptic responses Jesus gave, and then washed his hands of the whole mess. Neither freeing Jesus, nor explicitly condemning him, Pilate played the politician and gave the crowd what they clamored for to keep the peace. What did he care about the life of a poor, itinerant teacher? During his execution, Mary, Jesus' mother, and John, his friend, stood and watched. Despite the violent horror of crucifixion and the public anger towards Jesus, they came so that he would not die alone. After his death, a rich man arranged to have Jesus' body respectfully laid in his own tomb—giving dignity to Jesus in death, despite the public shaming of a criminal's death.

Whatever we may think of the historical accuracy of these stories, they depict a startling range of responses to the death of a beloved leader. As I imagine these characters as real people measuring their commitment and the danger, I wonder what would I do? Would I have had the courage to show up at the trial, the execution, the burial? Having seen the brutality and power of the crowd and the state, would I have stayed committed to Jesus' vision of how the world could be? Would I continue to share his vision? Or, would I stay silent?

To bring these questions a little closer in time, consider also how people chose to respond to the news of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination fifty years ago on April 4, 1968 in Memphis. A follower of Jesus, Dr. King brought a bold message of compassionate love, racial equity, and economic justice. Dr. King was in Memphis to support black sanitation workers on strike for better pay and safer working conditions. The weeks long fight had been characterized by daily marches of workers wearing sandwich boards that simply declared, "I Am A Man." When a large public demonstration on March 28 turned violent, King was swept away to safety. Days later, he returned again to Memphis.

On April 3, Dr. King delivered his last speech. "The nation is sick, trouble is in the land, confusion all around," King declared. And yet, *this* is the moment he would want to be alive. Recounting how he had been stabbed in 1960, Dr. King noted that had he merely sneezed the knife point would have cut into his aorta killing him. "I want to say tonight that I [am] happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in

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1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters." If he had sneezed, he continued, he would not have been there for the 1961 Freedom Ride, nor would he have been in Birmingham, nor Washington D.C., nor Selma, nor there in Memphis. In naming Memphis, King turned from the past to the present and then to the future.

> "Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter to with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life–longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."[i]

And so ended Dr. King's last speech. He clearly was aware of the danger and that his life was at risk. Knowing that his own leadership and life was at risk, he reached for an ancient, sacred story of another leader, Moses. Moses, the man who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt—the story which Passover is currently celebrating. And though Moses played a critical role in this exodus from Egypt, he never made it to the "Promised Land"—to the space and time of his community at peace in a place of material wholeness and spiritual joy. In the Biblical story, Moses was, however, allowed to go to a mountaintop to see the promised land. And this element of the story, King holds up, declaring, "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

Less than twenty-four hours later, Dr. King was dead. Fifty-years later we know that King's impact has continued. His name, his example, and his words remain as inspiration for millions. But, do you know what happened in those days and weeks immediately following his death? Did you know that the leaders of the Memphis strike along with Coretta Scott King continued to organize and support the sanitation workers? Several weeks later, their union was recognized and their demands were met. One of the chief local organizers, the Rev. James Morris Lawson Jr., described Dr. King's last speech as "one of the zenith experiences of the whole campaign, the whole movement." According to a recent NPR story, Rev. Lawson is still alive in Memphis today teaching nonviolent strategies to young activists. "He's not lost hope."

What do we do when the leader who inspired us dies before the vision is fulfilled? For me, this is the question Easter answers. In a memoir written in the wake of her brother's death,

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Nora Gallagher suggests that resurrection can be understood also as something that happens to those who live differently after someone has died. She writes,

> We spend so much time in the church "believing" in the resurrection or "not believing" that we may lose the point. What if the resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone but also about what those appearances pointed to, what they asked? And it is finally what we do with them that matters—make them into superstitions or use them as stepping stones to new life. We have to practice resurrection.[ii]

What might it mean for us to practice resurrection? For me, this question brings me back to the vision I had twenty years ago of a dead Jesus and a voice asking me to not leave him like that. At first, I thought this meant that I had to somehow find a way to believe again in Jesus' bodily resurrection. Instead, I came to understand the moment as a challenge to take up the mantle of Jesus' teaching—to make his vision manifest and alive in my own life. And while I no longer identify as a Christian, I continue to draw upon the spiritual resources and ethical insights of this tradition which is so deeply rooted and still alive within me. More broadly, I now understand this vision as a reminder that our choices about how we live contribute to what lives or what dies in this world. What kind of world do we want to see thrive? Who inspires us with their vision? What do we want to leave behind?

When we look at the life and death of Moses or Jesus or the Rev. Dr. King, we see how life can transcend death. We can see that the life of one can impact the lives of others—for decades, centuries, and millennia to come. Even in the wake of tragic death, death does not have to be the last word. Death does not have to silence the voice, the vision, and the passion of a leader. Life continues because those who knew and loved a leader practice resurrection. Though the leader may die, others continue to go out and feed the poor, believing that God cares for the least among us. Others continue to march in the streets with placards declaring their humanity, "I am a man," and demanding to be treated justly.

On this Easter day, let us practice resurrection by not giving up on the hope of a more loving and just world. In this Passover week, let us believe in the possibility of liberation as we recall how slaves have been set free against incredible odds. And as we approach the anniversary of Dr. King's death later this week, may we ask ourselves how we might keep alive his vision of racial equity and economic justice. Fifty years later, these are still difficult days in our nation for African Americans, for immigrants, and for the poor. We celebrate Easter today not because all is well, but to remind ourselves to not let death and despair have the last word. We celebrate because as Dr. King once preached, "This is the Easter message . . . love is the most durable power in the world." *Alleluia. Amen.*

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[i] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968, Delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, TN. Accessed full text online, March 31, 2018, at http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive_been_to_the_mountaintop/index.html

[ii] Nora Gallagher, *Practicing Resurrection: A Memoir of Work, Doubt, Discernment, and Moments of Grace,* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2003), p. 207.

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