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## **To Life!**

This is the year of the Unitarian Universalist Easter! I know, given our theology – or lack thereof – that's a hard concept to get your arms around, but I'm here to convince you.

Recently, I ate lunch with some esteemed colleagues of the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ persuasions. I presumed that, unlike my Unitarian Universalist colleagues, who were sweating out their Easter sermons, this merry band would be so excited about the resurrection. Instead, there was no small amount of wailing and gnashing of teeth because this is the dreaded Year B. Or something like that.

Here's what I understand: each member of my lunch gang's weekly sermons follows the directive of the lectionary, a collection of scripture readings appointed for worship on any particular Sunday. I cannot imagine being constrained by the lectionary; my friends cannot imagine being adrift without this three-year cycle of readings: cycles A, B, and C. “The ... A cycle begins at ... Advent ... near the end of those years whose number is evenly divisible by 3: ... 2001, 2004, 2007,”<sup>1</sup> and then the years follow in succession. Year A's gospel readings are from Matthew; Year C is from Luke. But Year B – this year – is from the gospel according to Mark, a source of great consternation for some of my colleagues. Why?

Okay, here comes the good news for UUs: Mark, notably the oldest of the gospels – the one written down about forty years after Jesus' death<sup>2</sup> – has what is known as “the short ending.” And what is the short ending? The earliest manuscripts conclude with Jesus' death and burial – period. Here's the last line, Mark 16:8, speaking of the women who had come to anoint Jesus' body: “And they went out quickly, and fled from the

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1 see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectionary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectionary)

2 ~70 CE

sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they anything to any man; for they were afraid.” The end.

In other words, the tomb is empty ... but just that. What? No resurrection? No reappearance? Suddenly, my colleagues were very interested in what I might say today! And suddenly, we have all before us a Unitarian Universalist Easter.

For me, for us, Easter is always about the short ending. One of my colleagues asked, “But what about Jesus on the road to Galilee?” referring to the long ending: his reappearance to his apostles, after his death. I thought of one of our church school children, saying to me, “We don't believe that, right?” The truth is, some of us believe it and some of us don't; we are a covenantal, not a creedal, faith community. But as a rule, Unitarian Universalism is not “about” that particular story.

So here's how I responded: Unitarian Universalism finds enchantment enough in Jesus' life and teachings; we are about life *before* death. What happened to Jesus – the rest of the story – is up to us. Easter is always about the triumph of life over death.

And now, once again, Easter comes to ask us the question, *Whose tomb is empty because of the way you live your life?*

How do we honor those who have gone before us? Who lives on in us, through our choices and actions?

The very first person who came to mind when I asked myself this question this week was an anesthesiologist whose name I don't even know. Years ago, I shattered my left arm and was admitted through Beth Israel's emergency room for surgery. There was no putting it off, but it was the Friday before our September Homecoming service here at Arlington Street. I'd been away for the two summer months, and was absolutely determined to be here to start the new church year.

I was wheeled into surgery just around midnight. I told the anesthesiologist – as in *announced*, not asked – that I really needed to be in this pulpit on Sunday morning at 11:00.

“You're telling me you need to be *compos mentis* 35 hours from now,” she said, doing her best to keep the incredulity out of her voice. “Well,” I said brightly, “34 hours would be even better; I like to get there about an hour before the service begins.”

This must have seemed the ramblings of a woman gone mad on good pain meds, but she rose to the challenge. “Tell me more,” she said. I did, and she said, “Okay, let's do it.” Leap of faith! As the anesthesia took, she proceeded to tell me about her *bat mitzvah*, being single, her new puppy ... and I faded into oblivion.

My next memory is of her beautiful face very close to mine, feeding me tiny chips of ice, one at a time, with exquisite tenderness. “We did it!” she smiled, triumphantly.

Obviously, I hadn't done anything, except ask for the moon and ruin her sabbath. She never flinched. She was only curious, and tremendously kind. And obviously, I have never forgotten her. Today, I wonder, whose tomb is empty because of the way she lives her life?

On January 28, 1986, Christa McAuliffe, a social studies teacher at New Hampshire's Concord High School, was one of seven crew members killed when the Space Shuttle Challenger disintegrated 73 seconds after launch. That same morning, Maia Clemence-Schreiner, a whip-smart, funny, impish, red-headed kindergartener from my church school on Cape Cod, was run over by her school bus and died. These unspeakable tragedies, one very public and one largely private, broke my heart.

Maia's death detonated my theology and remade my faith, and her unfinished life is inextricably interwoven with mine. I remember her, and I follow, with joy, the lives of her brothers and sisters, in whose lives, like mine, hers is continued. And I have never thought of Maia without also thinking of Christa ... for whom the sky was not the limit.

Years after these tragedies, Rob Cuddi became a member of Arlington Street Church. Rob is an educator who won a McAuliffe Center Fellowship. In him, I see Christa's life continued. And thanks to Rob, at a dinner planned for next month, I will meet Christa's mother, Grace ... and that's exactly what it feels like: meeting grace. Together, we will remember Maia and Christa, not forgotten because of the way we live our lives. Their tombs are empty.

On good days, I have the experience a lot – the experience of the legacy of generosity, goodness, or gratitude. Piero Ferrucci tells the story of standing in a cafe, waiting for his cappuccino. Next to him, an attractive young woman with red hair and freckles, a visitor to this country, has also ordered a cappuccino. The barista is a handsome young man; he places her cappuccino before her, a perfect, creamy heart

sculpted in the middle. Piero Ferrucci's cappuccino arrives: no heart. Just a drink; no love note.

He's a little envious. Cynically, he imagines that the barista performs the heart trick many times a day, whenever there's an attractive woman on the other side of his bar, and that, sooner or later, he scores. Secretly, maybe Piero Ferrucci hopes that the woman, a little bored with empty flattery, makes nothing of it. But the better part of him prefers to think that she takes her cappuccino out on the town, where she walks the tourist circuit, happy for the flattery, happy for that slightly goofy gesture, and feels, somehow, that America is a little sweeter than she might have imagined.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe, in her happiness, she passes it on, even through a smile, and maybe we can take this up a level, so that everyone gets a heart in their coffee, or wherever, some frothy message conveyed hand-to-hand or anonymously, so that everyone's day is just a little sweeter. This is what it means to start a chain reaction of joy. This is what it means to empty the tomb, and throw ourselves to the side of life.

On Sunday evening, March 29<sup>th</sup>, Robert Lemire was talking on his cellphone outside Mano's Pizza on Haverhill Street in Lawrence, and Alex Day was at Bible study in an apartment nearby. The two men had never met. Nor had they met the family three stories up, where two brothers, ages three and four, were pitching their toys out a window they'd managed to wrestle open while their father was putting his infant to bed. The movement of falling toys caught Robert's eye, and then he looked up three stories to see a toddler dangling from the window; 18 month old Caliah Clark had climbed out. Her brothers were each holding an arm, but she was slipping.

Robert bolted down the street, crossed, dodging a car, and yelled into the house. Alex heard the yelling, and ran out of his Bible study on the first floor. As he rushed to Robert's side, Robert said, "Here she comes!"

And then, said Robert, "[Alex] pretty much got the top and I got the diaper end, ... or whatever you call it."

Robert Lemire and Alex Day are heroes. And to put a fine point on their heroism, when Caliah's father<sup>4</sup> thanked the men for saving his daughter's life, Robert said, "People who have children know that it's impossible to keep your eye on them all the

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3 Piero Ferrucci, *The Power of Kindness*, pp. 183-184

4 Randall Clark

time, and all it takes is a second.”<sup>5</sup> Compassion and forgiveness are also heroic.

Caliah Clark's tomb is empty because of Robert Lemire and Alex Day, and we are all better for the reminder of the impulse for goodness and kindness in human beings, which we inherit, and learn, and pass on from those who go before, those whom we honor by weighing-in on the side of life.

What did Jesus have to say about this? Just this: “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.”<sup>6</sup>

Actually, he didn't say that in this year's lectionary – no time for those words in the short ending! So we have to look at his life – not his death, but his life; not his words so much as his actions – to see what he had to say about giving ourselves to life. Two thousand years later, Jesus' life and teachings call us to love one another ... call us to life.

My spiritual companions, let Easter come to remind us that resurrection is up to us. The anthem instructs us to change mourning into praise, change grieving into praise. Our dead would not want us to mourn; they would want us to remember their love, to continue what they began, to embody their pride and joy, and to live life abundantly. Let us praise them with our lives. Let us seek to care deeply; make of our lives a testament of love; and extend our hands to catch one another.

Whose tomb is empty because of the way you live your life?

Happy Easter!  
Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Boston Globe*, “Catch of a Lifetime,” 3/31/09, pp. A1, A10

<sup>6</sup> John 13:34

