

Stepping Out of Our Shells

Easter Sunday April 12th 2009
 Service Words by Rev. Tess Baumberger
 Unity Church of North Easton

Prelude

Welcome and Opening Words

Tess: Today is Easter Sunday, a day of glad remembering.
 We gather here this morning to celebrate!

Worship Assistant: That which seems dead and withered
 Can spring, once more, to life.

Tess: That which is entombed in sorrow
 Can break through, once more, to joy.

Worship Assistant: Those shells that harden round us
 Can fall away as we outgrow them.

Tess: The winters of the spirit that seem unending,
 Will always, someday end.

Tess and Worship Assistant: Today we celebrate the festival of life.

***Gathering Song #377** (Tune of Old Hundredth)

***Unison Affirmation**

*We pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection
 As best we know them now or may learn them in the days to come,
 That we and our children may be fulfilled,
 And that we make speak to the world
 In words and actions of peace and goodwill.*

***Hands of Friendship**

Chalice Lighting

Anthem

Sharing of Joys and Sorrows

Meditation and Moment of Silence

***Hymn #267** *When Mary Through the Garden Went*

Mary Magdalene Tells Her Story - written and performed by Rev. Tess Baumberger

My name is Mary Magdalene. You may have heard of me. I lived a long, long time ago, 2,000 years ago. And I'm here today to tell you the story of Easter as I saw it. But first I should tell you that some people think I'm a little crazy. Legend has it that I spent most of my life alone in a cave, and that would drive anyone crazy.

But before the cave, when I was a young woman, I knew an amazing man whose name was Yeshua, who you call Jesus. He was a great teacher. He helped to heal people. In fact, he touched sick people no one else would touch. He fed the hungry. In fact, he ate with people the laws of our time said he shouldn't eat with, non-Jews, and tax collectors (who everyone hated). And us women? He treated us like equals. That just didn't happen back then. That's why we stuck by him when the Romans took him, when the men were too afraid.

Yeshua was a great prophet. That means he could see how bad things were and how we could make them better, and then he told us what he saw. He saw that we could build a kingdom of the spirit, inside ourselves and also between us. He said we could build a strong community like this one you have here, that was too strong for even the Romans to break.

Throughout my life, the Romans ruled our land. They didn't like hearing Yeshua or any of us, his followers. Jesus' message scared the Romans and made them angry, and they did a bad thing - they made sure Jesus died in a terrible way that was meant to scare us and keep us from acting up. Those were bad times, when I was a young woman. People in power could do those sorts of things even to good people.

They put so many good people to death back then. We called them saints. We believed their spirits went to a paradise not far from the land of the living. This may sound strange to you in this day and age of science and technology, but we even believed their spirits could come back and visit us. Not like ghosts, not scary, but kind of nice. Like having them back again.

And that was true for Jesus. We felt that he visited us, sat with us, that we heard his voice and saw his face again. It helped to remember him in that way. It gave us

courage to keep building that kingdom inside us and between us, no matter what the Romans did to try to scare us out of it.

Things were so bad back then that many other religions around us told stories of saviors that would come from heaven to show us how to get there. In all their stories about saviors, the savior came to earth, died and went to heaven, and came back to life to tell us how to get there.

Now we all thought of Jesus as a savior, so over time his followers decided to use that ending for the stories they told about him - an ending that would help other religious people understand how important he was to us. So that's how the Easter story started.

Have you heard the story? Like most stories, people tell it differently, but I'm in all of the Easter stories in the bible, so if anyone can tell you, I Mary Magdalene, can. Well, he died on a Friday, during Passover. Some of the men took his body down from the cross where he died, and put it in a tomb before sunset.

The Sabbath starts at sundown, the holy day we Jews celebrate each week. We were mostly Jewish, Yeshua and the rest of us. According to Jewish laws you can't touch a dead body on the Sabbath. So his body lay there for a whole day and two nights. Sabbath laws say you shouldn't be sad on that day, and since it was also Passover we tried to be as cheerful as we could be, but our hearts were broken.

Since his body hadn't been properly prepared for burial, early the next morning (a Sunday) some of us women went to the tomb to do that. We didn't have morticians or undertakers in those days. Women among the dead person's friends and family prepared the bodies of the dead, and were honored to do it. We said prayers that blessed the bodies of those we loved.

Anyway, as the story goes, we women were walking through the garden talking with one another, and wondering who would roll the big heavy stone away from the door of the tomb. None of us was strong enough to do, and even together we couldn't see how it could work.

When we arrived, the story says, we were amazed to find the stone already rolled away. The story says we found an angel (some say there were two) who told us that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that we would see him again in Galilee!

One story says that we women were so afraid and amazed that we told no one. Now I ask you, how would anyone know that story if we hadn't told anyone? And us, afraid? We stood amongst the Roman soldiers as the rabbi died! How could an angel scare us?

Other stories said that we did tell people that Jesus appeared to us in order to give us hope, to tell us not to fear, to be glad and not to give up on this kingdom of the spirit inside and between us. To me the real miracle of Easter is that we didn't give up on that kingdom. We kept right on building it inside and between us. As sad and scared as we were, the Roman's didn't scare us out of it, they couldn't stop us from telling everyone we could about Jesus and what he taught us. That's the real miracle.

You might ask me, did that other miracle really happen? Did Jesus really rise from the dead and live again? Well, I'm a wise old woman now and I'll tell you what I've learned in all these years, cave or no cave. Whenever anyone you really love dies, that person rises often in your memory. That person lives in your heart and in how you live your life. As long as you remember and love that person, that person never dies.

That's how it was for all of us who loved Jesus. For us, he lived in our love for him, our memory of him, and our trying to follow his example. He lived in the stories about him we told again and again, to more and more people. Eventually people wrote down those stories so other people would know and remember and love him too, long after we all had died.

Now people since then have sometimes done really bad things in the name of Jesus and that makes me really mad. Some things they did were just the opposite of what he said to do. People disrespect Jesus when they hate or hurt other people in his name.

He said to love people, to bless even our enemies, and not to judge anyone. So whenever someone does a good thing in his memory, like feeding a poor person, or visiting a sick person, or comforting someone who is sad, or standing up for fairness and love, Jesus lives in that person.

Whenever a person inspired by his story helps people, heals them, gives them hope and courage, or shows us how to make the world a better place, his true message lives on. He doesn't die so long as we remember who he truly was, what he did, and how he loved everyone, no matter what.

That's what I think, anyway. But then again, some people think I'm crazy. What do you think?

Offering

Reading

Since Mary Magdalene's time Easter has come to mean many other things. It has acquired the things we think of in spring like rabbits and eggs. And then there's chocolate, which is for any time of the year. So in the spirit of those parts of Easter, this poem.

Patience by Bobbi Katz

Chocolate Easter bunny In a jelly bean nest,

I'm saving you for very last Because I love you best.

I'll only take a nibble From the tip of your ear

And one bite from the other side So that you won't look queer.

Yum, your'e so delicious! I didn't mean to eat

Your chocolate tail till Tuesday. Oops! There go your feet!

I wonder how your back tastes With all that chocolate hair.

I never thought your tummy Was only filled with air!

Chocolate Easter bunny In a jelly bean nest,

I'm saving you for very last Because I love you best.

Solo

Homily for All Ages *The Lesson of Easter: Stepping Out of Our Shells* by Tess Baumberger

Now the thing about the Easter story is that it's not just about things that happened long ago and far away, because Easter can be true today in a way like a

symbol. Do you know what a symbol is? It's something that can stand for another thing, like the American flag is a symbol of America.

Resurrection, which is a long word for the miracle in the Easter story, the miracle of Jesus coming back to life, can be a symbol for us even today. To help us understand one way the Easter story can be a symbol, I brought in some show and tell.

This is a shell a friend gave me a few years ago. There used to be an animal that lived inside it. It made the shell to protect its soft body, making layer upon layer of hard stuff all around it. You can pass it around and look at it, if you like. Notice that it sort of spirals in, so the animal could pull inside if danger threatened. Also notice that it left a large opening so it could get out if it needed to, sort of like the opening of the cave.

What else do you notice about the shell? Does it look the same on the outside as on the inside?

The thing about people is that sometimes we make shells to protect ourselves. They build up over time, like real shells, which means kids don't usually have as much shell around them as adults. Of course our shells are not real ones that you can see, like this one. That would look funny – we'd all look like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles! It's more like sometimes people seem different on the outside than they really feel on the inside.

For example, sometimes someone who is really sad inside may wear a shell of being silly or funny. Sometimes people who are hurt wear a shell of anger around them – they look angry on the outside but inside they feel bad. Sometimes people who are scared inside wear a shell of acting like they don't really care, they don't need anybody. Sometimes people who are shy inside may seem like they're cold or mean. So it can be confusing, when people have these kinds of shells. It's hard to know what's going on inside them.

One of the things churches like this one can do is help us feel safe enough here to be the same on the outside as on the inside. We try to make this a place where people can act sad if they feel sad, can say they're hurt or scared if they feel that way, can come out of the shell of shyness and make friends. In grownup language, we call this being “authentic” when we learn to make our outsides and insides match.

In other words, here at Unity Church, we invite and help one another to step out of our shells, especially when those shells have become too small for us. That's the reason the animal that makes a real shell leaves a big opening – so when it has outgrown the shell it can move on, or build another one. Unlike sea animals, people can learn how to go around without their shells, instead using something more like a shield that they can put up to protect themselves when needed, but not wear all the time. That allows them to be freer to be themselves wherever they go.

Sometimes people build shells that look more like this (hold up an egg) with no way out. In that case, the person might need help to hatch, like baby chicks do in the spring. We can help them break through the shell not just so the spring sunshine can come in, but so they can be freed.

If we think of the Easter story, we might act like angels when we do this, helping someone break out of their shell. It's like we're rolling back the stone and helping each other rise into a new life. Here at Unity Church, we call one another to be an Easter people, made new by stepping out of our shells. That's pretty cool huh? Then we can celebrate our new lives together! Easter helps us remember to do all that growing and freeing and living again and again, because sometimes even adults need reminding.

Now this egg here is reminding me of something that usually happens this day. Hm. Can you help me remember? Easter, kids, shells, candy, spring, eggs? Oh yeah, the egg hunt! Are you ready to do that? Okay, you can go but some grownups need to go with you! I'll see you all at coffee hour.

<dismiss the kids>

A few more words now between us adults before we sing and go witness the madness. It occurred to me the other morning that the Easter message of stepping out of our shells can apply not just to us as individuals, but to whole churches as well. Like people, churches build up identities and personalities over time. They can also build up shells. Congregations can feel vulnerable to attacks, and feel the need to protect themselves from what they might see as a hostile world. As their shells build up they may look different from the outside than they feel and act on the inside.

Also like people, congregations change and grow over time, in all sorts of ways. Sometimes those familiar shells become too small, or no longer fit. This happens.

Cracks begin to appear that let some light in, and sometimes something marvelous happens and the openings become big enough for the congregation to be freed from its former shell, to rise into the world again.

I believe we are called to do this, to be an Easter people as group, not just as individuals. Like the frightened followers of that Jewish prophet long ago, we are called to go out into the world and share the goodness we have found here with others.

We do this through our ministries to the wider community, like our English language program, and through other programs we are yet to design and to build. We do this by letting people know we are here, people who have been longing for a community like this one is inside but who will know we are here unless we tell them. We have a good news to share, and we are called to share it as best we can.

A friend gave me the egg I showed the kids, over ten years ago. She said it seemed to her that I was in an egg stage. A few weeks ago the inner voice I associate with Spirit said, "I'm inviting you to step out of your shell." Personally, it feels like time to hatch. I am wondering if this is not also true for this congregation. Does the shell feel constricting? Is it time to step out of it? Is the spring air calling us to do so, together? I think it might be, in which case there is much to celebrate this Easter morning.

Perhaps some angels have come into our lives, angels with the hands, of friends, or even strangers. Perhaps these hands are finding openings in our shells, through which they can whisper softly to us, "You can change your life! You can feel joy again!" These angels may roll back the stone for us, or they may give us the strength to do it ourselves, if we choose.

In our lives, I think that resurrection is a choice we make. We can choose to work with the better angels of our hearts and minds. We can choose to accept help from strangers and friends in rolling back the stones that keep us locked in hardened old dead ways. We can accept help in breaking out of the shells that keep us isolated, or that we have truly outgrown. We can choose to come back out into the world, to live more fully and in whole new ways. We can experience resurrection.

That which has seemed dead and shriveled can spring to life once more. That which was entombed in sorrow can break through to joy. The shells that harden round us can fall away as we outgrow them. We can choose freedom. We can choose to end the

winters of the spirit. We can choose resurrection. We can choose new life. In the spirit of that miracle, let us join our voices for the song written to honor one many who helped so many to find true freedom, to step out of their shells and become an Easter people.

***Hymn #268** *"Jesus Christ is Risen Today"*

***Closing Circle and Benediction**

Let us go forth to celebrate the seasons of our joy,
Of our awakening again, or in new ways, to life.
May we be blessed with the message of Easter
And may we remind ourselves, and each other
That even in our hardest times, we can choose resurrection.

***Extinguishing the Chalice and Closing Song**

Postlude