

“Resurrection is Communal”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

selection from “They Have Threatened Us with Resurrection” by Julia Esquivel¹

Sermon

Steve Prince, whose [artwork is on the front of your order of service](#) this morning, is a printmaker, sculptor, and graphite artist born in New Orleans who now lives in central Pennsylvania.

On August 26, 2005, three days before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Prince was visiting his hometown to preside over an art show and to visit one of his dear mentors who was ill. As the storm drew near, his wife began to call urging him to leave. He was hesitant to depart. The work he was sharing was part of, what he calls, his “art evangelism” - sharing tools for healing through memory, mourning, and renewal. He was at the side of a beloved teacher who didn’t have much of his life left. And, he had been through many Gulf Coast storms and seen them fizzle into nothing of great significance. But, the day before the storm, he heeded his wife’s implorations and left. There were no flights departing from New Orleans, so he drove to Atlanta and eventually flew back to Virginia where he was living at the time.

It was from afar that he witnessed the drowning of his cherished city, the stranding and scattering of its residents, and the abandonment of a place that so many had visited only for fleeting pleasure.

It was also from afar that Prince created a series of work that would grieve the catastrophe that began long before the storm in 2005 - from the institution of slavery

¹ Reading not printed because of copyright restrictions.

and its residual aftermath of poverty, poor access to healthcare and education, imprisonment, and early death through to the resistance movements and culture that have sustained the black community over centuries, particularly in New Orleans.²

Speaking of his sense of personal vocation in his artistry, Prince says, “There’s a lot we haven’t dealt with in our soul, so I like to deal with it in my artwork.”³ I think this is clearly evident in his art piece, like the one on the order of service, entitled, “Communal Resurrection.”

This piece bring together many images from religious and secular life. Through my own interpretation, I see Mother Gaia at the very bottom of the image with arms stretched out in front of her; a triune God with three faces just above that with arms stretched out to the side; and images of people in prayer, in sorrow, in struggle. The image conveys the messiness and deeply intertwined nature of our collective struggles and our need for collective redemption.

This drawing has resonated with me powerfully especially these past few weeks, in the face of pain and suffering experienced throughout our communities. We have witnessed our youth speaking out with more truth and power than we adults have been able to muster in the face of devastating gun violence. We have witnessed yet another community in our country grieving with sadness and rage at yet another police killing of an unarmed black man, Stephon Clark, in Sacramento, California. We have witnessed our transgender siblings face another assault on their dignity with further attempts to ban them from military service. And, we and our fellow creatures on Earth continue to feel the impacts of the changing climate with warming temperatures, extreme weather events, and changes in natural habitat.

We are living the messiness and the entanglement of our collective sorrows in the face of violence, death, and destruction.

That is the Good Friday part of the sermon this morning.

The part that reminds us, if we needed any reminding, that it is only through our passage through death that resurrection and new life are possible.

² Beth McCoy, “Second Line and the Art of Witness: Steve Prince’s Katrina Suite,” *Image Journal*, Issue 78. <https://imagejournal.org/article/second-line-art-witness/>

³ <https://imagejournal.org/artist/steve-prince/>

It is instructive and intriguing to me that Steve Prince has called this piece printed on your order of service, “Communal Resurrection.” I also learned in preparing for this sermon that he recently had an entire exhibit on display in Pittsburgh called, “Communal Resurrection: The Soul of a Community” featuring many of the pieces he created in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Prince’s intricate and complex drawing speaks to the truth that our fates are intertwined - whether you believe that fate to be connected to a life after this one on earth, or simply our fate while we inhabit this earthly existence. The continual cycle that we are part of - of life and death, of rebirth and renewal, of failing and starting over again - this is a cycle that we are part of together. As a human family and as part of a community of creatures that inhabit this planet Earth.

The idea of resurrection is not often presented this way, particularly in the Western Christian tradition. Many images of Jesus’ resurrection focus on him alone, or on Jesus and one or two of his disciples mentioned in the gospel accounts that may have been at the tomb when it was discovered his body was gone.

Images found in Christian churches of Eastern Europe, however, depict a different kind of resurrection. One such image can be found in a place called the “Dark Church” in Cappadocia, Turkey. The Dark Church is a miniature Byzantine cathedral carved into a rocky hillside. The images in the Dark Church date back to the 11th century.

The commentary on the images uses the Greek work *anastasis* instead of the English word resurrection. *Anastasis* literally means up-rising. In the *anastasis* painting in the Dark Church, Jesus is depicted in the center standing upon a figure on the ground which is likely Hades, an ancient Greek personification of Death. And, he is grasping the wrist of Adam. Eve is standing behind Adam. Both are emerging from what appears to be a tomb.

Images in other churches throughout Eastern Europe show a similar motif. As Jesus is conquering Death, he is bringing all of humanity with him, symbolized by Adam and Eve. In one such image, Jesus, who in his life was a prophetic transgressor of social norms, is grasping the wrist of Eve rather than Adam.⁴

⁴ This background draws on the work of John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan. “Rising up with Christ: The Eastern Church’s Communal Vision of Resurrection,” *Christian Century*, January 31, 2018.

For many of us contemporary Unitarian Universalists, this idea of a savior leading us into eternal life may not have much meaning. But this understanding of resurrection - of uprising - that is not just about individual rebirth but about a community rising up in the face of death, this notion, I believe, has a profound impact on how we might think about resurrection today.

The theological question in all of this is, how do we find new life? In the face of death, in the face of the tombs that would enclose us, how do we, in a communal sense, emerge into something new?

The lesson in these images for me is that we do not do this alone. We cannot endure the large and the small deaths - both literal and figurative - on our own. Nor are we brought into life again on our own.

In her poem, "They Have Threatened Us with Resurrection," Julia Esquivel writes:

"They have threatened us with Resurrection
because we have felt their inert bodies
and their souls penetrated ours
doubly fortified.
Because in this marathon of Hope,
there are always others to relieve us
in bearing the courage necessary
to arrive at the goal
which lies beyond death..."

They have threatened us with Resurrection,
because they are more alive than ever before,
because they transform our agonies,
and fertilize our struggle,
because they pick us up when we fall,
and gird us like giants
before the fear of those demented gorillas..."⁵

Here, Esquivel speaks of those who lost their lives in search of peace. They, too, are part of the community through which we can be resurrected.

⁵ Julia Esquivel, *Threatened with Resurrection*, (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1982).

In a few days, it will be the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He, and so many others, faced death because of their unshakeable belief in Love and in Peace.

And, so many since then, have continued to live by Love, to seek peace, despite the odds and the opposition.

It is in joining in this community of *anastasis* - of up-rising - that our own resurrection is possible.

Reflecting on Esquivel's poem, the writer and theologian Parker Palmer says, "Esquivel's image of resurrection involves an entire people arising as one and becoming a community in which injustice is no more. If we do our grieving deeply and well, we become participants in a communal uprising, a resurrection in which the dead live on through the commitment of the survivors. Through the bonds of community, death is transformed into energy for life, and ultimately our losses are overcome... Each of us is resurrected only as we enter into the network of relationships called community, a network that embraces not only living persons but people who have died, and nonhuman creatures as well. Resurrection has personal significance—if we understand the person as a communal being—but it is above all a corporate, social, and political event, an event in which justice and truth and love come to fruition."

In our own time, thousands of years after the death and storied resurrection of Jesus, fifty years after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., we continue to face destructive forces in our midst and to seek our own way out of the tomb of despair.

And, it may not be the hand of a divine anointed savior that reaches out for us to pull us into new life. It may instead be the hands of the everyday prophets and messiahs in our midst that reach out for us, that by the grace of all that is holy take a hold of us, as reluctant as we may be, to yank us out of the deadly tombs of complacency and cynicism. It may be an Emma Gonzalez, or a David Hogg, or a Stevante Clark, or one of the many youth leaders in our midst in Vermont who refuses to let death have the last word, who instead demands that together we seek resurrection not just for some of us, but for all of us. It is those around us, in this sanctuary, in our neighborhoods, across our nation and globe, who insist that there is still life amidst death that invite us into this community of uprising. As bullets reign down upon them, as life-snatching opioids course through the veins of their loved ones, as the waters rise around them, they reach out a hand to you and to you and to me.

And, their outstretched arms say to us - join me. Let us rise up together!

Palmer continues in his commentary on Esquivel's poem: "No wonder resurrection is so threatening: it forces us to abandon any illusion we may have that we are in charge of our own lives, able to do whatever we want, accountable to no one but ourselves, free of responsibility to others. Resurrection requires that we replace that illusion with the reality that we rise and fall together, that we have no choice but to live in and with and for the entire community of creation."⁶

And, this is the joy of Easter, my friends. That we can let die the notion that we can go it alone and that we live only for the sake of ourselves and instead embrace the life-giving truth that we can and will rise up together and in this find new life.

Julia Esquivel, despite all the terror and suffering that she has witnessed, remains a hopeful person. This hope is captured in her poem entitled, "Certainty," from her collection, "The Certainty of Spring," written in honor of her homeland. These are a few lines:

"They can cut all the flowers
but Spring will always return."
Guatemala you will bloom.
Every drop of blood,
every tear,
every sob extinguished by bullets,
every cry of honor,
every shred of skin
torn away in hatred
by the anti-humans—
will bloom...
We have lived a thousand years of death
in a homeland
that will be altogether

⁶ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*. pp. 152-156. Josey-Bass, 1990.

‘An eternal Spring.’⁷

This Easter, I hope that you will know new life. That you will feel your spirit rise again. That the earth’s awakening awakens you from your slumber and offers you solace where there is heartache.

This Easter, may you also know yourself inextricably tied to the community of humanity and of all creation.

May you know that when we join together Spring always returns and that new life awaits.

⁷ Julia Esquivel, *The Certainty of Spring: Poems by a Guatemalan in Exile*, trans. Anne Woehrle (Washington: Ecumenical Program on Central America, 1993).