

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Laramie**  
**March 31, 2013**  
**Rev. Dr. Penny Rather**  
**“Departing a Tomb”**

**Reading**

Our reading this morning is a meditation by Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert:

A tomb is no place to stay,  
Be it a cave in the Judaeian hills  
Or the dark cavern of the spirit.

A tomb is no place to stay  
When fresh grass rolls away the stone of winter cold  
And valiant flowers burst their way to warmth and light.

A tomb is no place to stay  
When each morning announces our reprieve,  
And we know we are granted yet another day of living.

A tomb is no place to stay  
When life laughs a welcome  
To hearts that have been away too long.

**Sermon**

You know the traditional Easter story.  
Three days after being crucified and buried  
the women who had buried him  
returned to the grave to anoint him with spices.  
But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb  
and the body of Jesus gone.  
They were told that he had risen from the dead.

This is the event Western Christians celebrate today.  
This is the event that we Unitarian Universalists,  
with our religious taproot sunk deep in Christianity,  
observe today as well.  
The story has been understood many ways  
over the centuries.  
As historical fact.  
As superstition.  
As metaphor.  
And each Easter we UUs look for ways to relate it

to our religious tradition.  
To our beliefs.  
To our lives.  
And so,  
we celebrate today,  
not only because of tradition,  
but also because the Easter story speaks profound truths  
about what it is to be human.  
Not facts, perhaps,  
but profound truths, nonetheless.

One of my favorite Christian theologians,  
retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong,  
claims in his book *Resurrection*  
that it was Jesus' teachings and example,  
that could not be killed by his executioners  
or contained by the tomb.  
Not his physical body.  
I know a lot of Christians who share this interpretation.  
One that I can embrace, too.  
And one of Jesus teachings,  
is that in order to move forward  
sometimes we have to die to those things  
that are holding us back.  
There are things we need to let go of.  
Stones to roll away from the tombs that confine us.

A tomb is no place to stay  
When each morning announces our reprieve,  
And we know we are granted yet another day of living.

What are the things that keep you  
from living fully?  
What are the habits, the ideas, the stories  
that entomb you?

An old parable tells of how the ancients  
used to catch monkeys.  
They would tie a coconut to a tree,  
cut a small hole in it,  
and fill the cavity with sweet treats.  
Sooner or later a monkey would come along  
and stick his hand through the hole  
to grab onto the sweet treats.  
But with the treats now in his fist  
he could not get his hand back out.  
Refusing to let go of his treasure,  
the monkey remained trapped

and was caught by the clever hunter.  
All the monkey would have had to do  
to gain his freedom,  
was to let go of his prize.

What prizes might you be holding onto  
for which you are willing to sacrifice your freedom?

Buddhism teaches that suffering comes from clinging.  
Clinging to things we think will make us happy.  
Wishing that the things that make us happy won't change.  
Refusing to let go of things we hope will make us happy.  
Clinging to those sweet treats  
certainly caused suffering for those monkeys.  
And clinging to things that we might better let go of  
can entomb us away from our hearts.

I am aware of some of the things I cling to.  
Maybe you will recognize them.  
Maybe you know of different examples.

Stuff.  
That's one of the things –  
or more accurately a lot of things –  
that I know can threaten our freedom.  
Some of the stuff I keep, I keep for practical reasons.  
I might need it someday.  
I might fix it someday.  
Someday I might actually make a quilt from all those  
fabric scraps I have saved for over 50 years.  
Other stuff I keep for sentimental reasons.  
It brings back fond memories.  
Not that anyone has called me up to invite me  
to be on the “reality” show *Hoarders* yet,  
but my closets and bookshelves,  
basement and garage,  
are more crowded than I'd like them to be.

It's not the stuff itself that is a problem.  
Though sometimes I do notice with amazement  
how much more peaceful I feel  
in uncluttered surroundings.  
No, it is what the stuff stands for that can trap us.

Keeping all that “practical” stuff might reflect  
a false psychology of deprivation.  
The feeling that there might not be enough stuff  
to go around.

A lesson I learned in childhood,  
and that is reinforced by our consumer culture.  
I certainly don't need to be concerned about that now.  
But might that remnant of worry  
keep me from being as generous as I'd like to be?  
Might letting go of some stuff  
free me to be less materialistic?

Another thing the stuff we keep might stand for  
is our self-image.

One of the classic questions of religion is  
"Who am I?"

The scrapbooks and photo albums,  
the trophies and mementos we keep might  
tell us who we are.

Or who we think we are.

Or who we were – or want to be.

Again, not a problem unless it keeps us stuck.

And it often does.

Part of the Buddhist ritual of taking Bodhisattva vows,  
which is a commitment to serving others,  
is to place on the altar something  
that you are committed to giving up.

Giving up so that you are more able to be of service.

Some of the common things people bring to the altar  
are alcohol and cigarettes.

When I participated in this ritual ten years ago,  
I took something that represented a self-image  
that was not serving me well.

I gave up my copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

A book that I had started more than a dozen times  
and never gotten past page 50.

You see, I had an image of myself as a good reader.

Literarily sophisticated.

My daughter had told me this was one of her favorite books.

And so had a good friend.

So I thought I should like it, too.

But I didn't.

I tried.

I really tried.

But I could never get past page 50.

Nor could I give up my self-image as a cultured reader.

For years I was not willing to admit that

my daughter or my friend might be smarter than I was.

Or have more erudite, cultured, refined taste in literature.

The reason I gave away that book

when I took my Bodhisattva vows  
was that the way we look at ourselves  
seeps out into the way we look at others.  
If I think I am less worthy because I am not smart enough,  
it is not much of a leap  
to think less of someone else  
because she doesn't live up to some ideal of mine.  
I gave that book away to let go of the need  
for a particular self-image.  
So that I could learn to love myself just as I am.  
And then love my neighbor as myself.

A year later I attended the Bodhisattva ceremony  
when a friend was taking her vows,  
and I had an unexpected opportunity  
to think again about what I might let go of  
that might free me from some other tomb.  
I had not realized that guests would be invited  
to place something on the altar, too.  
So I had not brought anything.  
The man sitting next to me saw this  
and offered me half of the floral bouquet he had brought.  
Automatically I protested,  
"No. I couldn't. You brought those.  
I'll just skip this part."  
Until it was clear that he really wanted  
to share his offering with me.  
And so I accepted.  
He divided the bouquet,  
and gave me half.  
And as I went forward to place them on the altar,  
I contemplated the symbolism of my offering.  
Just what was I vowing to give up?  
So that I could be of service to others?

And then it dawned on me.  
I would vow to let go of rugged individualism.  
Radical independence.  
Or at least the fantasy of radical independence.  
Thinking I could do whatever I set out to do  
.....on my own.  
Without help from anyone.  
Because service is a two way street.  
Or at least it should be.  
If we set out to be of service with the attitude  
that we have something to give and nothing to gain,  
we are in danger of arrogance.  
We are in danger of becoming resentful.

We are in danger of burning out.  
We are in danger of believing that we are insulated  
from the pain and joy of others.  
We are in danger of over-applying our first UU Principle –  
the inherent worth and dignity of every person –  
and ignoring the seventh –  
that we are a part of the interdependent web of all existence.  
We are in danger of getting stuck  
in a dark cavern of the spirit –  
in a tomb that is no place to stay.

The teaching of Jesus that touches me this Easter  
is that we all have the opportunity  
to be reborn.

To let go of things and ideas and habits  
that are limiting.  
To depart from the tombs that keep  
us isolated from the joys and pains of life.  
I have suggested two with which I am familiar.  
The tomb that is filled with stuff.  
And the tomb of radical independence.  
But I know so many more.  
The tomb of prejudice.  
Of perfectionism.  
Of addiction.  
The tomb of the illusion of control.  
What are the tombs that limit you?  
That you might try to let go of this Easter?  
So that you may be blessed by each new day  
you are granted.

“A tomb is no place to stay  
When life laughs a welcome  
To hearts that have been away too long.”

Blessed Be. May it be so.