

ROLLING AWAY THE STONE

Easter, April 8, 2012

John 20: 1 & 2: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away from the entrance, and ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb," she said, "and we do not know where they have laid him."

Today we will mostly be playing in the fields of metaphor, however, let us begin with some context. The verses I quoted are from the story of the Resurrection of Jesus told in John. It is the story in which the wealthy Joseph of Arimathaea, "a disciple of Jesus, but a secret disciple", (which is why we never hear of him elsewhere) asked for permission to bury the body of Jesus. He received permission; he and Nicodemus came with the appropriate funeral salves and herbs, and "following Jewish burial customs they wrapped (the body), with the spices, in strips of linen cloth." They then buried him in a "new tomb", and placed a great stone in front of the door.

We might ask a couple of questions. Why the detail of the stone? The realist answers: to keep wild animals from eating the body. Why the story of Joseph, and the new tomb? Again, the voice of reality answers: because the victims of Roman justice were almost universally thrown into a pit outside the walls of the city, where they were exposed to weather and wild animals.

John is the latest gospel, traditionally regarded as written by John the Evangelist, or more likely, a member of one of the communities he established in Asia Minor. Most non-evangelical biblical scholars think it was composed because the members of the early Christian church could not bear the thought that their messiah was eaten by wild animals.

Thus we have a story, probably fictional, that includes the metaphor of rolling away the stone from the tomb. It became one of the founding stories of Western Civilization, through its incorporation into the official Christian canon.

Let me pause to share with you what my assumptions are before we proceed further. Unitarian Universalist ministers learn that we need to proceed with caution, for we never know what toes we might be stepping on when we discuss the history of various religions.

My assumption is that most of you are no longer Christian. My assumption is also that most of you respect Jesus of Nazareth as a great prophet. I am aware that some of you come from different faith backgrounds, and some of you have embraced a faith that

differs greatly from the one in which you were reared. Some of you may well come from no religious background, and some of you may come from evangelical Christian churches, and some of you may be completely casual religionists.

When I explained to some of my Christian colleagues the variety of people who fill the sanctuary on any given Sunday, their reply was usually, “How do you preach to those people, Nana?” My reply was, “Very carefully.”

Rolling away the stone. Let us now think about stones and rolling them away, and why we should do so. Let us leap into the fields of metaphor.

What might be some of the stones that stand in our doors, blocking our full participation in life? What keeps us from engagement with the world? I thought of two very large stones, one with several different expressions.

The first is pain; and it might be physical pain, emotional pain or existential pain. I have had recent experience with physical pain, and the difference it can make when that stone is removed. My arthritic hips made each step painful. Even sitting had to be done carefully. Further, the pain I was experiencing made me grouchy—not a good characteristic in a minister. My long term therapist says that her readings on brain behavior point to a regression to the reptile brain when one is in pain. No one wants a reptilian pastor.

Following surgery the pain was gone. I was amazed at the difference! I can literally think better. I have great sympathy for those people who have physical pain that cannot be rolled away.

We humans also experience emotional pain. We speak of someone *hurting our feelings*. This kind of pain is just as real as physical pain, and may be more difficult to treat. Often emotional pain is caused by other humans; family members or friends or the larger society.

As a society we are conversing at great length about the pain caused by bullying behavior. Although bullying can be physical, it often begins as emotional, and may continue in that mode. Online bullying is a contemporary phenomenon. It can result in a very large stone that blocks us from full participation in the world.

Existential pain also afflicts modern humans. This is the pain that results from a failure to find answers to the great questions: *Who am I? Where did I come from? What is my reason for being? Where do I go when I die?* These are the questions of existence. Failure to find answers to them leads to an existential crisis, and pain.

Let me quickly say that I think that the luxury to reflect on these questions has been, in the past, restricted to those people who were both wealthy enough to have the time to

do so, and intelligent enough to be interested in such matters. I also think that as the class divide in this country widens there will be fewer Americans with the luxury to do so.

From existential pain arose most of the great philosophical questions, and many of the religious questions that have occupied scholars for centuries. Rolling away the stone of existential pain requires engagement with both ideas and feelings.

There is one more very large stone that blocks emergence from the tomb: despair. Wendell Berry speaks of “despair for the world”, an affliction that could hold us frozen within a cold tomb for a very long time.

I have a Unitarian Universalist friend who is a state representative here in Michigan—a feminist Democrat who is struggling to make a difference in Lansing in the current Republicans-only-need-apply-for-positions-of-influence climate. She spent months working on a package of bills on women’s health issues. She consulted with everyone, including pro-life politicians and lobbyists. She made bargains. She received messages of “okay, we can live with this,” from many of them. And then the House Leader refused to bring it to the floor.

I think I would have had a major hissy fit, and then retreated behind a very large stone, filled with despair, and vowed to never, ever emerge again. She may have (okay, probably) had a hissy fit. However, she did not retreat in despair. She formed a Progressive Democratic Women PAC in Lansing, and held a press conference to which she invited the media. She scheduled it at the same time the Right to Life was holding their annual conference. She was on TV and the radio, and is writing to state newspapers. I admire her persistence. Despair was, if present at all, short. The stone did not get comfortable in front of her door, before she kicked it out of the way.

Grief is the name of the stone of despair in front of my door. I push it out of the way often, but it is a wobbly stone, and often falls back. I must struggle with it frequently. I am beginning to think, however, that the constant rolling around is slowly wearing it down.

It is hard work, rolling great stones around. We might ask ourselves, *why bother? Why not just wallow in despair?* The inclination to find a comfortable bed in that tomb and give up is tempting. Why struggle against that huge rock? There are many people who feel they are trapped in the tomb of despair. Why not join them and indulge ourselves in a litany of complaints?

The short answer is that we are not those people. Our faith calls upon us to engage with the world. Our faith calls upon us to work for justice, equity and compassion. We work for a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. We recognize that we are

part of an interdependent web of existence. In other words, sulking instead of working for change is not part of our DNA—and it's not very much fun, either.

Unitarian Universalist Professor Sharon Welch writes about how progressive groups can continue to work for justice, in the face of opposition that seems overwhelming. It is like the story of the ant and the rubber tree plant: don't tell the ant he can't move that plant. We have to keep working, we have to move that stone.

However, she is clear that to do so we have to take time to celebrate the small victories. We don't stop; but we do pause, we sing together, we eat and drink together, and we regain our strength to continue. We do not have the luxury of hiding behind the stone of despair.

We must find ways to live our principles and remain sane, reasonable people. In the doing, in the living, we can find joy. Joy is far more zingy than happiness. I am happy that Elise did not get voted off American Idol. I experience joy when I can again walk around the block. I am happy when I eat a good bowl of potato soup when I am hungry. I experience joy when I share a feast with family or friends. Let us seek joy in the living out of our faith; rather than only pursue happiness.

We need to roll away those stones that would prevent us from these goals. The question is now, how to do so.

One of the ways is to engage with our faith community in some depth. We will be with people who can support us, people who understand us. The people here understand what it means when a member of our family is in pain, and we can do nothing to alleviate it. They understand what it means to apply for tenure, and what it means to succeed or fail in the effort. They understand what it means to have someone we love be mistreated, and feel helpless to prevent it. The people here love us in spite of our faults.

When we come here for worship we have the opportunity to experience and participate in producing beautiful music to lift our spirits. We share companionship with like-hearted people. We hear poetry and carefully crafted words, meant to bring wisdom and understanding into our midst. And we share a rite present in all Unitarian Universalist faith communities—coffee communion. The discussions we share with a cup of caffeine in our hands are often the highpoint of the Sunday experience. During the Sunday morning experience we have an opportunity to experience transcendence, to be part of something larger than ourselves.

The same is true when we engage with the Earth and its peoples. When we immerse ourselves in the natural world, whether that is a garden in our yard or floating on the

Chip or skiing on a cold crisp day we again become one with the Earth. And if we are one with the Earth, it is an easy task to shove that stone out of the doorway.

When we speak of Earth's People, we mean all people, no exceptions. This means we will engage with culture—other people's culture as well as our own. We do not live in a vacuum, and we cannot hide behind the stones in front of our doors. Please do not try to hide from the culture in which we live.

I have a very dear friend who often says, "I don't listen to the news." I accepted this without questioning, but I did not fully understand its implications. Then, about a week ago, I referenced Trayvon Martin in a conversation. She did not know who he was. She literally does not know what is happening in the world.

I will confess to being a news hound. I read newspapers and magazines. I listen to NPR. I watch the evening news on NBC. And, I have online news sources. Maybe I go overboard. However, I really think that we need to have a coherent notion of the state of the world. We are a part of the culture, and we need to understand its implications.

Lastly, we need to remember to love. The poet Mary Oliver says that her job is to love the world. I agree. This does not mean that the world, or the people in it, or all aspects of its culture are perfect, or even beautiful. However, taken together, the Earth is beautiful, and all children, yes, especially yours are above average, and fallible humans are worth our love. Remember to love, and the warmth of your heart will melt away the stone in front of your door.

Shalom and Salaam,

Blessed Be and Amen.