

Rolling Away the Stone
A homily by Rev. Fred Small
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The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 28, beginning at the first verse:

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised"

Today we celebrate Easter, the Christian holy day of resurrection, of triumph over the grave.

Like holidays in all faith traditions, Easter is actually a palimpsest, an inscription that overwrites more ancient texts that may yet be understood.

Beneath the Christian Easter is the Jewish Pesach, or Passover, commemorating the escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, a liberating exodus into the wilderness and finally the promised land. Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover Seder. Beneath Pesach we can still make out two earlier festivals: one of shepherds celebrating the fertility of their flock, the other of farmers eating unleavened bread when they threw out the old starter sourdough and began a new batch in the spring.

Uniting these holidays is the theme of redemption: redemption from sin and servitude, redemption from the dead of winter and the death of the body. In each story, God rescues God's people in return for their faith and sacrifice. Christ is risen, Pharaoh's army drowned, and spring returns. The desert blooms with new life.

These are sacred stories with happy endings. What happens in real life, our life, when no happy ending comes? When death steals from us those we love, and there is no resurrection? When oppression and violence and abuse persist unabated, even unacknowledged, cycle upon cycle, generation unto generation? When the promise of spring is broken, and crops wither in the barren earth?

Each of us knows death.

Even children know the death of a pet dog or cat or hamster, of a favorite grandparent or aunt or uncle, or even of a schoolmate. Hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, famines, wars, mining and industrial accidents take thousands and thousands of lives each year.

Other deaths, too, shadow our lives.

The death of a relationship. The death of a home. The death of a career. The death of a community. The death of faith. The death of trust. The death of a dream.

Since the dawn of time, people have found hope and solace in the permanence of nature, the endless cycles of the seasons. However unbearable our sorrow, we have lifted

our eyes unto the everlasting hills. However cruel the winter, we have always had faith in the spring.

Now the hand of humankind threatens the earth's climate, the survival of millions of species, the rhythms of life itself.

When there is no winter, how can there be spring? If we exterminate ourselves, where is our redemption?

Do we really expect an angel to roll away the stone from our tomb?

My colleague Rosemary Bray McNatt, an African-American Unitarian Universalist minister, newly called to the Fourth Universalist Society in New York City, preached to her congregation for the first time on Sunday, September 9, 2001.

Two days later, when the World Trade Center came crashing down, she found herself ministering not only to her church but also to the wounded and dazed on the city streets. She made her way to ground zero to comfort and counsel the rescue workers who found in the rubble almost no one to rescue. She met a police officer who had seen scores of his fellow officers killed before his eyes. This white cop, whose uniform and skin color on another day would have provoked in Rosemary a wary mistrust born of decades of rudeness and harassment and violence—this white cop wept in her arms.

And then he returned to the pit, to lift stone after stone, praying for a miracle. "Someone could still be alive," he said. "We gotta hope, right? We gotta try."

He had it right.

We gotta hope. We gotta try.

When no angel rolls away the stone, we must roll it away ourselves.

We roll away the stone because that's what we do. That's who we are. Just flecks of spray in the storm surge, brother and sister to the sparrow, the wild salmon, the blade of grass pushing, pushing, pushing toward the sunlight.

We gotta hope. We gotta try.

In the brutality of Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl realized what he called "the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of [humanity] is through love and in love.*" We always have a choice, he said. [E]verything can be taken from [us] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

We gotta hope. We gotta try.

Even as our palms chafe and crack and bleed against the stone, our labor lights the night with the unquenchable fire of love. Even in bondage, our spirits need not be broken. Even if spring never comes, our hearts warm each other's. Our love, our laughter, our compassion, our courage complete the circle and roll away the stone.

Amen and Blessed Be.