

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Easter Sunday – April 1, 2018 - Communion

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 20:1-18

FOR REFLECTION

“Easter’ is a movable event, calculated by the relative positions of sun and moon, an impossible way of fixing year by year the anniversary of a historical event, but a very natural and indeed inevitable way of calculating a solar festival. These changing dates do not point to the history of a man, but to the hero of a solar myth.”

~ Annie Besant, English Philosopher (1847-1933)

“The symbolic language of the crucifixion is the death of the old paradigm; resurrection is a leap into a whole new way of thinking.”

~ Deepak Chopra, American Philosopher (b.1946)

Reappearing Act

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

— Seamus Heaney, “Doubletake”
Irish Poet/Playwright (1939–2013)

This Irish poet certainly experienced the ebbs and flows of despair and hope – as he lived in the aftermath of their guerilla war for independence from England which ended in 1921 – and the Irish Civil War which followed to 1923. And then – for much of his life – he endured the violent extremism of the anti-treaty IRA (Irish Republican Army (1922–69), which fought and lost the civil war and which, thereafter, refused to recognize either the Irish Free State or Northern Ireland, deeming them both to be creations of British imperialism.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Republican_Army

... once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

A year before the IRA was dismantled, in 1968 on April 4th – 50 years ago – Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered. A Baptist minister, he had been at the forefront of a **non-violent** movement for Civil Rights in the U.S. where the Jim Crow reign of terror

had been in place since the end of our Civil War and the so-called emancipation of slaves in America. He too was a poet and many of his words are remembered to this day. One oft-quoted line is from a speech he made in 1956 following the conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott – an early victory in the movement:

Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.

These words were, actually, a paraphrase of writings by Theodore Parker (1810-1860), an American Transcendentalist and reforming minister of the Unitarian church, an Abolitionist whose words would later inspire speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. Note that Parker died as the Civil War began – but he inspired hope for 100 years and more beyond his death.

On April 4th in 1967 – one year to the day before his assassination — the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the most politically charged speech of his life at Riverside Church in Upper Manhattan. It was a blistering attack on the government's conduct of the Vietnam War that, among other things, compared American tactics to those of the Nazis during World War II.

When Martin Luther King Came Out Against Vietnam - The New York ...
<https://www.nytimes.com/.../when-martin-luther-king-came-out-against-vietnam.html>

In 1967 my father took me to the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam – a companion march in San Francisco – with the main mobe in New York marching from Central Park to the UN. Millions of us marched. Later that same year there was a mobilization march in D.C. to the pentagon. In 1969 we marched again – Dad and me in San Francisco – millions of others across the nation. Like the Women's March in January 2017 and the March for Our Lives last weekend, these events brought the kids into the streets – high school and college kids – kids who had been or would be drafted to fight in Vietnam. They also brought the mothers and the fathers, the grandparents and the teachers, the musicians and the artists, the organizers and the followers – out into public displays of protest against injustice and death-mongering.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew that Civil Rights issues were intertwined with racism and poverty and violence and warfare. Theodore Parker knew that, Seamus Heaney knew that. Unitarian Abolitionist Julia Ward Howe knew that – when she declared the first Mothers' Peace Day in 1870 (now a Hallmark holiday), but originally a movement to save their kids from being killed in national and international conflicts.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.

From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, disarm! The sword is not the balance of justice." Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession...

Let [us] then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each learning after his own time, the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/mothers-day/the-original-mother-s-day-proclamation>

Reformers, abolitionists, protesters, peace and justice and civil rights advocates – for the last 2000 years anyway – all knew what Jesus knew – that civil rights are intertwined with race and gender equality, economic justice and peaceful interactions between peoples. In fact, Jesus is one who is quoted often – in various forms and paraphrases – when the people hit the streets. The church, the body of Christ, has had (and continues to embody) many failures and faults. But when it is at its best, it is the Resurrection of the Jesus Movement – it is the reappearance of the Voice for Justice and Peace – it is the living, breathing Hope that allows us to go on in the face of great evils afoot in our world.

When the women found the tomb empty, it was the final blow.
The man who championed their equal rights among the disciples,
the man who championed the poor and the outcast,
the man who stood up to the self-righteous religious hierarchy
and, for G-d's sake, ran head-long into the face of the Roman Empire,
the man they thought was the next Ruler of Israel –
he was not only dead but gone –
disappeared as if he never existed.

And then – as Mary wept – he reappeared.
As the disciples hid from the Romans in the Upper Room, he reappeared.
As the fishermen went back to their old jobs, he reappeared on the beach.
As a few disciples made their way home on the road to Emmaus, he reappeared and broke bread.
He kept showing up. And he had shown up repeatedly – throughout history –
in the words and actions of millions.

In 1923, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) Irish playwright and political activist, another survivor of the Irish war for independence, the Irish civil war and the IRA years, wrote his play "St. Joan". And the most quoted line is this question:

Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age
to save those that have no imagination?

"St. Joan" (1923)

It certainly seems so. Yet, taken to its unspoken conclusion, Christ must then be RESURRECTED in every age to re-ignite HOPE, to re-instigate protest, to re-start myriad civil rights movements, to re-new our passion for peace. Jesus must re-appear in order to inspire a new generation of children to march for their lives against gun-violence and the tyranny of the NRA, to engender a #Black Lives Matter movement, to give strength to the DREAMERS, to give courage to the #MeToo survivors.

And, it is entirely possible that the Institution of the Church, in the throes of death in this century – MUST perish –
in order to cleanse itself of self-righteous Crusades –
and reappear in the next century as the Protector and Defender of the dis-advantaged – the Savior of the Suffering –
the Heart of a global Beloved Community.

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

— Seamus Heaney, "Doubletake"
Irish Poet/Playwright (1939–2013)

And hope and history rhyme.
And hope and history rhyme.

John 20:1-18

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' 14 When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' 16 Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

No worship service here next week.

Benediction

In the great quiet of God, my troubles are but pebbles on the road.
My joys are like the everlasting hills.
So it is when I step through the gate of prayer
from time into eternity.
When I am in the consciousness of God,
my brothers and sisters are not far-off and forgotten,
but close and strangely dear.
They shine, as if a light were glowing within them.
Even those who frown on me and love me not
seem part of the great scheme of God.

- Chalice Hymnal #232

The religious imagineer Where the fire and the rose are one Posted on March 24, 2018 March For Our Lives: When Hope and History Rhyme

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

— Seamus Heaney, "Doubletake"

Heaney's powerful words seem the perfect epigraph for this amazing day, when hundreds of thousands of people in over 800 communities took to the streets to say "enough is enough." Enough shootings! Enough victims! It's time to heal our national gun-sickness. It's time to choose life.

Have we finally reached a turning point? We've seen countless turning points come to naught. We have become well accustomed not to "hope on this side of the grave." But this new movement, led by highly committed young people not yet practiced in the art of resignation, does feel different. Could this in fact be one of those rare moments, like the end of apartheid or the fall of the Berlin wall, when "hope and history rhyme"?

In "Summoning the Sanity to Scream," posted in the wake of Orlando, I wrote:

Gun worship seems the most powerful religion in America. From presidents to schoolchildren, the blood of countless victims stains its altars. And however much we rage and moan we feel powerless to stay the hand of sacrifice.

After the joy of marching with thousands of beautiful fellow citizens in the streets of Seattle, and later viewing media excerpts of the utterly compelling young voices at the demonstration in Washington, D.C., I felt myself being awakened from the deadly illusion of inevitability. I began to let myself hope again. The kids are leading the way out of the Slough of Despond. How can we not follow?

I was especially moved by Emma Gonzalez, a senior at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Already well known for her prophetic cry against the NRA and its political puppets ("We call BS!"), she began with a brief,

heartbreaking roll call of her seventeen dead friends. Then, remaining at the podium, she stood in solemn silence for a very long six minutes—ritually enacting the excruciating duration of the mass shooting.

Ms. Gonzalez had not explained her silence in advance, nor had she invited the crowd to observe it with her. Many in the crowd of 800,000 were undoubtedly bewildered by such an exercise, periodically filling the uncomfortable silence with shouts of “We love you, Emma,” or chants of “Never again.” But the camera also showed many faces mute and tearful. It was a risky liturgical move to immerse that vast multitude in such a long silence (almost unendurable for talkative Americans!) without any advance consensus on its intention or meaning. Those weren’t a million Trappists out there. As far as I could tell from the video, she more or less pulled it off, never quite losing them. I suspect that many will be haunted by the experience for a long time to come.

It is late, I am tired from a lot of walking, and I hesitate to reduce what happened today into a few concluding paragraphs. Something great happened out there, and let’s leave it at that for now. But I am prompted to make a brief digression before signing off.

As a priest on the eve of Holy Week, I could not help making connections between today’s events and what Christians will be doing over the next eight days. How could I not carry echoes of today’s joyful urban processions into tomorrow’s commemoration of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem? Both processions involved cheering crowds envisioning a better world; both posited fundamental challenges to the established powers. As for the fate of today’s crowds compared to the one in first-century Jerusalem, I suspect there are crucial differences as well. While every human dream must endure repeated crucibles of resistance and setback, I suspect that the kids on the streets today will not replicate the failures of the Palm Sunday crowd. In that sense, they may prove to be more like Jesus—enduring faithfully with their eyes on the prize—than like the fickle crowd whose “hosannas” turned so quickly to “crucify.”

The other connection I’m thinking about tonight is Emma Gonzalez’s six-minute silence. Founded on an original experience of unimaginable pain and loss, it created a space where suffering might be both remembered and transcended. Like the rites of Holy Week, it engaged the past as something never to be forgotten, something that is intrinsic to the story, but in the context of a future which can contain and redeem whatever has been lost. We all dwell in the provisional space between memory and hope, where we neither forget nor give up. There is always more to our story than we can ever know. Even in the darkest night, God continues to imagine the dawn.

At the Easter Vigil next Saturday night, one of the stories we will tell is the deliverance of the biblical Israelites from the powers that enslave them. Instead of an adult reading the story from the Bible, children will act out the Exodus from Egypt. When they reach the Red Sea (adults blocking their way with waves of blue fabric), the congregation will shout “No way! No way!”—like Congress telling the kids to give up and go home. But Moses will raise his staff, a way will open through the sea, and the Israelites will cross over. One will be carrying a “Never again” sign; another will wear a “March for our lives” T-shirt.

Once they are safely across the sea, Miriam, Moses’ sister, will reflect on what has happened, concluding with a declaration of faith:

“The world says NO.
The power of God is YES!”

<https://jimmfriedrich.com/2018/03/24/march-for-our-lives-when-hope-and-history-rhyme/>