

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 23 March, 2008

Easter, Ready or Not!

Today is the earliest Easter any of us has ever lived, or ever will live. In fact, it can get one day earlier, but no worries; the next time that happens will be 277 years from now. The last time Easter was this early was 1913 - 95 years ago; the next time it will be this early will be in 2285 - 220 years from now.¹

O, it's early, but the hour is late. The chance to awaken is so rare, and so precious. Ready or not, it's time to wake up, and shake it up. Rise and shine! The time of Eastering is full upon us.

Setting us apart from Christianity, Unitarian Universalism is not founded on Jesus' death and resurrection. We celebrate his *life*; his life, and, especially, his teachings. Yes, we affirm that when Jesus died, a great light went out. But we celebrate that a divine fire burned in him, and that a spark of that fire also burns in each of us. Our sacred purpose, as people of faith, is to breathe on that spark in our lives, and so tend the fire of our divine calling.

On January 18th, 2005, the First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain burst into flames. The pastor, my friend Ashlee Wiest-Laird, escaped unharmed from the parsonage next door with her husband and their three children. The church was destroyed.

Heather Hawkins, a member of First Baptist, heard the news from Terry Burke, the Unitarian Universalist minister of First Church in Jamaica Plain. "The night of the ... fire, I ... didn't know about it," she said, "until I heard two messages from Terry saying if we need a place, we can use his church."

¹ Thanks to Rev. Gene Navias for these statistics.

I was so proud of Terry, and of our congregation in Jamaica Plain. In these times of so much rancor and division along faith lines, they extended a hand of welcome and refuge to their neighbors at First Baptist.

In fact, the same thing had happened 30 years earlier: the Unitarian Universalists had also opened their spiritual home to the Baptists when a lesser fire had forced them from their building. But what no one knew was that this was actually the *repayment* of a kindness.

Last month, professional safecrackers opened First Baptist's safe, which had rusted from exposure to the elements as it lay in the charred ruins ever since. I wouldn't have laid odds on anything having survived; in fact, the safe's double doors revealed perfectly preserved historic books and documents, along with the church's silver service.

Our own Sharon Pressly Fiero, who has been serving as a capital campaign consultant at First Baptist, brought even more astounding news to church the next Sunday. "Did you hear about the silver?" she asked.

As it turns out, in 1854, the Jamaica Plain Unitarians gave the communion service to First Baptist for "[the] Christian charity and kindness manifested toward them' during the fifteen months they were without a building."² Until now, no one living knew that the hospitality had been given and returned over the course of more than 150 years.

* * *

Jesus taught, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that [others] should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."³

* * *

Over lunch last month, I had the great pleasure of listening to two colleagues, both Episcopal priests, do a spontaneous comedy routine about the prayer prayed at their ordinations. A beautiful passage from the prayer says, in part, "O God of unchangeable power and eternal light, ... let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things

² Sharon Pressly-Fiero, '*Safecrackers' Find Treasure!*, The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain, newsletter, 3/1/08

³ Matthew 7:12

are being brought to their perfection....” And then there’s this little sentence, undoubtedly inserted by committee: “O God ... by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation.”

In other words, we pray for the world to be utterly changed, utterly made new, but for it to be done “in tranquility.” As one Episcopalian colleague said it, “We want you to turn the world upside down, O God, but could you please do it quietly? We do not wish to be disturbed.”

Is it ever easy? Is it ever easy to be jarred out of a sound sleep, to wake up and smell the coffee and realize something’s got to give, something has to change, and *that* something ... is staring back at us from the mirror. It’s a courageous prayer, the prayer to awaken, to be truly awake to change, to be changed, to change the world - starting with ourselves - and to be of use, to give, to serve.

* * *

Sandie Andersen is a 51 year old barista at a Starbucks in Tacoma, Washington. Annamarie Ausnes stops in each day for a “short drip, double cupped” coffee. In brief exchanges, they like to talk about their grandchildren.

For more than 20 of her 55 years, Annamarie has lived with polycystic kidney disease; last year, when no family members could provide a match for a transplant, dialysis and the hope of a kidney donor became her foreseeable future.

Normally, Annamarie just doesn’t talk about it. But the transplant coordinator who is handling her case said, “Annamarie, you never know where a donor’s going to come from. Keep telling people your story.”

Annamarie wasn’t so sure about that, but when she arrived at Starbucks one day, looking grim, Sandie asked what was wrong.

Hearing her story, Sandie said, “I’m going to get tested.” And she did. Blood type O: check. Negative cross-match under the microscope: check. The six elusive DNA markers: one of the six was a match; not ideal, but good enough. Check.

When Annamarie walked into Starbucks the next day, Sandie reached over the counter to her and said, “I’m a blood match.” The two women burst into tears; the line behind them looked on in confusion, and grew long.

So now, in just a few weeks, they will check into the hospital together, and Sandie Andersen will give her left kidney to Annamarie Ausnes. Howard D. Schultz, chief executive of Starbucks, called Sandie and said, “how proud I am to have someone like you working for our company.” Sandie replied that she had taken very seriously Mr. Schultz’s recent, well-publicized remarks about having employees make a ‘human connection’ with customers.⁴

* * *

Jesus taught, “For I was [hungry], and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

“Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

“Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, ... ‘When saw we thee [hungry], and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?’

“Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?’

“And [Jesus] shall answer and say unto them, ‘Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’”⁵

* * *

Those who loved Jesus believed that they saw him after his death. Have you ever had the experience of thinking you’ve spotted someone who’s died? I have it all the time. Rounding the corner just ahead, there he is, there she is! Instantly, my heart floods with joy, and then, almost as quickly, I know that it isn’t true; I’ve mistaken them for someone else.

⁴ William Yardley, *A Donor Match Over Small Talk and Coffee*, The New York Times, 3/4/08. Thanks to Kem Morehead for this story!

⁵ Matthew 25:35-40

Grief can make us a little crazy ... crazy like we've lost a limb, crazy with longing or regret or the feeling that if we start crying we may never stop, that we will never be happy again. But Easter comes to remind us that grief is not the end of the story. The story doesn't end with Jesus' broken body. The story doesn't end with death. The story ends exactly as it begins: with a miracle. And the next chapter is about life.

* * *

One more story: Jerry Chavez is the pump operator in the Grand Canyon. The pumping station is halfway to the bottom,⁶ and Jerry is responsible for supplying the entire South Rim with water. He is also a highly-regarded member of the Search and Rescue team, and well-loved by the park rangers. Jerry has a lot of amazing stories to tell of his years in the Canyon. But there's one story he doesn't tell: the first story someone who knows him will tell you about him.

One day, Jerry was working at Indian Gardens, where the pump is located, and noticed an elderly gentleman sitting off by himself, utterly dejected. Jerry approached and asked him what was wrong; the man told him that he was 80 years old, that he had hiked from the rim that morning, but that he simply couldn't go any farther; his legs just wouldn't carry him the rest of the way down. He was supposed to be meeting up with a rafting trip on the Colorado River, and riding the rapids for the next week to the Canyon's end. "I've dreamed of doing this my whole life," he said, "And I'm not going to make it."

Jerry didn't hesitate. "Grandfather, you are going to the river. Climb on. Let's go." And with that, Jerry hoisted the man up onto his back, and carried him. For two and a half miles down the perilously steep trail, down the twisting switchbacks of the Devil's Corkscrew, down into the inner Canyon, all the way to the river, Jerry carried him.

When they arrived, Jerry called the rafting trip operator on his radio, and said, "You have a client at Pipe Creek, waiting for a pick up." And sure enough, there came the raft, and the old man climbed on.

⁶ Indian Gardens, where the pumping station is located, is 4.5 miles down from the South Rim.

A few weeks later, Jerry Chavez received a letter in the mail. “Dear Jerry,” it began, “I had the time of my life. Thank you.”⁷

* * *

If you look at the stained glass windows in the balconies, you will see Louis Comfort Tiffany’s illustration of these words: Jesus taught,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God....

“Rejoice, and be exceeding[ly] glad.”⁸

* * *

My spiritual companions, ready or not, now we are called to this early Easter.

Easter calls to remind us not of despair, but of hope.

Easter calls to remind us not of death,
but of life.

Easter calls to remind us to
love one another.

May we answer the Easter call to awaken and rise and shine. Let it shine! May we answer the call to love and service, justice and peace.

⁷ Thanks to National Park Service Ranger Pam Cox for this story.

⁸ Matthew 5:3-12