

*“All that Survives”*  
*Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson*  
*March 27<sup>th</sup>, Easter 2005*

**Opening words – by e.e. cummings**

i thank you god for most this  
  amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits  
  of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and  
  for everything  
which is natural which is infinite  
  which is yes

(I who have died am alive again  
  today,  
and this is the sun’s birthday; this  
  is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings:  
  and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching  
  hearing seeing  
breathing any-lifted from the no  
of all nothing-human merely  
  being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake  
  and  
now the eyes of my eyes are  
  opened)

## **Sermon**

When I was a kid I had to listen to my father as he was preparing for church on Sunday morning. He was a minister. We lived in a small apartment in New York and it was kind of hard not to hear his booming voice. I assumed it must be a scary thing for him to get up in front of everyone, because every Sunday morning I would hear him moaning in the bathroom. Then he would repeat some words and they were always the same ones. He would say them in a deep rumbly voice, with a lot of phlegm in it, much deeper than the one that he used for every day; and his voice would drop down real low at the end.

*“Out of the night that covers me black as a pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever Gods may be for my unconquerable soul.”*

I think for my father the period from Friday to Sunday, every Friday to Sunday, which was his sermon writing time, was like the cycle from Good Friday to Easter. He moved through a kind of death, into the tomb, the pit of darkness and then out again into the light, emerging new each Monday, only to begin again.

The Easter story of death and resurrection can tell us that we humans move like the earth does, through darkness into light, over and over again, and that the spirit of life, the unconquerable soul of things, never dies.

The story of death and resurrection is of course much older than Jesus. It's as old as the grass pushing back up through the tough hard earth every spring. It's as old as the birds flying back with the return of the warm weather. But those cycles feel so *new* every time they happen, which is what makes life so tender and miraculous. And then there are other even wider circles and cycles of life which remind us of a kind of resurrection too.

A few years ago I went to visit my parents on the land they had bought out in the middle of the desert/prairie lands in New Mexico thirty miles from the nearest town and a mile from the nearest neighbor. You get the picture. You can wander there lost for years and never see another soul.

One night it rained. I knew from living in El Paso in High School that rain is a big deal in the desert. Not just because it relieves the unremitting dry heat for a time, but because of the wonders that spring up after one. In fact I remembered that, after a rain, we would all run and jump in the car and tear on out of the city to the open desert, stop the car, open the windows and just breathe. The fragrance in the desert after a rain is like nothing else. And

flowers appear out of nowhere, bloom for a few hours, and then disappear.

These were moments to be seized.

I was to learn that rain is an even bigger deal in the part of New Mexico where my parents land is, because on this morning, just a few years ago, while the fresh smell was still in the air, my father woke me up and said, “quick, quick, come with me, I want to show you something”. We walked and walked and everywhere around us on the ground under the Pinon, and twisted Juniper trees, shining in the early dawn light was a white substance. My father picked up a little piece of it and said: “here, take it, eat it”.

“Yeah right, you first”, I said.

He ate.

I waited a few seconds to see if he keeled over.

“Go ahead”, he said, “take it and eat before it dries up and blows away. As soon as the sun comes all the way up it will completely disappear. And we don’t know when it will rain again.”

So I kind of inspected it. And it was whitish greenish, but it looked a little bit like seaweed, and the Japanese eat sea weed and I’ve had Sushi wrapped in sea weed and I liked it so I went ahead and ate.

And it was good. I immediately began running around gathering up big handfuls and stuffing them in my mouth and in my pockets, so I could show my friends back home.

“Manna from heaven!” I said to my father. “This is manna from heaven, this must be what the ancient Israelites ate! This must be the dew in the morning. A lot of those stories were based on some kind of real event. I bet this is the same kind of thing they were eating to survive in the desert! To them it must have seemed like a miracle.”

“No,” said my Presbyterian turned Congregational turned Unitarian turned Episcopalian, minister father, “it’s sea-weed.” Actually the way he said it made it sound as if this was just as miraculous as manna from heaven.

He went on: “There’s an old ocean floor below us. And whenever it rains we discover something rising up from that old ocean floor. One time your mother and I looked under an overturned bucket which had had some water in it” he stopped and laughed like he still couldn’t believe it, “and there were tadpoles jumping around. Primitive little frogs!”

“No”! I said

“Yes! And, there are people out here who claim they have found shrimp after a particularly heavy rain.” My father said, “But I don’t know, that might be apocryphal.”

“Yup. Aestivation”, he said. “It’s called aestivation. They’ve been sleeping through their own long summer, a million year long summer, and now it’s their time. Up north things hibernate for the winter, they sleep through the cold. Down here they sleep through the heat, for a really long time.”

Well I wasn’t sure how much of this I should believe, but it did seem pretty amazing to me. That life is like that. That something could go to sleep in the tomb of this earth over a million years ago and on this particular day, after a little bit of rain, we could look down at the ground, and the eyes of our eyes were opened and we could see: it is risen. The earth gave us this day our daily bread. Million year old dried seaweed is a kind of manna from heaven.

As we kept on walking the sun was rising higher, and it was getting warmer, and the moisture was leaving the land very quickly, and I watched as the manna shriveled right up, some of it seeming to dissolve back into the ground. And then as the sun shone brighter, and the breeze picked up, some of the particles which had dried up but had not yet disappeared were lifted up and carried on the wind, and the air was full of, and we were breathing in, this fine, million year old dust.

There is a poem attributed to the Cheyenne tribe, but has probably been rewritten to rhyme, which is said to have been used at burial:

I am a thousand winds that blow  
I am the diamond glints on snow  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain  
I am the gentle autumn rain  
When you awake in the mornings hush  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circled flight  
I am the soft star that shines at night  
Do not stand at my grave and cry  
I am not there, I did not die.

The seaweed did not die either. It had become indistinguishable from the desert roughage, the creosote bushes and pinon and juniper trees. It had risen and then it had become one with everything again.

Nothing really dies.

In some understandings of Easter, particularly amongst Christian mystics, the death and resurrection story carry much the same sense; that when Jesus died, his being, his essence, the “Christ spirit” dissolved into everything that is. And some believe that happens to all of us, but that his, being a particularly strong essence, remains present in the world, as an available power.

Personally, I think the mystical story is ironically the earthiest and, in that sense, the most realistic interpretation of Christ’s death and resurrection.

It describes exactly what happens every day, to the physical and visible forms of creation, like what I'd seen happen in my parent's own backyard.

In the gospel of John at the last supper before Jesus is taken to be crucified, he says: "A little while and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me." And then, after his women friends find the tomb empty he appears to them, but they don't recognize him. He has returned in another form.

Finally they do have eyes to see, and they recognize him and when they do, "he vanished out of their sight."

In a mystical, and yet earth based, understanding of this story, what is being described is how everything, including us, disappears back into the great ocean of being, and then reappears in some form or another.

The story of Jesus and the tomb and the resurrection is itself a reforming of a very old story. Throughout Pre-Christian history earth based religions commemorated spring with rituals and stories that spoke of a savior god figure rising back up out of the tomb of the earth.

Life is one big story of resurrection, and of re-formation. And yet we *suffer* so much in life because we would like to hold on, to not let go of so much. The Buddhists say that is the cause of suffering, this holding on, this

attachment to what is impermanent. We hold onto old needs, or old behaviors, even when they no longer serve us.

We hold onto old ideas even when in all our searching we've uncovered new more useful ones.

We hold onto a self image even when our spirit wants to free us to crack open and grow and change.

But Unitarian Universalism is a hopeful religion, it is a practical and a this worldly religion. It is one of empiricism and also of wonder and awe and delight. And so we are encouraged not to suffer needlessly! We are encouraged to re-imagine, and we are free to notice just what life itself is really trying to show us. And what nature tells us at this time of year is that nothing really goes away completely, even as we can't hold on to its present form. Everything all around us, everywhere, including ourselves is always changing.

There may be a long sleep first, there may be many dark tombs in our lives, experiences of life in which it feels as if there is no light and no hope. But a tomb is a time of waiting, winter is a time of waiting, darkness is a time of waiting, even despair can be transformed into a time of waiting. We can wait in hope and quietude, with faith in our knowledge that everything,

even that which seems to be leaving us, is actually in some process of return,  
is becoming, once again, a part of everything else.