

“Rolling Away the Stone”
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I have a friend who tells stories that are often so funny that I’m practically rolling on the floor laughing. Who doesn’t love a good story? There are stories that make you grin until your face hurts. There are stories that are so sad they make you want to cry. Stories that astonish you and let you see something in a whole new way; heartwarming stories, inspiring stories. Tall tales; cautionary tales. Really, there are zillions of kinds of stories, and the good ones draw us in and keep our attention.

Modern storytellers are descendants of an immense and ancient community of holy people, bards, troubadours and wise men and woman. For most of human existence, stories and storytelling were the means of passing on truth and wisdom: they taught people how to live in the culture; what to watch out for; how to be a good person, how to live in harmony with the rest of the community; what happens if you break the rules of that community. Some of the best stories are like multi-faceted gems, which you can view from lots of different angles, and the more we look, the more we are able to see, and if we look closely, we may even be able to see ourselves in the story.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a Jungian analyst and *cantadora* storyteller say that “stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important if the inner life is frightened, wedged or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down , or up, and for our troubles, cuts for us fine wide doors in previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland, that lead to love and learning, that lead us back to our own real lives...”

Would this description include stories from the Bible, like the Easter story? We are so far today from the original tellers of the stories in the Hebrew and Christian bibles that all too often, what we have taken away from such stories are layers of added interpretation and meaning that were never intended by the original storytellers. We also live in a world that tends to take things literally, which can make it difficult to see past the words, beyond the surface meaning.

Do you remember being in high school, where the English teacher had you read poetry that seemed meaningless and incomprehensible? I do. The teacher would try to explain what the poet was really saying. I just didn't get it. I remember this extra-credit question on a test: "What does 'no man is an island' mean?" I had no clue! I had not yet learned to think in terms of metaphor and symbolism, allegory and simile.

But good storytelling, like good poetry, often incorporates these very devices, where specific actions, things and even characters stand for larger truths and meanings. Ancient languages themselves tended to have a poetic quality. Many words had multiple meanings and multiple layers of meaning, some of which can easily be lost in translation –which creates another barrier to understanding ancient texts.

To some Unitarian Universalists, it matters whether a story is literally true, historically and factually. It's human nature not to want to be deceived, and, for some of us, if a story is not literally true (especially if we have been told that it **was**), we may not want to base our lives on it. And it may not be a part of our religious background at all.

But for some UU's, in their search for truth and meaning, the objective literal truth of a story is not what matters; what matters is the wisdom that the story may contain. Throughout our Unitarian and Universalist history there have always been those who read scripture as being open to our questions and reflections. Some of our religious forebears paid dearly for this attitude of truth-seeking, for what they considered to be a religious imperative. Today, we can be grateful that we live in a society in which we are free to interpret religious stories in ways that are meaningful to **us**, or ignore them altogether if we so choose. I like a saying I've heard that goes: "Take what you like and leave the rest."

I invite you to join me this morning in exploring one of the themes of the Easter story: the tomb and the stone. I read you the account from the book of Mark, because it was the first of the four canonical gospels to have been written, and it tells the story in the most basic way. Also, if you read this account yourself, you will probably find that it doesn't end at verse 8. However, most scholars believe that the extra lines were added later as early Christians felt the need to embellish the original story.

The three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome, are very concerned about the tomb in which Jesus's body has been laid. The tomb would

have been either a natural cave or a chamber cut into soft rock, near the city. And, like most tombs, it was closed off with a large stone.

The moving of the stone is a worry to the women; they talk about it on their way to the tomb: “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” They have come out of love for this man who has been executed. Their desire to anoint his body, his head and perhaps also his feet, with scented oils is a reflection of their love and respect.

But they are worried that they will be cut off from the person they loved, from all that he was, from the legacy that he has left. They worry that the stone will prevent them from expressing their caring through this physical act, the ritual of anointment.

A stone covering a tomb is a kind of blockage; it stops anyone from moving forward. And it also stops anything from coming out. Tombs themselves contained symbolic meaning for Ancient Near Eastern peoples. Their ancestors had often designed tombs as “wombs” to give rebirth to the dead. Even though a cave or cave-like tomb was associated with death, it was also identified with the womb of Mother Earth. “Tomb” and “womb” share a common linguistic root. The Greek *tumbos* and the Latin *tumulus* come from *tumere*, to swell, to be pregnant. So, these dark holes in the earth symbolized birth and regeneration. (*The Women’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*)

What are we to make of the stone being rolled away from the tomb? With the removal of the stone, the womb of Mother Earth opens. The opening is the way to birth and new life. The rolling away of the stone reawakens hope.

The women were well aware that giving birth was hard work. It would take a force larger than themselves to open the tomb, Mother Earth’s womb. But there comes a time in every labor when the new life cannot be contained any longer and must come forth. Like a spring that’s slow in coming, there comes a point at which nature can no longer hold back, and the new life is born.

We can think of stones as metaphors for the things in our own lives that block us from hope. Stones like the distrust we have of our own capabilities; I wonder, how many of us underestimate what we are capable of? Stones like looking at everything that goes wrong instead taking time to appreciate our many successes, however small. Stones like our blindness to the beauty and wonder of the world all around us. Stones like fear of failure – or fear of success! What are the stones that

are blocking something in your life that is waiting to be born? And what force will it take to roll away these stones? For something new to be born?

Every birth is also a transformation. As James Broughton wrote, “Nothing perishes; nothing survives; everything transforms!” And when the three women see that the stone has been removed and that Jesus’ body is gone, something happens to their love for their spiritual leader. They can no longer express their love physically, by anointing him. This upsets them very much.

Someone who recently attended a funeral told me how the wife, who had been married to the deceased man for over 50 years, hugged and caressed his body in the open casket. And when the time came to close it, she cried hysterically and had to be pulled away from her dead husband. I can only imagine how painful that must have been.

I imagine not unlike the pain that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome feel, in being confronted with the reality that they will never again be able to touch the body of the one they have loved. They instead find in the tomb a man in white. He’s a messenger who tells them not to be afraid. But they’re only human. They can’t help it. These women are overwhelmed with grief and all they want to do is to be with the body of that person who has meant so much to them. And now they can’t even do that. They’re forced to acknowledge that Jesus is no longer with them in a physical way. A major transformation has taken place. A radical change, a transformation, is almost always jarring, and scary.

But they are told to move on, to where they will find their beloved teacher. They will come to understand that the spiritual and ethical truths he taught, the inspiration of his life, would not, could not, remain hidden in a tomb. His passion for right and peaceful living, his invitation to so transform society in such a way that the hardships of poverty, illness and cruelty would no longer dominate and distort the powerful and central reality of love—these truths remained and were very much alive in those whose lives he had touched.

During this Easter season and the return of spring, let us remove the stones that block us from transformation –from life to death to new life. James Broughton encourages us to move forward in spite of everything:

“Shake out your qualms. Shake up your dreams... You are closer to glory leaping an abyss than upholstering a rut... Walk toward clarity. At every crossroad, be prepared to bump into wonder.”

May we be open to the possibilities of change and transformation. And may we have faith that ultimately, love prevails and life is good.