

## Sermon Transcript

### “Life Wants to Live”

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My mother-in-law, Vicky, teaches third grade. She is an excellent teacher, somewhat like the character of Mrs. Frizzle in the *Magic School Bus* books. Vicky is an avid naturalist and, whenever possible, she brings life to her classroom.

Known to her students as Mrs. Schwartz, she brings caterpillars to the classroom so the children can watch them emerge from their chrysalises rather than simply read about the process from a book. They watch real tadpoles transform into real frogs. Her students dissect squid, and they dissect owl pellets, too. One year, Mrs. Schwartz and her colleague Mrs. Weeks had six anole lizards in their classes for the children to learn about reptiles and the food chain.

Now, the lizards needed to eat—in fact, that was a key part of the food-chain lesson. These particular types of lizards like to eat crickets. So, Vicky and her colleague ordered a supply of crickets. Soon thereafter, a box of 200 crickets arrived from Carolina Biological Company.

Vicky and her friend waited until the school was nearly empty, so they could open the box without exciting the children—and without losing the fast-jumping crickets in the commotion that would certainly ensue. When the time was right, they opened the box.

The two teachers were very disappointed to find that the crickets had not survived the journey. They thought that they lost their money—and worse yet, the lizards had no dinner! They put the dead crickets in the trash cans, where the custodian would soon remove them, and they went to finish grading their papers and tidying their adjoining classrooms.

About 45 minutes later, Vicky heard a rustling in the trash can. As soon as she could look over, the crickets came to life, jumping out of the trash can tomb, and into the classroom! Quickly, they were jumping everywhere!

She called out to her friend, and the two of them started hopping like mad trying to catch the crickets that by now had started hopping down the hallway of the school.

Resurrection!

Apparently, the crickets had been chilled so they would be dormant during shipping. After about an hour, they had warmed to room temperature and came back to life from their cold sleep. Vicky and her friend managed to catch some of the crickets, but many of the 200 made their way from the trashcan and wandered, hopping throughout the classroom and the school. They continued to live. For many months afterwards Vicky heard chirp, chirp, chirp, while teaching.

A reminder: life wants to live.

Like the crickets, many people may be taken for dead in the middle of their lives. All of us will experience tragedy; all of us experience deep pain.

And, all of us will experience what UU Minister Max Coots, calls “the little deaths” before our physical death. He writes

It's the little deaths before the final time I fear.  
 The blasé shrug that quietly replaces excited curiosity,  
 The cynic-sneer that takes the place of innocence,  
 The soft-sweet odor of success that overcomes the sense of sympathy,  
 The self-betrayals that rob us of our will to trust,  
 The ridicule of vision, the barren blindness to what was once our sense of beauty—  
 These are deaths that come so quietly we do not know when we died.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we must be rigorously honest to face our dyings. Often, we can't do it alone. The gospel asks, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" We need one another to help us roll away the stone, to face our tombs. It's only when we allow ourselves to enter into the deaths of our lives that we open the door for new life. Living exacts the cost of loss, but with every loss comes the possibility for a new future.

This is the Easter story: the seed sprouts from the dung-heap, and the spirit of the prophet rises from the grave. Resurrection is the eternal flow of death to life, as our planet renews itself, like a mighty ship righting herself after a wave. It's the "wild greening from dry bulb, the sour alchemy of rot, a rusty handprint of lichen."<sup>2</sup> Resurrection is the crickets awakening; it's when we face our failures; and we try to live again. And perhaps, more importantly, it's the faith that such resurrection is possible that makes it so. But in the midst of our dying, this is no easy matter: "I believe, Lord, help mine unbelief."

It took rigorous honesty for him to face his dying. He didn't see it for a long time, in fact, not many people did at first. He was 22 and already a veteran of foreign wars.<sup>3</sup> He returned home imagining that he would head vast enterprises and revel in worldly success. Setting to prove that he was important, he and his wife, Lois, roared off on a motorcycle and sidecar to find their fortune.

He took a position on Wall Street, which nurtured his frequent drinking. He lost everything in the stock market crash of 1929, but escaped to the home of a generous friend in Canada, where he and his wife continued to live in their accustomed style. But his drinking caught up with him—his friend let him go. He and Lois went to live off of the charity of his in-laws. Soon, he needed three bottles of gin just to get through the day. He was climbing into his tomb.

Things got worse. They lost the house. The in-laws became sick and died. He had another promising business opportunity, but went on a bender and lost all of his prospects. He asked himself, "Where is my resolve? Am I crazy?" This cycle happened again and again and again. He would steal from his wife's "slender purse," and descended into madness, having to sleep on a lower floor so he wouldn't jump out the window to end his life. He was "an unemployable drunk with a disdain for religion."<sup>4</sup>

He went into rehab, and fared very well. He was sober for over three months. He started to make some money. But then again, he drank once more. Eventually, the doctor told Lois that he had about a year to live before he died of the disease of alcoholism. He was suffering so much; he welcomed the idea of an end. Fear kept him sober for a while, but that inevitable first drink took him again. It seemed that the stone was now sealed, and he was unable to roll it back on his own, and he had resigned himself to die.

One day, as he sat planning if he had enough gin to keep him until morning, the phone rang. It was a school friend. He invited him over, hoping to have drinking company—and acceptance—from an old drinking buddy, Ebby.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Coats, in *Beyond Absence*, ed. Edward Searl. Boston: Skinner House Publishing, 2006, 26.

<sup>2</sup> From Kim Garcia, *Eager*.

<sup>3</sup> The following story is based upon the account as described in "Bill's Story," in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc., 2001, pp 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/wilson01\\_OLD.html](http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/wilson01_OLD.html)

That night, he got acceptance and company—but not what he expected. Ebby was sober. Ebby simply said, “I’ve got religion.” He was aghast, but curious, because Ebby, too, had been pronounced incurable by the doctors; and had admitted complete defeat. And it was there—in recognizing the empty tomb that new life sprung forth. Ebby was the person who first budged the stone from his tomb.

Some of you may know this story; in fact it may have budged your own tombstone. This is the story of Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is now over 100,000 groups strong, and is the foundation for many other successful 12-step programs.

Life wants to live!

Like the women in the Gospel, we might be terribly frightened when we find the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and know only that we have to search for life again, heaven knows where.

Resurrection happens when we see that the tomb is really empty and we decide to look for life elsewhere. When we emerge, blinking our weary eyes in the bright sun, it’s then that we can be sustained by our belief that life indeed wants to live. We have to act before we see, and perhaps this is why “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”<sup>5</sup>

We are blessed when we have faith that can propel us out from the empty tomb and into the world.

We may have to look for a really long time without finding much life. And I can’t guarantee we’ll find it. We all know that resurrection doesn’t always come. What appears dead often actually is dead. Yet, often this knowledge blinds us to the fact that resurrection *is* possible. I can guarantee that if we leave the tomb, we’ll be out living in the world.

Life wants to live.

We spend a lot of time as Unitarian Universalists distinguishing who we are not: few of us believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus, some of us have trouble with this language even when used metaphorically. This makes Easter complex for us. Many of sit betwixt and between, like philosopher Simone Weil, at the intersection of the cross: at the intersection of everything that is Christianity and everything that is not.

When we need spiritual rebirth, we may prefer to think of the Egyptian Goddess Isis lovingly resurrecting Osiris from the his death in the Nile River, of the Babylonian god of the harvest Tammuz, who died young and was rescued from the underworld by his love Ishtar,<sup>6</sup> or of Persephone and her pomegranate seeds, of the Phoenix, or of Odin hanging from the tree, waiting for a new life of wisdom. These stories are relevant: as the Greek statesman, Solon said, “myth is not about something that never happened. It is about something that happens again and again.”<sup>7</sup>

Life wants to live. Again and again.

In our attempt to distinguish ourselves from the religious right, we may relegate the Christian resurrection as irrelevant. But it’s more than relevant: it happens again and again.

We are a creedless faith. So,

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<sup>5</sup> John 20:29

<sup>6</sup> Joan Goodwin, “Will There Always Be an Easter,” *Celebrating Easter and Spring*, ed. Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris, Cambridge: The Anne Miniver Press, 2000, pp 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/exodus/kristasjournal.shtml>, accessed April 7, 2007.

- you belong here if you consider Jesus a prophet and rabbi,
- you belong here if you consider him your Lord and Savior,
- you belong here if you believed he died and was buried, period,
- and you belong here if you believe something miraculous happened there in the Holy Land 2000 years ago.

But here, we *all* believe in life *before* death.

The question is: will you rise again?

Will you experience resurrection after the inevitable pain that your life holds? To quote the writer Madeleine L'Engle, "I believe in the truth of the resurrection, if not the fact of it." I believe in the truth of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, 2000 years ago and I believe in the truth of the resurrection 2000 years later, today, right here, in this holy land because I've seen it.

Life wants to live.

Church is where we come for resurrection. The double-doors on the church are intentionally wide enough to accommodate a casket and its pallbearers. Every time we walk through those doors we come into the church in our dyings—large and small. We come into the church with the hope that we will walk back out of those doors changed, for those double-doors are also wide enough to us to leave, twice as joyful. This is the work of the church.

A singing group called "The Resurrection" was scheduled to sing at a church. When a big, Minnesota snowstorm postponed the performance, the minister fixed the outside sign to read, "The Resurrection is postponed."

Friends, let us not postpone our resurrection. Eastre is the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn, where the sun rises in the East. With every dawn may we remember that "What happened once upon a time happens all the time."<sup>8</sup>

Eastertide is

when we choose innocence to again replace our cynicism,  
it's our will to trust despite betrayal,  
it's the hopeless addict finding new life,  
it's the curiosity that again replaces the blasé shrug  
it's the crickets awakening,  
it's the "space-seeking species springing up after fire,"  
it's all of these,  
it's you and me  
resurrecting as though we took no lesson from destruction  
but to begin again  
twice as joyful.

May it be so for all of us.

A happy and blessed Easter to you all.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Sandy Sasso, as quoted in <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/exodus/kristasjournal.shtml>, as accessed April 7, 2007.