

Rolling Away the Stone
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Sometimes, the darkness in the tomb of the soul is a comfort, Sara Moores Campbell says; sometimes it is an escape. Sometimes it prepares us for experience; sometimes it insulates us from life. And sometimes in the tomb of the soul we meet a deeper darkness; sometimes we aren't sure if we can face the light or even if there is light outside to see. Sometimes we don't know if we can roll away the stone.

That's when stories of new life, of hope beyond what we think is possible, become so important. Stories of life stronger than death, like the Easter story, can give us the hope and courage we need to reach for the new possibilities within us, among us, and all around us in this living world.

I want to invite you to travel in time with me for a moment, back to an Easter morning in a Unitarian Universalist congregation I attended while I was in seminary. Like many U.U. Easter services, this one has been treading the line between interpreting Easter as a festival of Spring and life's renewal, and as a festival directly celebrating Jesus' Resurrection. The minister pauses in her sermon, looking out over the congregation. She's making a point about that feeling I'm describing, the feeling that all hope is gone, that moment when you need something to tell you there are still new possibilities, more than you can imagine in that moment. She calls that something a Resurrection faith.

"Let me tell you about a Resurrection faith," she says. She takes a flower bulb from under the pulpit. "Many people will say that this is what Easter is about," she says. "They say this gnarled, dead-looking thing will become a living plant with a beautiful flower. But that's not what I mean by a Resurrection faith. This isn't dead. Nothing impossible happens when this grows."

She reaches under the pulpit, and brings out a piece of Plexiglas and a hammer. Setting the bulb on the plastic, she raises the hammer with a grim look and smashes it down on the bulb. Pieces fly out into the front rows of the congregation. "Now it's dead," she says, picking up a piece of pulp. "A Resurrection faith believes that *this* can be brought back to life."

I'm sitting in the second or third row, trying to get my mind around the fact that she's just killed something in the pulpit to make a point. I feel like my own naturalist faith has been assaulted. I realize that I'm glaring. So I look down, trying to get my face to behave, and see a chunk of the bulb about the size of a fingertip on the floor under the chair in front of me. Without any real sense of what I'm doing, I pick it up, wrap it in a tissue, and slip it in my pocket. Now I'm suddenly calm. A few hours later I plant the scrap in a flower pot, not really thinking about anything except that I have an immense need to treat it with respect. It feels like a burial.

In about three weeks there's a green sliver of a leaf pushing up from the little pot.

That *is* what I mean by a Resurrection faith.

For some, the only power great enough to be called Holy would be a power that could make a dead thing live. For some, death is the enemy; when we die, death wins. Life has been defeated. For them, only a literal return to life against the laws of nature is miracle enough to defeat death.

For me, the ordinary, everyday power of life is miracle enough. Death ends every human life, ends every life of every kind we know. What makes life powerful is not that it can't be destroyed; it can. What's powerful about life is that it can create more life. Death can't do that. Destroying life is never creative. Death doesn't beget life, ever. Life begets life. Life doesn't "win" by refusing to die. Life defeats death and destruction by creating new life, weaving new connections, sparking new creativity, releasing new possibilities. Every single moment of every single day.

The Spring festivals that have been held all over the earth throughout human history are celebrations of life. We call them fertility festivals sometimes, but it's more than fertility we're celebrating. It's life, it's creativity, it's growth and nurture and adaptation.

There are a lot of stories out there about why people dye eggs at Easter and hide them. Whatever the historic reason behind the custom, the egg is a symbol of life. It tells a story about how life continues, but also about how life changes. Nowadays, you may be pretty certain that what cracks its way out of a chicken's egg is going to be another chicken. And yet the egg is far older than the chicken. The egg's hatchlings have been aquatic creatures, and reptiles, and apparently, brightly colored flying feathered lizards—and after millions of years, the earliest of chickens, who kept right on laying those eggs that are now so nice and reliable about hatching into more chickens.

All around the world, some of us paint eggs for our Spring festivals. Some of us wear garlands or flowers; some of us deck our halls with daffodils and azaleas and forsythia; some of us throw handfuls of brightly colored dyes over each other. Some of us dress in new clothes, clean the house, visit relatives, jump over symbolic fires. We celebrate growth, and flowering, and the joining together of lives to create new life.

There is nothing watered-down, or frivolous, or overly romantic about a celebration that finds meaning in something as simple and simply powerful as the bulb of a tulip or a narcissus. This is no pale substitute for some more important miracle. The life we can see springing out all around us right now is the "Life that maketh all things new." We greet the green blade that rises from the barren field. We sing out praises to what the poet calls the "force that through the green stem drives the rose." There is no power greater than this.

The power of life to regenerate itself is miracle enough for me.

Sometimes, destruction seems terribly powerful. Just this week, forces of chaos and death have thrust themselves into the world in acts of violence as far away as Brussels, Nigeria, Istanbul, and Baghdad; forces of fear and hatred have made themselves felt as close as Raleigh. Things may look hopeless, and sometimes they are—if hope only means that things turn out the way we

want them to. Lives and connections and possibilities seem lost, and sometimes they are. Yet even in times when death, or fear, or hatred seem to “win,” their triumph is never final. Sooner or later they come to the end of their course, and die in their turn. Winning isn’t power. Creativity is power. Love and life are power.

There is always, always another new possibility waiting.

When you’re caught in the tomb of the soul, when the troubles of the world or of your own life seem like too much to face, when you only want to hide in the dark or even when you think that there’s no way out—how much miracle do you need, to tell you that you can roll away the stone? What is enough to lead you to reach out for a possibility you may not even be able to imagine?

It is Easter, so let’s consider the life of the human being named Jesus. Whatever you think actually happened in the Resurrection story, there is no denying that his life has vastly overflowed the boundaries of his single lifetime. The ripples of that life have birthed and nurtured and fed countless new lives, lives transformed by an encounter with just the reflection, the memory of that life, in a book or in the life of someone admired and beloved. The reflection of that life still flows forward, even when it is only glimpsed through the distorting lens of religious institutions which have mostly missed the point of Jesus’ life and his teachings for two thousand years.

Whether or not you believe that Jesus died and came back to life, how extraordinary, how miraculous that overflowing life is! And how much more wonderful it is to know, as our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors taught, that each and every one of our lives has that very same possibility. Every one of us can roll away the stone and step into a more abundant life.

How much more miracle do we need than that?