

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 8 April 2007

***Look Out and See!***

The Reverend Victoria Safford

\$2.00 two dollars

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
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**CALL TO WORSHIP**

And all of a sudden, without warning,  
though we'd long expected it, in our bones, in our blood,  
all of a sudden, without warning,  
the morning wind blew gentler.  
The white cold moon burned warmer.  
Our lake ice cracked  
and robins flew out, freed, onto the muddy grass.

All of a sudden, without warning,  
Something led us out with an outstretched arm and a mighty hand,  
Something promised us rebirth, the resurrection of our hoping.  
The rain rained down wet and clear, not thick and white,  
and without warning, winter washed away  
and we were free.

Spirit of life and love,  
moving in every living thing, and in us,  
astonish us this morning.  
Startle us.  
Stun us.  
Shock us.  
Shake us from our sleeping.  
For we are winter-weary and disbelieving  
and our eyes have forgotten what surprises look like,  
and we are ready, we are more than ready, to open them and be amazed.

## READING

*from Parker Palmer, Quaker teacher*

There is hard truth to be told:

Before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful that it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created.

I love the fact that the word *humus* – the decayed vegetable matter that feeds the roots of plants – comes from the same root ... as the word *humility*. It is a blessed etymology. It helps us understand that the humiliating events of life, the events that leave “mud on your face” or that “make your name mud,” may create the fertile soil in which something new can grow.

Spring teaches us to look into the mud for the green stems of possibility: for the intuitive hunch that may turn into a larger insight; for the glance or touch that may thaw a frozen relationship; for the stranger’s act of kindness that makes the world seem hospitable again.

Late spring is a great give-away of blooming beyond all necessity and reason - done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it. The gift of life, which seemed to be so withdrawn in winter, has been give in once again, and nature, rather than hoarding it, gives it all away. There is another paradox here, known in all the wisdom traditions: if you receive a gift, you keep it alive not by clinging to it but by passing it along.

Perhaps we are meant to yield to spring’s flamboyance. From autumn’s profligate seedlings to the great spring give-away, nature teaches a steady lesson: if we want to save our lives, we must spend them out with passionate abandon.

**READING***Wendell Berry*

## Look Out

Come to the window, look out, and see  
the valley turning green in remembrance  
of all springs past and to come, the woods  
perfecting with immortal patience  
the leaves that are the work of all of time,  
the sycamore whose white limbs shed  
the history of a man's life with their old bark,  
the river quivering under the morning's breath  
like the touched skin of a horse, and you will see  
also the shadow cast upon it by fire, the war  
that lights its way by burning the earth.

Come to your windows, people of the world,  
look out at whatever you see wherever you are,  
and you will see dancing upon it that shadow.  
You will see that your place, wherever it is,  
your house, your garden, your shop, your forest, your farm,  
bears the shadow of its destruction by war  
which is the economy of greed which is plunder  
which is the economy of wrath which is fire.  
The Lords of War sell the earth to buy fire,  
they sell the water and air of life to buy fire.  
They are little men grown great by willingness  
to drive whatever exists into its perfect absence.  
Their intention to destroy any place is solidly founded

upon their willingness to destroy every place.

Every household of the world is at their mercy,  
the households of the farmer and the otter and the owl  
are at their mercy. They have no mercy.  
Having hate, they can have no mercy.  
Their greed is the hatred of mercy.  
Their pockets jingle with the small change of the poor.  
Their power is the willingness to destroy  
everything for knowledge which is money  
which is power which is victory  
which is ashes sown by the wind.

Leave your windows and go out, people of the world,  
go into the streets, go into the fields, go into the woods  
and along the streams. Go together, go alone.  
Say no to the Lords of War which is Money  
which is Fire. Say no by saying yes  
to the air, to the earth, to the trees,  
yes to the grasses, to the rivers, to the birds  
and the animals and every living thing, yes  
to the small houses, yes to the children. Yes.

## MEDITATION

### **Look out and see!**

What really happened, do you think, in that garden graveyard 2000-something years ago, where was buried without ceremony the broken body of another outspoken, inconvenient rabble-rouser, tortured by the state, executed as an example, whom they hoped would be forgotten? Whatever you believe about Jesus and the resurrection, or about the kind of God that intervenes (or doesn't) in human history, or the kind that intervenes in and deeply cares (or doesn't care) about our little human lives, whatever you have decided you believe about all this, there is no question that he was not forgotten. How did that occur? What did those women see, if women there were, if they saw or heard or said anything at all? The true facts of what really happened (which we can never know), and the way each gospel writer rendered these slender facts, give us at least five different variations, each of which has been open to thousands of interpretations over thousands of years by millions of Christians and millions and millions of others. All we can really know is that almost immediately after the execution of Jesus, people began to tell stories. As happens almost always when someone beloved dies, people began to make stories.

Marilynn Robinson is a novelist and in one place she has a character reflect on these things, perhaps speaking her own idea as a liberal Christian. She writes,

*Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes. And while He was on earth He mended families. He gave Lazarus back to his mother, and to the centurion he gave his daughter again. He even restored the severed ear of the soldier who came to arrest Him – a fact that allows us to hope the resurrection will reflect a considerable attention to detail. Yet this was no more than tinkering. Being man He felt the pull of death, and being God He must have wondered more than we do what it would be like... And when He did die, it was sad - such a young man, so full of promise, and His mother wept and His friends could not believe the loss, and the story spread everywhere and the mourning would not be comforted, until He was so sharply lacked and so powerfully remembered that his friends felt Him beside them as they walked along the road, and*

*saw someone cooking fish on the shore and knew it to be Him, and sat down to supper with Him, all wounded as he was. There is so little to remember of anyone – an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with ... habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long.*

Somehow the sense of loss became articulate in memories, and memories became stories which, for some, became matters of literal, incontrovertible history which could be then and still are twisted for power and profit; stories which, for others, were not held literally true, but began to give shape a different truth, a kind of meaning which would be enough to go on till their own lives ended, and enough to pass on to their children. That meaning was very simple and very complicated: love one another. Turn the other cheek. Seek more to forgive than to be forgiven. Question authority, and wealth and power and conventional doctrine and any standing order that stands to subvert justice. Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone. Spend your time, your money, your energy, your passion – spend out your life - with lepers, beggars, children, women, the old, the sick, the sinner, the prisoner, whomever is an outcast, whomever society currently despises or ignores, “the least of these.” Sell what you have and give to the poor. Love the sacred mystery, and whatever proves beautiful, true, and good, with heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbors as yourself, and remember that the neighborhood is very, very large. The stories helped them remember that teaching, the kind of people and community they were trying to become, and over time grief gave way to celebration because that was a bright, hopeful, radically life-affirming vision. We don’t know what happened at the tomb on Easter morning, nor if there was a tomb on Easter morning; we only know that afterwards, people began to tell a bright story.

*Look out, says Wendell Berry. Come to your window, look out and see the valley turning green in remembrance of all springs past and to come. It is a beautiful world, if you open your eyes – but if you open them honestly, he says, you will also see, upon your house, your garden, your shop, your forest, your farm, the shadow of war and destruction, the shadow of plunder and greed. This is not a new circumstance, but sometimes lately it can feel to us as if that shadow is*

ever more deeply darkening. If you really look with open eyes, this gorgeous, broken world could break your heart, break your spirit right down into dust. He says, “Look out and see,” and then

*Leave your windows and go out, people of the world,*

*Go together, go alone.*

*Say no to the Lords of War...*

*Say no by saying yes...*

To me that is the central tenet of the ancient Easter story, that somehow despite their grief and despite the terrors of the time, some numbers of people began saying yes to a radical vision of compassionate human community, even though their teacher had been killed. I think it was not about the teacher, but the teaching. Over twenty centuries, that vision has been bought and sold, hijacked and corrupted, but still the essence of it stands. It shines through many wisdom traditions, and people, even us, are still struggling to say yes to it.

To me it is the central tenet of the Passover story, the story of the Exodus, wherein a small community said no to slavery and bondage, said no by saying yes to a life they had never known but could imagine. They said yes to that impossible idea by walking right out toward it, making their freedom out of memory and imagination.

*Leave your windows and go out, people of the world,  
go into the streets, go into the fields, go into the woods  
and along the streams. Go together, go alone.*

*Say no by saying yes  
to the air, to the earth, to the trees,*

*yes to the grasses, to the rivers, to the birds  
and the animals and every living thing,  
yes to the small houses, yes to the children,*

yes

It's a matter of deciding what stories you're going to hold onto, what teaching you'll remember and pass on, what companions you need to walk with you, what beauty you'll recognize, what world you will live in, as long as you live. So often we say no by saying no, in fear or bitterness or anger, all of which are justified on any given day, but none of them the stuff you can build a future fit for children on.

*Question, to be answered in silence and speaking:*

*What have you said yes to in your life? What do you say yes to now?*

*(After the people speak...)* Here is a benediction, adapted from a litany written by Barbara Pescan:

*For the resilience of Earth and its creatures.*

*For these children who will go on to save what we cannot.*

*For the ordinary tenacity of plants and of people.*

*For the center of the universe, which is everywhere, not the least in the human heart.*

*For love that survives anger, and winter, and despair and sorrow and even death.*

*For love that persists*

*For peace in the heart, and calm that is the seed in the dark.*

*For endings that are beginnings, for beginnings that are endings.*

*For the circle, the spiral, the web, the egg, the orbit, the center,*

*For the seed, the flower, the fruit, the opening, the death, the release, the seed...*

*Amen – we are going on.*

*Alleluia - It is going on.*

*Amen and blessed be.*

**CLOSING WORDS**

**from a poem by Joyce Sutphen**

*One day, something very old happened again.*

*The green came back to the branches,  
settling like leafy birds on the highest twigs;*

*the ground broke open as dark as coffee beans.*

...

*It was as good as ever:*

*the air was filled with the scent of lilacs  
and cherry blossoms sounded their long whistle down the track.*

*It was some glad morning.*

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The passage from Marilynne Robinson is from her novel, *Housekeeping*.