

Don't Let the Stone Stop You

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
March 23, 2008*

HYMN 73, Chant for the Seasons [Spring]

Minister. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere; I'm the minister of this congregation. A little research will show you that the early Christian church co-opted many pagan holidays and gave them new names and new reasons for being a holiday. St. Valentine was probably created

to replace many pagan gods of love and sexuality. Christmas used to be a winter solstice festival in many ancient cultures; the double holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls Day used to be Samhain in ancient Ireland.

Pope Gregory the Great, for whom chant and plain song is often called "Gregorian," and who adjusted our calendar to account for the movement of the earth, sent a mission of his monks to the end of the earth—actually to England—for the purpose of spreading the gospel among the Anglo-Saxons. This was at the end of the 6th century.

The leader of the expedition was a timid monk named Augustine, who tried repeatedly to get out of his commission, since he believed that the savages would eat him when he arrived. Once he landed and was accepted by the barbarians, he found himself raised to the office of bishop and soon began to administer the Diocese of Canterbury.

Gregory wrote one letter after another admonishing Augustine not to prefer Roman customs to English ones. "My brother," he wrote, "Customs are not to be cherished for the sake of a place, but places are to be cherished for the sake of what is good about them." According to the pope, there was no need to tear down pagan temples—just remove the idols and replace them with decent Christian images. Nor was there any need to outlaw the old festivals or the customs that accompanied them. Just baptize them a bit.

By such encouragement were the customs of the northern barbarians allowed to enter the European mainstream. Easter, with fertility symbols of rabbits and eggs was taken from the Saxons.

So one holiday survived and it is Easter. It survived in theme and in story. To be honest, I cannot think of a more important and enduring experience of life, than the return of spring, the growing season. The turning of the earth, the return of warmth—that is in our bones.

The word Easter is derived from an ancient Germanic name for a

goddess whose feast day was celebrated on the vernal equinox, which was the day before yesterday. The vernal equinox marks the beginning of spring, when people celebrate the resurrection of the earth and embrace the promise of warmth in the future. To mark this event, let's sing the verse marked "Spring" from Hymn 73, "Chant for the Seasons." Steve, will you play it once to remind us of the melody?

ANNOUNCEMENTS ⊕ GREETINGS

Eric. My name is Eric Papendorp and I am treasurer of this congregation.

Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode," childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery; after the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

Our worship service will begin shortly, but here is one important announcement: This church participates in the **Interfaith Hospitality Network**. Beginning today and going for a week, this church will host three or four homeless families as they struggle to regain their place in society. There is one position that we have been unable to fill and that's an overnight host for Friday. Please see Charlotte Davis or me if you can help.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to receive weekly announcements via e-mail.

To do that, please see Chris in the office. I invite you now to extend a hand of warmth to two or three people near you. So please rise now and greet your neighbors. [*Meet & Greet*]

[*Chime*] For music, Steve chose the music of the Unitarian composer, Bela Bartok.

PRELUDE

Bartok: Dance in Bulgarian Rhythm No. 3

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

THE EASTER STORY

Today is Easter. And so I wanted to tell you the Easter story. The Easter story is about Jesus and what happened to him in the last days of his life. Jesus lived about two thousand years ago in the part of the world known today as Israel.

Jesus was a very spiritual man and he knew a lot about religion, and he thought that he should tell other people what he knew. So Jesus spent the last three years of his life telling people what he knew about leading a spiritual life and working to establish justice.

One thing Jesus knew was that God loved everyone and that God wants us to love everyone. So Jesus said to love the people who are hard to love: people that are sick or poor, or people that do the jobs no one else wants to do. Jesus even said to love the people who don't love us: our enemies.

Another thing Jesus knew, was that God sees all people as equal, and God wants us to see everyone as equal, too. So Jesus taught that we

should treat everyone equally. Jesus said that if you have enough for your own needs, you should help other people so they could be happy, too.

Jesus loved everyone, even poor people and sick people, and other people who were the outcasts of society, like thieves and prostitutes and lepers. He made them feel very good about their lives and he began to attract followers. Jesus had courage. He criticized people who weren't doing all they could to establish justice and make the world a better place and he was especially critical of rich and powerful people, like mayors & governors, the police, and ministers. Jesus thought they were not helping people in the way they should.

Jesus was especially critical of the religious leaders; the ministers, the rabbis and the lawyers. Now Jesus emphasized only one part of religious practice, the part that says we ought to love one another. He disregarded all those laws that told people how to take a bath and how to eat supper and who your friend could be. He thought all those laws were interesting, but they didn't help people much. He said it was more important to be compassionate than it was to be holy.

The trouble was that all the lawyers, ministers and rabbis disagreed. They thought it was more important to be holy than it was to be compassionate. They were afraid that Jesus might destroy religion if enough people listened to him. And they worried that if religion was destroyed then the whole nation would be destroyed and the people would be lost.

One week before he died, Jesus came to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the biggest city in Israel. It was the city where the lawyers, ministers and rabbis met and built a big temple. And it was the capital city, the place where the governor lived. And during the week, Jesus gathered a crowd together and started saying the same critical things he had been saying before. Of course this made all the lawyers, ministers and rabbis—and now the governor—very angry, and they decided Jesus had to be stopped.

On Thursday, while Jesus was celebrating Passover with some of his friends, he was arrested, and tried as a traitor. Even though Jesus hadn't really said or done anything wrong, they found him guilty of being a troublemaker and they sentenced him to death.

On Friday, Jesus was executed in the same way that any criminal would be executed: Jesus was tied on a wooden cross and left to hang there until he died. And he died that way, which was a very painful way to die.

Some of his friends came in the evening and they took his body but they couldn't bury him right away because it was already evening and the next day was Saturday, which, was a holy day and on that holy day, you're not supposed to do any work, not even bury your friend. So instead they laid Jesus' body in a cave and they closed the entrance to the cave with a huge boulder.

On Sunday morning, they came back to prepare his body for burial, but they discovered that the huge boulder that had closed the entrance to the cave had been rolled away. And when they looked inside the cave, Jesus' body wasn't there.

And then there was one more surprise. Sitting inside the cave was a young man, and he said, "Don't be afraid. I know that you come looking for Jesus, but he isn't here. Go and tell your friends what has happened and tell them that they will see Jesus again."

So that's the Easter story. Now some people believe that the last part of the story is really true. They believe that Jesus really died and then became alive again for a time. For those people, Easter is a happy day because it shows that Jesus was so powerful that he could overcome anything, even death. These people believe that if they ask Jesus for help he will use his power to help them through the difficult parts of their lives.

Other people don't believe that the last part of the story is really true.

They believe that when Jesus died, he really died, just like any other person. But whatever you believe, Easter reminds us that the important thing about Jesus is not how he died, but how he lived. I believe that Jesus is important because of all the wonderful things he had to say and his words, his ideas and his stories will never die as long as we remember them and tell them to each other.

HYMN 61, Lo, the Earth Awakes Again

OFFERTORY

Bartok: Dance in Bulgarian Rhythm No. 2

The Offertory has two parts today.

First, you may know that once a month, this church donates the Sunday collection to an outside agency working to make the world a better place. We'll do that this morning and at the request of Nancy Anderson, the recipient is Chattanooga Cares.

Chattanooga Cares was organized in 1986 and the agency employs 19 staff members and uses more than 200 trained volunteers to provide resources to anyone affected by AIDS. The agency treats every client with dignity and respect, neither condemning nor condoning behaviors that increases the risk for HIV infection. They strive to be the leader in providing AIDS resources for people in this area affected by HIV and AIDS, and they emphasize prevention as the best tool for fighting HIV infection. As do we all, they look forward to the day when a cure for AIDS is found, and they can close their doors.

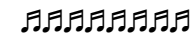
Chattanooga Cares sponsors the Strides of March, which will be Sunday, March 30, 2008 in Coolidge Park. It's a 3 mile walk through scenic downtown Chattanooga designed to promote awareness of HIV throughout the Tennessee Valley. Individuals, churches and any other community groups are encouraged to form teams and raise

necessary funds for the clients and programs of Chattanooga Cares. And you can register for the Strides of March by using one of the brochures that you'll find in the fellowship area.

For the second part, the ushers have with them pledge cards for our stewardship campaign. If you have not made your pledge of support for next year, please do so this morning. Merely put your name and address on the card, the amount of your pledge and sign it. If you have questions about the stewardship campaign, you can ask Leslie Walters or David Reed. Daidee Springer can tell you the amount of your last pledge.

After you complete the card, you can put it in the plate or give it to Daidee, David, Leslie or Chris in the office. So we'll collect the offering now for the support of Chattanooga Cares and we'll collect pledge cards for the support and ministry of this church. If you have a check for your current pledge, please be sure it's marked that way. As always, the Dolores Wood-Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items, and the collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of personal joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Steve, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving. The words are in your program.

Hymn of Thanksgiving

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,

For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

I said about a year ago that I would continue to pray for peace in Iraq until the war ended. It seems now that I will be praying for a long time. Our army, navy and air force have been fighting now for five years. Some people notice improvement, some progress. From where I sit, it's hard to see progress, hard to see anything except but a long hard struggle. Many people now say we'll be in Iraq for another 10 years. For this Vietnam veteran, that's a very disheartening prospect. Still I pray for peace.

Dottie Antman's cousin, Frank Lynde died last week. The bulletin has information about his memorial service. This was hard on Dottie. Her brother died about three weeks ago, so she's feeling pretty low right now. I'm sure she'd like to hear from you.

O Thou
Who art everywhere,
many are your names.
May thy presence be with us,
may thy wisdom guide us,
in our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
and may we forgive the mistakes of others
even as we long for our own mistakes to be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
and be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live with You as our constant companion,

in every moment,
in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come;
Blessed be
Amen.

In these few moments of silence, let us hold close to our heart all those who suffer in this world, especially those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE: When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place

When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place,
We are blessed with love and amazing grace.
When our heart is in a holy place.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 28 & Mark 16

A passage now, from Christian Scriptures.

George. After the Sabbath, as the sun rose early on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salome went to the cave to anoint his body with oils and spices. As they approached the cave, it dawned on them that the stone covering the entrance would be too large for them to move and they worried that they would be unable to anoint his body. Salome said, "Who will move the stone for us?" And Mary said, "It is very large. We don't have the strength to move it by ourselves." But they continued and when they arrived at the tomb, they were amazed to see the stone moved away to one side and the cave open.

Looking inside the cave, they saw a young man dressed in white

robes that shone brighter than the noonday sun. They were terrified and turned to run away, but the young man spoke gently and reassured them. “Do not be afraid. I mean you no harm. You must be looking for the body of Jesus, but as you can see, it’s not here. He is risen and goes before you to Galilee where you should meet him. Go and tell his friends what I told you.” But his words frightened them all the more and they ran back to tell the others.

SERMON: Don’t Let the Stone Stop You

I was told once that it’s unusual for a Unitarian Universalist minister to preach about Easter. Ditto for Christmas and just about any other Christian holy day. Actually, the word wasn’t “unusual,” but *weird*. It’s weird that a Unitarian Universalist minister would preach about Easter. Why? I suppose the woman who said that to me thought Unitarian Universalist ministers were humanist or atheist or anti-theist. Certainly not *Christian*. That is, after all, the stereotype.

The person who said that to me wasn’t suggesting that I lacked the credentials or the knowledge. No, she implied that I wasn’t *allowed* to preach about Easter. As if I might taint the day with my Unitarian Universalist sermon.

Was a time I would be offended, but I’ve become accustomed to such limited understanding of religion by the supposedly pious. So I said, “Christian ministers and Catholic priests preach about my holidays all the time. I can preach about Easter.”

Perception. Prejudice. They’re stones. And to paraphrase the title of my sermon, I ain’t gonna let the stone stop me.

Truth be told I am not a Christian—in the sense that Christians use that term. I’m Christian in the same sense that I’m a Hoosier. I was born in Indiana, so that makes me a Hoosier. But I live now in Tennessee, so I’m a Volunteer. But I’m still a Hoosier. I’m a

Volusier. Or a HooVol.

Terms. Categories. They’re stones. And to invoke the title of my sermon, I ain’t gonna let the stone stop me.

The first time I preached about Easter, my sermon was exactly two sentences long. I was 87 days into my first semester in seminary and being as I was not going home for Thanksgiving, but staying in Hyde Park, I was invited along with a few other students to share Thanksgiving dinner at the home of Bill Murry, the president of the theological school. What a great opportunity, I thought. I’m gonna have dinner with the president!

So there we were, a half dozen students and Bill Murry, sitting in his parlor while his wife and mine tended to the dinner. I hafta say, the stereotypical gender assignment bothered me, but not enough that I went out to the kitchen to help. I mean I felt like I had an audience with the pope.

So the conversation drifts around to Easter, and Bill poses this question: What do you preach about at Easter? I cannot recall who answered first, but I recall my answer as if it happened yesterday. I said, “I don’t believe that Jesus came back from death. But I think his disciples felt his spirit so strongly that they believed he must still be alive.”

And Bill nodded and gestured with his thumb up, like this. I was really pleased with myself, and happy to have Bill’s approval.

The images of Easter is confusing. Little animals. Bunnies and duckies and birdies. Eggs in pastel colors. Bunnies and duckies and birdies in pastel colors. Chocolate eggs. Chocolate bunnies and duckies and birdies. Baskets. Ostentatious apparel. New hats, new shoes, new life. Resurrection Sunday; the central mystery of the Christian faith. The truth is, it’s easy to be confused about what metaphors and meanings to take from Easter, just as the kids in Mrs.

Roger's 4th grade class.

She asked her eager young students about the meaning of Easter, and the hand of a little Methodist boy shot up. "I know," he said confidently. "Easter is when we put up a pine tree and decorate it with lights, wrap presents for each other and sing lullabies to Baby Jesus."

"No," said Mrs. Rogers, "You've got Easter confused with Christmas. Does anybody else know?"

With that a little Catholic girl's hand shot up. "Easter is when you cook a turkey, watch football all day, and give thanks for all our relatives who come for dinner."

"No," said Mrs. Rogers, "Who knows the meaning of Easter?"

A little Baptist boy in the class thought he knew. "Easter is when we decorate the front of the house in American flags, go to a big parade, and shoot off fireworks all night."

"No, no, no," cried Mrs. Rogers. "Doesn't anyone know the meaning of Easter?"

Well, yes, someone did; Suzie, the Unitarian Universalist kid in the class. She raised her hand.

"Easter is when we remember that after a three year ministry in the Judean countryside, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, was put on trial by the Roman authorities for being a troublemaker, was crucified on a hill with two thieves, and finally buried in a cave."

"Yes! That's right!" cried Mrs. Rogers. But Suzie wasn't finished.

"And then after a couple of days the rock gets rolled away, Jesus

comes out and if he sees his shadow, there'll be six more weeks of winter."

It's OK if I tell religious jokes like that. I'm a minister. Those kids were kinda like stones in Mrs. Rogers' path. But she didn't let the stones stop her. I'm not sure she was satisfied with the result, but she persevered. Don't let the stone stop you.

Don't let the stone stop you. When I first heard that good advice, I lived in Chicago, when I was in theological school. There were about two dozen theological schools within commuting distance of mine. And I could register for any of their classes. So I did. In one class at the Lutheran school, I befriended a guy who had a car and offered me a ride to the train station. I could walk to the station, but it was winter. In Chicago.

On the way to the station, he had a tape playing in his car. It was an African-American evangelical minister preaching in a service at an annual convention, sort of like our Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly. And he was good. I mean this guy could preach so well that the front door of his house opened itself for him.

He had the solemn, ringing tones that people with big lungs and big throats have. He had the classical cadence that Martin Luther King Jr. had. He had the inspirational vocabulary and the powerful images. He had grace and style. Although I disagreed with his theology, I loved his preaching, and I listened to that tape several times. I stole the gist of his sermon for mine today. That's all right; preachers do that all the time. He said, "Don't let the stone stop you."

We know what a stone is, right? Here's one right here. Hard thing, made of highly compressed silica, calcium or aluminum. A stone is dangerous when it flies through the air; a stone is pretty when nature has painted it; a stone is beautiful when a million years of water has polished it.

But in the passage that George read, a stone is a burden, a challenge, a block. If a stone could talk, it would say, “Stop.” But I say don’t let the stone stop you. Mary, Martha and Salome didn’t. They walked on, even though they knew that the stone covering the entrance would be too large for them to move.

Salome said, “Who will move the stone for us?” And Mary said, “It is very large. We don’t have the strength to move it by ourselves.” But they continued and when they arrived at the tomb, they were amazed to see the stone moved away to one side and the cave open.

That stone was huge, cold, indifferent. That stone didn’t care, that stone was there and it wasn’t gonna be moved by three little old ladies on Sunday morning. But they continued, even though they had a stone, a burden, a challenge. They didn’t let the stone stop them.

And today we have stones that are huge, cold and indifferent.

When you find yourself trying to gain a toe hold on the smooth side of the mountain—bills are many, but dollars a few—don’t let the stone stop you.

When your name is scandalized and dragged through the muck, don’t let the stone stop you.

When you meet someone whose heart is cold, stony, and indifferent, love them anyhow, and don’t let the stone stop you.

When your health is failing and you’re lying on a bed of affliction, reach deep for your connection to life and to other people and don’t let the stone stop you.

When you don’t know how to finish your education because you don’t have the necessary funds, don’t let the stone stop you.

Just like you and me, the stone has a goal, you know. The stone

wants to stop you. The stone wants your marriage to flounder. The stone wants you to fail. The stone wants your family to splinter. The stone would like nothing more than you to be burdened with your job.

The stone wants to stop you from getting your education. The stone wants to stop you from being a success—that way, you can’t help anyone else. The stone wants to stop you from loving life and the stone wants to stop you from making the world a better place.

But don’t let the stone stop you. Vernice Armour didn’t.

She began life with two big stones. She’s black and she’s a woman. And having those two stones is like having a third at no extra cost. Inherit two, get one free. Now you might not think being a woman is a stone, or at least it shouldn’t be. And you might think that being black shouldn’t be a stone, but it is. And if you want to be a police officer in Tennessee, being black and being a woman are two big stones. But Vernice Armour didn’t let those two big stones stop her.

She became a Nashville police officer and the first black woman on the motorcycle squad. Then she enlisted in the Army Reserve and was commissioned as an officer. Then she joined the Marines. Then she went to flight school. And in 2003, she was recognized as the first African–American combat pilot. She said, “Acknowledge the obstacles in your path, but don’t give them power.”

Vernice Armour. Don’t let the stone stop you.

Now you might think that it’s easy for me to say, “Don’t let the stone stop you.” You might say, “Words are cheap, Jeff. The stone that’s in my path is bigger than the stone that was in Mary & Martha’s path. Easy for you to say don’t let this big stone, this big boulder this heavy burden stop me. It’s not in your path.”

So are you saying that your stone’s bigger than my stone? What’s your stone? Is it that you didn’t get promoted? Is it that you got a

bad grade? Is it that a friend or relative died? Is it drugs or alcohol? A flat tire? Are you beginning to question yourself? Lost your lover? What's your stone?

Sure, your stone's big. Sure, it's intimidating. Sure, it's heavy. It's a stone! But you are not alone! Ask for help with your stone. Reach out. Offer to help others with their stones. Get together; make a connection and don't let the stone stop you.

The truth is that it's not easy for me to say, "Don't let the stone stop you." It's hard, cuz sometimes when I say it to myself, I don't listen. Crazy as it sounds, it seems easier to stumble over that stone, to fall down and hit my head on another stone. Crazy as it sounds, sometimes I let that stone stop me cuz I'm tired of kickin' stones outta my path. I get discouraged, thinkin' about all the stones in my way, all the burdens I have, all the headwinds blowin' me down.

So I'm here to tell you that kickin' that stone outta the way is not easy and I know it. But it's better than lettin' the stone kick you outta the way. The stone has a goal—to stop you—but it ain't got no power except what you give it. Ain't no stone can stop you, unless you let it. So don't let the stone stop you.

HYMN 163, For the Earth Forever Turning

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE: Bartok: Dance in Bulgarian Rhythm No. 5