

## RESURRECTING NOT THE PERSON, BUT THE PERSONALITY

By David Herndon

Easter

8 April 2007

First Unitarian Church

Pittsburgh, PA

### ANCIENT READING

Matthew 28:1-10

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher.

And behold there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.

His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow.

And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

"He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay."

"Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you."

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

### MODERN READING

"Rescuers Tell of Hero Who Put Others First"

By Phil Gailey

There was a hero, name unknown, in today's plane crash into the iced-over waters of the Potomac River.

To the rescuers in the helicopter, he was only a head in the water, a balding man, perhaps in his mid-50's, with a heavy mustache.

He was clinging with five others to the tail section of the Air Florida 737, the only part of the plane still afloat. The helicopter crew, Donald W. Usher and M. Eugene Windsor of the Federal Park Police, threw down a yellow ring life preserver attached to a rope.

“He could have gone on the first trip,” said the pilot, Officer Usher. “We threw the ring to him first, but he passed it to somebody else,” a man who was bleeding badly from a head injury.

“We went back five times, and each time he kept passing the ring to someone else, including three ladies who were hanging onto the tail section,” Mr. Usher said.

Finally, after making several trips and plucking everyone else from the water, the helicopter returned to pick up the man who had put the others first.

“We flew back out to get him but he was gone,” Officer Usher said.

“We really want to know who he was. That gentleman put everyone else ahead of himself. He is the real hero of this whole thing,” Mr. Usher continued. “There’s no doubt about it. You have to ask yourself the question: If you were in his situation, a hundred yards from shore and knowing that every minute you were closer to freezing to death, could you do it? I really don’t think I could.”

“I cried when I did not see him,” Officer Windsor said, biting his lip and fighting back tears again as he told the story of the hero to reporters late tonight. “If I could have seen him under the water, I would have jumped in myself to try to pull him out, dead or alive.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Gailey, “Rescuers Tell of Hero Who Put Others First,” The New York Times, Thursday, January 14, 1982, p. B6.

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Twenty-five years ago, on Easter Sunday in 1982, I visited the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. What I heard and saw and felt that morning made a deep impression on me. Later that afternoon, reflecting on my experience, I felt the first stirrings of a call to ministry, and that call grew stronger as I reflected further. That was Easter; by September I was a student at our Unitarian Universalist theological school in Chicago.

What was so powerful about that particular Sunday morning? First, it was unexpected. I was living in New Jersey at the time, and I had traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend the wedding of a high school friend. On Sunday, I wanted to go visit one of the wonderful museums in that city—the National Gallery, perhaps, or maybe one of the Smithsonian museums. But unfortunately none of the museums were open until the afternoon. What to do in the morning? Well, why not go to church? I did not realize that it was Easter; at the time, my focus did not include keeping track of holidays. Thus, I was not expecting the celebratory energy. I was not expecting the wonderful music. And I was not expecting such extraordinary preaching.

One thing I need to tell you about the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., is that the congregation was about half white and half African-American, or so it appeared to me. The All Souls Unitarian Church is located about a mile north of the White House, and once upon a time the surrounding neighborhoods were mostly white and the congregation was mostly white. By 1982, however, the surrounding neighborhoods included a substantial number of African-Americans, and so did the All Souls Unitarian Church.

One other thing I need to tell you about that church is that the minister was African-American. The Rev. David Eaton came from a Methodist background in the South. Later he concluded that theologically he was a Unitarian Universalist. When I heard him preach on that Easter Sunday twenty-five years ago, I was quite astonished. For he was delivering a fine Unitarian Universalist message, yet he was preaching with a style often associated with African-American ministers. And that leads me to the second reason why that particular Sunday was so powerful for me. David Eaton spoke about what he believed, not what he disbelieved. He offered a positive message, not a series of

denials. Moreover, David Eaton was open to the richness of our theological heritage. Yes, he came to his message from a thoughtful, rational, scholarly perspective. But at the same time he came to his message with deep appreciation for the emotional power of traditional symbols and stories. Twenty-five years later, I still vividly recall his language: with regard to Jesus, he affirmed not the resurrection of the person, but rather the personality.

The music carried forward this same approach: it was positive, and it was open to the richness of our theological heritage. The children's choir sang; the adult choir sang; and—surprise!—the gospel choir sang. Now maybe you have never imagined that a Unitarian Universalist church could have a gospel choir, but they did. In fact, as some of you may remember, the Jubilee Singers of the All Souls Unitarian Church came to sing here at the First Unitarian Church back in 1994 as part of our first Unitarian Universalist Folk Festival. The Jubilee Singers were started by Ysaye Barnwell, who has been a member of the All Souls Unitarian Church for many years. By 1982, however, Ysaye Barnwell was no longer conducting the Jubilee Singers, because she had moved on to establish the singing group called Sweet Honey in the Rock. This leads me to the third reason why that particular Sunday was so powerful for me. I was entranced by the multicultural experience I was witnessing. These folks were not just talking about working on the challenges of anti-racism. They were enjoying the fruits of that work.

Now I am a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, but I had never experienced our faith tradition in quite that way before. The energy, the positive message, the appreciation for our theological heritage, the institutional strength, the multiculturalism, the extraordinary music—all this was quite powerful for me, and I said to myself: If this is what Unitarian Universalism can be, then find me a dotted line to sign, for I want to be part of this.

The vision of Unitarian Universalism that I experienced that Easter morning twenty-five years ago is a vision that I have kept close to my heart ever since. I am glad to be serving an urban church, a church in a city. In my preaching I have attempted to present positive messages, to talk about what I believe, not what I disbelieve. I have remained open to our theological heritage, bringing to that heritage a critique grounded on reason and scholarship, but also bringing to that heritage a willingness to listen for messages that I can affirm, as well as messages that have challenged me to grow as I have come to understand them more deeply. Recognizing the importance of music in the life of a religious community, I have welcomed opportunities to strengthen and expand the role of music. All these aspects of my ministry over the years I trace straight back to what I experienced that one Sunday at the All Souls Unitarian Church.

I once wrote David Eaton a letter expressing my gratitude to him. He wrote back with a polite and happy reply, but I'm not sure he truly understood the depth of whatever it was that I brought with me from that particular Sunday, probably because much of what I brought back from that particular Sunday I already had with me when I entered the church building that morning. I had just not put it together. David Eaton once said that the task of ministry is to bring out the best in others, and surely that is what he accomplished with me. Yes, I received a great deal from my visit to the All Souls Unitarian Church—the music, the preaching, the energy, the multiculturalism—but in addition to that something already inside me was unlocked that morning, and thus the vision of Unitarian Universalism that I experienced that day was a combination of what I

saw and heard there plus what I already had with me inside, now unlocked and available in a new way.

Therefore while it was the right thing to do to write a letter of gratitude to David Eaton, my desire to give something back really transcends that mode of expression. At this point I believe that my desire to give something back can best be expressed by following through even further with the vision that I experienced that Sunday twenty-five years ago, a vision that has of course been deepened and strengthened over the years.

I believe the time has come in the life of this congregation when we need to have a second minister on our staff. I am finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the demands and the opportunities. No doubt I could find ways to be more effective and efficient. But not being one hundred and ten percent effective and one hundred and ten percent efficient is not the reason I cannot keep up the demands and opportunities of my position. In truth, this congregation has become large enough and busy enough and complex enough that we need a second minister on our staff.

Now here is the great challenge and the tremendous opportunity that I would like to set before this religious community this morning. Right now, approximately fifty African-American and Hispanic individuals are preparing to become Unitarian Universalist ministers. Right now, Unitarian Universalism has an historic opportunity to fulfill our dreams of promoting diversity, at least in our ministry, and perhaps also in our congregations, by taking extra care to ensure that these individuals have realistic opportunities to serve Unitarian Universalist congregations as they graduate from the theological school over the next two or three or four years. The great challenge and the tremendous opportunity that I would like to set before this religious community this morning is creating a new ministry position here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh and then making the commitment to invite an African-American minister to join our staff.

While you reflect on that prospect, I would invite your attention to the second reading we heard this morning, the reading about the man who was on board that airplane that crashed into the bridge over the Potomac River. Time after time, this individual passed the life preserver thrown from the helicopter to other individuals who were also clinging precariously to the tail of the airplane in the cold water on that January morning. But then, on the final trip, the rescuers in the helicopter were not able to find this heroic man. He was gone.

I made a copy of the newspaper article which told this story. This was a very unusual thing for me to do, but this story made an unusually deep impression on me. This sad event took place in January 1982, a couple of months before I visited the All Souls Unitarian Church. I will not say that reading this story pushed me toward ministry, but perhaps in some way it prepared me for my experience that Easter morning. Surely the courageous act of loving self-sacrifice offered by the man in the water echoes the courage of Jesus on his final day. But when I read this story I responded at a much less spiritually articulate level: I think this story posed for me the question Mary Oliver poses in her poem "The Summer Day" where she inquires: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Perhaps my experience at the All Souls Unitarian Church some time later helped me answer that question for myself. But for this morning, I would like to pose this

question to this religious community: Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life together as a religious community? Are we content with what we have achieved and what we are doing and who we are? Or can we imagine something even more remarkable?

This morning we celebrate Easter, and thus we encounter that troublesome and challenging word “resurrection.” Twenty-five years ago, I heard David Eaton distinguish between resurrecting the person of Jesus and resurrecting the personality of Jesus. What might it mean to resurrect the personality of Jesus? It seems to me that this would be something that happens inside: the personality of Jesus becomes resurrected, one might say, when we bring into our own lives the personal qualities that we may have appreciated about Jesus: personal qualities such as a willingness to include those who have been excluded, a willingness to act with courage and determination on behalf of justice, a willingness to make no human creation more important than concern for the well-being of other people.

More generally, however, resurrection means new life. And it seems to me that new life means more than the restoration of old life: the Easter story does not say that Jesus came back just as he was before and that everything went back to normal.

Affirming the spirit of Easter, therefore, means being open to new life: that is, being open to life that is somehow larger or more significant or deeper or more meaningful than it was before. This is the challenge and opportunity I ask us to consider this morning with regard to making a commitment to inviting an African-American minister to join our staff here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh. I am asking us to consider new life for our congregation, new life that is larger or more significant or deeper or more meaningful than it was before.

You do not need to remind me that creating a new ministerial position would require substantial financial resources. You do not need to remind me that creating a new ministerial position would call for changes in how we do things. You do not need to remind me that having an African-American minister on our staff might call for some adjustments in our congregational culture and identity.

And I do not need to remind you that the long history of racial injustice is one of two original sins of the United States, the other being the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants of this land. I do not need to remind you that the continuing effects of that history of racial injustice constitute one of the most difficult challenges facing this nation even today. And I do not need to remind you that one of the most enduring hopes of Unitarian Universalism has been to make a positive contribution toward racial justice.

With regard to financial resources, I can just about promise that our Unitarian Universalist sisters and brothers across the country would be willing to help us. I will be able to say more about that in the near future.

For this morning, however, as we celebrate Easter and the promise of new life, I ask that we hold onto the hope that new life can go beyond the life that has been. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said: “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” May we be willing to take that first step in response to the challenges and opportunities that come to us in all parts of our lives.