

## HUUC Easter Sunday 2014

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### **Meditation**

Prayers: "Being the Resurrection"

*Victoria Weinstein*

The stone has got to be rolled back from the tomb again and again every year.  
Roll up your sleeves.

He is not coming back, you know.  
He is not coming back unless it is we who rise for him  
We who lay healing hands on the reviled and rejected like he did  
on his behalf --  
We who rage for righteousness in his insistent voice  
We who love the sinner, even knowing that "the sinner" is no farther off than our own heartbeat

He will not be back to join us at the table  
To share God's extravagant banquet  
God's love feast, all are invited, come as you are  
And so it is you and I who must feast for him  
Must say the grace and break the bread and pass it to the left  
and dish up the broiled fish (or pour the wine) and pass it to the right.  
And treat each one so tenderly  
as though just this morning she or he made the personal effort  
to make it back from heaven, or from hell  
but certainly from death  
to be by our side.

Because if by some miracle (and why not a miracle?)  
He did come back  
Wouldn't he want to see us like this?  
Wouldn't it be a miracle to live for just one day  
So that if he did, by some amazing feat  
come riding into town  
He could take a look around and say  
"This is what I meant!"

And we could say  
it took us a long time...  
but we finally figured it out.

Oh, let us live to make it so.

You are the resurrection and the life.

*Source: Original*

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## **Reading**

*Letter from Nelson Mandela as he refused the release from prison offered to him.*

I am surprised at the conditions that the government wants to impose on me. I am not a violent man. My colleagues and I wrote in 1952 to [Daniel François] Malan asking for a round table conference to find a solution to the problems of our country, but that was ignored. When [Johannes Gerhardus] Strijdom was in power, we made the same offer. Again it was ignored. When [Hendrik] Verwoerd was in power we asked for a national convention for all the people in South Africa to decide on their future. This, too, was in vain.

It was only then, when all other forms of resistance were no longer open to us, that we turned to armed struggle. Let Botha show that he is different to Malan, Strijdom and Verwoerd. Let him renounce violence. Let him say that he will dismantle apartheid. Let him unban the people's organisation, the African National Congress. Let him free all who have been imprisoned, banished or exiled for their opposition to apartheid. Let him guarantee free political activity so that people may decide who will govern them.

I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. Too many have died since I went to prison. Too many have suffered for the love of freedom. I owe it to their widows, to their orphans, to their mothers and to their fathers who have grieved and wept for them. Not only I have suffered during these long, lonely, wasted years. I am not less life-loving than you are. But I cannot sell my birthright, nor am I prepared to sell the birthright of the people to be free. I am in prison as the representative of the people and of your organisation, the African National Congress, which was banned.

*Nelson Mandela* 110 February, 1985, retrieved from  
<http://prisonphotography.org/2013/12/05/mandelas-1985-refusal-of-release-from-prison/>

## **Message**

[Open with song -- What If I Give All I Have by Ray Boltz]

I was not sure at first about opening with that song. Perhaps because it starts talking about giving in terms of money and I would rather keep it more open. Money is after all the least valuable thing to give, money is easy time isn't. Or, as Keith Green said it, "you can't cash out of state checks in heaven," Jesus didn't say to send your money he said to go.

We often tend to look at what is given trying to give it an objective value forgetting that life is never objective. Rather the value of a gift is based in great part on who is the giver, after all that is why Good Friday and Easter are important. The Roman government crucified uncountable numbers of people during its centuries of rule, it was the identity of one and what he framed his sacrifice as that made all the difference in the world. And I don't think we have to agree on all the aspects of a sacrifice to understand and appreciate it.

At some level we as a society understand the power of a complete gift of service. I chose the excerpt from Nelson Mandela's letter in part because what he did -- and what he did through the African National Congress -- was and remains controversial. Mandela was by no means alone in those who made the decision to resort to violence in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. Nor was he alone in being arrested, tried (or at least given a show trial) and imprisoned for their efforts for justice. But Mandela realized that he was unique in public recognition and unique in his ability to push for change even during his 27 years in prison.

I think part of the reason so many people can bring themselves to risk everything for a cause - be it in a formally recognized military or in a insurrection for what they believe is a just cause - lies in the concept of risk. We are able to go into a situation advocating for what we believe in part because we carry the notion that some greater justice will turn the risk in our favor. As such, I don't see Mandela's greatest sacrifice being the one he made when he took leadership in the ANC or when he led the organization into actions that he knew were risky, rather it was when he (knowing full well and with certainty the consequences) refused release because accepting release meant betraying the cause. Giving all meant saying "I will not accept justice and freedom at the cost of denying it to others."

I don't have to agree with all of his tactical decision (nor even fully understand them) to appreciate the incredible gift he gave to all those waiting desperately for the end of apartheid. Giving his all was made him quite possibly the man solely responsible for ending this grave institutionalized injustice that might otherwise have lasted for several more generations.

Sometimes the value of the gift has everything to do with the who the giver is and their motivations.

Mother Teresa spent almost half a century caring for the poor and helpless in India. By the time of her death, the foundation she started had 450 centers in 123 countries. She personally assisted countless victims of disaster and disease during her lifetime many of whom might not have survived without her seemingly tireless efforts.

After her death, Pope John Paul II, waived the normal waiting period to begin the process of recognizing her sainthood - an action unknown in recent history. During her years of ministry she supported the official positions of the catholic church on many issues (including contraception and abortion) in spite of the appearance to many that these position worsened the plight of those she worked so hard to help.

In a letter from 1953 she wrote - "Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself -- for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything

was dead," "It has been like this more or less from the time I started 'the work.'" Her correspondence during her life (letter she asked be destroyed at her death) revealed that she was plagued by [if not doubt] an everpresent feeling of the absence of God.

Yet her mission lives on. Her gifts to the poor of India and around the world were no less valuable for her own doubt. And she gave even when she struggled to understand why.

Sometimes the value of the gift has nothing to do with the motivation or identity of the giver.

As we celebrate the Weekend of Good Friday and Easter - the story called "the Greatest Story Ever Told" and "the Greatest Gift Ever Given," I think it is worthy to ask what the gift was.

As one who grew up in a Christian community the question "why did Jesus die?" the answer had to do with appeasing justice or some divine sense of vengeance. "Someone had to pay the price." I have a hard time accepting the idea that a god who would sacrifice himself to appease a divinely instituted blood price would create a universe that required it.

Perhaps it makes more sense to look at the gift (and the meaning of the holiday) from the perspective of a positive rather than a negative as well as from a human perspective. If the coming of Jesus was to bring humanity closer to god than it is humanity that should be changed by the contact not the omnipotent divine. God did not descend to earth in order to appease his own sense of justice but rather to show us that we didn't have to.

*Mathew 5:1-11 (BBE happy changes to blessed)*

11 And seeing great masses of people he went up into the mountain; and when he was seated his disciples came to him.

2 And with these words he gave them teaching, saying,

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

4 Blessed are those who are sad: for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the gentle: for the earth will be their heritage.

6 Blessed are those whose heart's desire is for righteousness: for they will have their desire.

7 Blessed are those who have mercy: for they will be given mercy.

8 Blessed are the clean in heart: for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers: for they will be named sons of God.

10 Blessed are those who are attacked on account of righteousness: for the kingdom of heaven will be theirs. 11 Blessed are you when men give you a bad name, and are cruel to you, and say all evil things against you falsely, because of me. 12 Be glad and full of joy; for great is your reward in heaven: for so were the prophets attacked who were before you.

Blessed are those who do not have: those who do not have strength, those who do not have drive and power, those who seek what is right but do not have earthly power. God will accept, and bless, those with nothing. And even when those who did have power tried to destroy it (by killing the messenger) they could not. The gift of Easter then is that the gift is stronger than our power to destroy it. Jesus gave everything, and when the gift was destroyed gave it again.

The conviction among the 12 disciples of the power of Jesus giving everything is evident in the stories (some from more reliable historical sources than others) of their deaths. They gave their all in their own ways: James (along with his executioner who converted based on the conviction James showed) was beheaded for his faith giving the last decade of his life to preaching and his life itself for his belief; Peter gave 20 years to ministry and was crucified upside down (at his own request) insisting he did not deserve to die the way of Christ; Andrew, Nathanael, Simon, and Philip gave their lives in the same way as Jesus, crucified. Thomas was executed by uncertain means; Matthew was beheaded after 30 years of preaching the message of Christ; James the lesser was thrown from the roof of the temple and beaten to death; Judas Thaddeus beaten to death; John died in exile after spending his last years writing the book of Revelation; Judas gave his reputation, his conscience, and ultimately his life in order to enable the death and resurrection of Jesus; and Matthias (who replaced Judas) ultimately gave his life as well.

Mother Teresa understood that it was about giving to those in need, about bringing a message of hope. Her sometimes lack of strength in faith did not change the power of her service. The gift has power because of what the gift is, it has great power even if the giver is only human. It has great power because of what it is and because of whom it is given to. Nelson Mandela understood that he represented the oppressed, that what he spoke for was greater than himself and that he had to share the identity of those to whom he gave his service.

Jesus teaching of mercy toward all remains a message of great power no matter the identity of the messenger, human or divine. But perhaps more powerful than the promise of comfort, mercy, and the healing of the divide between humankind and our creator, more powerful than the gift of creator god killed most brutally by his creations who gave forgiveness, is what he asked us to do in return.

*Mathew 25:34-46 (BBE)*

334 Then will the King say to those on his right, Come, you who have the blessing of my Father, into the kingdom made ready for you before the world was: 35 For I was in need of food, and you gave it to me: I was in need of drink, and you gave it to me: I was wandering, and you took me in; 36 I had no clothing, and you gave it to me: when I was ill, or in prison, you came to me. 37 Then will the upright make answer to him, saying, Lord, when did we see you in need of food, and give it to you? or in need of drink, and give it to you? 38 And when did we see you wandering, and take you in? or without clothing, and give it to you? 39 And when did we see you ill, or in prison, and come to you? 40 And the King will make answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, Because you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me. 41 Then will he say to those on the left, Go from me, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire which is ready for the Evil One and his angels: 42 For I was in need of food, and you gave it not to me; I was in need of drink, and you gave it not to me: 43 I was wandering, and you took me not in; without clothing, and you gave me no clothing; ill, and in prison, and you came not to me. 44 Then will they make answer, saying, Lord, when did we see you in need of food or drink, or wandering, or without clothing, or ill, or in prison, and did not take care of you? 45 Then will he make answer to them, saying, Truly I say to you, Because you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me. 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment; but the upright into eternal life.

The god who forgives even those who do the most unspeakable to him, judges harshly those who mistreat the innocent - the least. Jesus, who identified himself as the son of god, did not call his privilege at his death, because he gave it to us. He gave his life, he gave his name: "whatever you do to these, you do to me." The immortal reached out to mankind and said: I take you as you are, I forgive you whatever you have shorted me, and I give you my name - whatever you do toward me it is forgiven - whatever love you have for me, give it to each other - and I will be back to keep giving the gift again. That is the gift of Easter.

The gift that has nothing to do with the motivation or identity of the giver and the gift that has everything to do with the who the giver is and their motivations..

### **Closing words**

In a world full of gods that demanded sacrifice and obedience that demanded service to themselves, one came forward gave everything, including his own life, and said: I will judge you not by what you give to me, not by how you sacrifice at the temple or by some display of piety - but by how you treat each other. "whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me."