**The Defiant Sound of Life**

**Sunday, April 16, 2017**

**Rev. David Kraemer**

Part 1

Shortly after Mary and I were married we moved to Fountain City, Wisconsin, in Buffalo County. That first spring, we signed up to help with the sandhill crane count.

The count had begun just a few years before we joined. It was started by the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, coordinated county by county across Wisconsin. We helped with the count in Buffalo County for 10 years until we finally moved too far away.

Cranes were just making their comeback in Wisconsin at the time and the crane foundation wanted any sign it could find of cranes mating and hatching young. Volunteers were sent out to as many wetlands and picked over cornfields and low-lying wood lots as possible, any place that seemed like a good spot for love, at least a good spot if you are a sandhill crane. Or of like mind. As I said, we were newly married. And young. So even we found sitting in a marsh at 4:30 in the morning at least a little romantic.

We were asked to sit quietly for a couple of hours, listening and watching. Cranes, in the amorous predawn dampness of a meadow, are inspired in the spring to engage in an elaborate mating display.

They leap in the air with wings akimbo, throw their heads back and call out with a frightening yodel – it’s been likened to a squeaky wagon wheel – but I think it’s almost impossible to describe. It is the sound of protein and blood, of feathers and bone, a sound as old as the earth, the defiant sound of life.

In those days, cranes were still rare in Wisconsin. The odds of actually witnessing this display were long. But we had other duties too. We were to log any change in water levels, any change in neighboring agriculture, and any other sign of human encroachment. We were chronicling the reestablishment of nesting cranes in Wisconsin and also the natural and human change in the biosphere. We were to recognize the interdependence of living things, us included, and to chart the change against a baseline. We marked time.

Spirituality is said to be the art of noticing. And so we also took note of other wildlife, weather conditions, and anything unusual. In the marsh in those years we often listened awe-struck to the weird buzz of woodcock, who have their own crazy mating ritual.

We heard bitterns, and red-winged blackbirds, swamp sparrows and owls. There is something truly prehistoric about a swamp before dawn, life emerging from the murk and the mud.

Eventually, each year we counted, the light came up and our job was done. But then came the best part. I don’t know how it worked in other counties, but, after the count each year, the volunteers in Buffalo County all drove to the Alma Hotel for breakfast.

There, we turned in our log sheets to our coordinator, and we took part in our own, human, spring dance of pancakes and eggs, coffee and stories. As small as the county was and despite having a mutual interest in birding, most of this group saw each other only once each year – at breakfast following the count. It was a reunion, a renewal of friendship. We caught up on a year’s worth of news, noted the changes, marked time.

There was an elderly bachelor farmer in the group who had a pet coyote, or at least, a coyote who came around for food and a little skittish company – bachelor farmers and coyotes each are able to survive on not very much. One year, when we asked, a tear came to his eye – his coyote had been hit by a car.

In 1988, we showed up with a new son, bundled against the damp and strapped into his car seat. Oohs and ahs greeted us at breakfast. A year later, we came with another son. The cycle of life repeating itself across species. Perhaps ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny – I do not know whether either of our sons resembled a crane embryo at some early point in his development. But I do know that birds are not alone in experiencing the circadian—“roughly daily” -- rhythms of life.

Science writer Chet Raymo writes than anyone who has experienced jet lag knows that biological clocks are not unique to birds. “Timekeeping is the rhythm of the soul.”

I am proud to say that Mary and I were the ones to log the first mating pair counted in Buffalo County one year – their eerie call echoed across the marsh.

Things have changed since then. The annual count of Sandhill and Whooping Cranes has grown to span 90 counties in six states of the upper Midwest. There were more than 10,000 sandhill cranes counted in Wisconsin last year. What once was nearly extinct has found a way to survive and thrive. Hope has come home to roost.

Part Two

As Unitarian Universalists, we sometimes have a hard time with Easter. The idea of the bodily resurrection, the sacrifice, the idea that this was preordained and that someone would do this to his own son.

And for what?

We have come to reject the notion of hell and eternal punishment. We entertain pretty widespread questions about any kind of afterlife at all. We see Jesus as exemplar and teacher, but the divinity that lived in him lives in us, too.

And while we recognize that the world is hurt and broken, and that we, too, break faith, break trust, we do not buy in to the idea of original sin, and so the whole notion of substitutionary atonement, tied up in the theology of Easter, falls off for us.

At the same time, there is a growing number of neopagans among our ranks who like to point out the etymology of Easter, the connection to Ostara, with the celebration of the equinox, and the fact that the whole thing is tied to the cycles of the moon.

And, as you know, we have even more folks who would rather not talk about Christianity at all.

Even if you see hope in the resurrection, we are not a faith that makes a lot of promises about what happens to you after you die.

I think, what a crowded place the universe would be if the invisible spirits of each living being that ever has been somehow still populate the place.

Part of me says, too, that a more romantic idea about death is dangerous.

If we believe in some heavenly reward from this life, we can let go of all kinds of things.

It means we can put off injustice if it turns out to be just too hard. We can sublimate abuse. We can ignore pain and suffering for now. We can become martyrs. Just like Jesus.

We do sometimes have this sense that there is more to it, that somehow we are not just our bodies, that there is some animating force, some awareness apart from our senses, the root of our selves that makes understanding possible.

We want this not just for ourselves, but for those we love, those whose lives have touched ours. We want to know there is more, that it’s not over.

But death, for a lot of us, is not about failure, or missing the mark. Death is a part of life. A natural part.

And death might just be the end of it.

The lights go out, our physical being and our consciousness are one and the same. Without a body, that’s all there is.

When frost strikes the garden and the plants whither and die, we pull up the vines, collect the tomato cages and the rabbit fence, till the soil and think no more about whether the garden in any sense exists.

The Good News, the gospel story of resurrection and immortality, might tug at our hearts, but what real evidence do we have?

How does it fit with everything else we know?

If we don’t have a lot of answers about the afterlife, we are all about this life. We are a lived faith, a faith that grounds its beliefs in sense and senses.

What we know is that we are alive. Isn’t life great? In a cold and dark universe filled with swirling gasses and hard rocks, life keeps popping up, it keeps hatching, from the murk and the mud, incessant, defiant. Life defying death.

There is that sense of the Easter story, too. The story of life and death, of the triumph of life over death, all wrapped up on the springtime renewal of the Earth.

Life doesn’t deny death. Death happens. Winter comes, water like a stone, and it hangs on, and then just when you think you can’t take it any more, then comes spring, with light and life.

So if we can let alone damnation for a bit, we might hear in the Easter story an augury, an auspiciousness. I think we might find there is more in Easter than we expect.

Here’s the account of the story, from the book of Mark.

“When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices to anoint Jesus’ body. Just after sunrise they went to the tomb.

“They were wondering who would roll away the stone for them, but when they got there, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they fled from the tomb, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

That’s how the story in the book of Mark ends, in uncertainty. No one says anything to anybody about what just happened. There are all kinds of questions. Who was that nice man in the white robe? Who rolled back the big stone? What do you mean Jesus was “raised?” Like carried off maybe?

That’s how Mark is a lot. I think Mark is my favorite book of the gospels. Historically, the best guess is that this book was written closest to the actual life of Jesus. So it’s kind of like newspapers, the first rough draft of history. The later synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, have a little more time to iron things out, make points.

But Mark is full of questions. Jesus often comes off as kind of grouchy. The facts don’t all line up. The women who went looking for Jesus in the tomb didn’t find him. End of story. Just like real life.

That uncertainty, that open-endedness, that alone ought to make us UUs curious. It ought to invite us to ask, what’s going on here?

But there’s more.

Across the land, not just in our congregation, children are out hunting, not for cranes but for the embryos of chickens, new life embodied in eggs and in the proliferation of rabbits. Baskets filled with luminescent plastic grass that is maybe a harbinger of the real grass we know is to come, and chocolate to be eaten, too.

Eggs are an ancient symbol of fertility and rebirth. Wikipedia tells us that in Africa, they have found 60,000-year-old ostrich eggs with engraved decorations. Coloring eggs as part of Christian tradition traces back Mesopotamia.

This is what is known in the study of religion as sychretism, the merging of two or more religious traditions, keeping some of the old, bringing in some of the new. Sometimes, this is seen as a watering down, or worse, a perversion of one or the other, a heresy.

But we, as UUs, are all about heresy. We draw meaning from a host of sources. Just look at the front of your hymnals. Why not mix it up a little? Find new meaning.

If a message of life and renewal can be found in the story of the resurrection, why not scramble it with some eggs?

We are tasting life this month, too, with our Jewish friends and neighbors who are celebrating Passover, that renewal of life in yet another form, from bondage into freedom, from Egypt into the promised land.

On the seder plate each year is something sweet, something salty, something bitter -- fundamental flavors of life.

I have to credit Rev. Kendyl Gibbons with this part.

Salt, Kendyl says, is the taste of life. It is the blood in our veins, the endless flow that brings the nourishment of the world. It is the primal ocean in which life first came to be. It is the fluid of the womb, that amniotic sac in which we were first nurtured. It is in the tears we weep.

Bitter is the taste of pain. It is the suffering that comes to us and to others,

That leaves a mark upon our lives,

That changes us.

It is the frustration of all that we would change, and cannot.

It is the confession that for all our goodness and all our wisdom,

We still have not found the key to the community of love and justice.

Sweet is the taste of joy.

When a young child begins the study of Hebrew,

He is given a book with a dab of honey on the cover to lick, so that he may associate his first memory of that process with a sweet taste.

The taste of sweetness is the joy of learning,

The richness of conversation, the delight of “aha!”, the concepts that click together,

Oh, and also on that seder plate was a hard boiled egg.

The themes of hope, the cycle of life, renewal, these are the Easter messages for me. The syncretism of the season is a joy. The big take away from the resurrection story is that life goes on. That the women who went to the tomb expected one thing, and found another. They expected to find Jesus dead. Instead, they found mystery.

Often we speak of life as a gift, and death as the mystery. But here’s a riddle, what if we spoke of death as the gift, and life as the mystery? The mystery that left the tomb.

As for atonement, for making things right again, salvation comes not at the end, but at the beginning. Salvation comes in each new moment, in the ability to choose, to choose to be something other than what we are now, to be better, to be our best selves. Christ rising from the dead means just that to me, the Christ-like ability in each of us, in some small or large measure, to begin again.

And as for life everlasting, here’s what lasts. Life lasts. Life keeps coming back. In some tepid backwater somewhere, amino acids combine, a lightning bolt strikes, or some other magic happens, I don’t know, and wow, life comes. From the murk and the mud, life, again and again, incessant, irrepressible, defiant, can I say it, eternal.

What happened to Jesus when he died? He lived, in hearts and minds. He was already on the road to Galilee, with the disciples, within in them, as the women stepped out of the tomb.

If you doubt this somehow, I would invite you to look all around, at cathedrals and churches, and whole migrations of people across the land. Look at the social climate change that Christianity brings, look the history of the Western world, look at us, who grew from that root.

What happens to us when any one of us dies?

We live, in birdsong and swampland.

We live, in hearts and minds.

We live, in our interconnectedness.

This is the mystery. This is the miracle. The evidence is all around.

The deep roots of Easter are in renewal, in rebirth, in the cycle of life. Day by day, dawn arrives with light and life. Year by year, the marsh comes alive after a season of darkness. Eon by eon, sandhill cranes return to sing and dance. It is a wheel within a wheel within a wheel.

What is immortal? Life is immortal. Life goes on. Life keeps on coming back. Irrepressible. Defiant.

What is incarnate? Truth is incarnate. Truth given shape and form in our bodies. Truth incarnate in everyone.

What is gospel? The gospel story, the good news, is the story of each one of us. And it is the story of all of us. Your story, my story now, our story, alive inside the hearts and minds of all we touch, incarnate, immortal, in each of us.

What is resurrection?

I was in Buffalo County again not long ago in late afternoon, coming back from the cabin. Two cranes passed overhead and sailed down into a cornfield. I turned to see them as I rounded the corner, but I did not stop. That is how common cranes are these days. What once was nearly extinct has found a way to survive and thrive. Hope has come home to roost.