

When All Else Fails, Reboot! a sermon by Rev. Doug McCusker

How many words do you think there are in the English language that start with the prefix “re”? I looked it up. I have one of those great, big, unabridged dictionaries at home like the ones you see in the library. It weighs about 10 pounds.

Well, according to my dictionary there are a little over 2,000 official “re” words. That’s 46 straight pages of nothing but words that start with “re”. That’s like looking up “Smith” in the New York City phonebook, for those of you who know what a phonebook is.

The prefix “re” signifies “again” or “to go back”. For there to be so many words in our language starting with “re” means that it is a hugely important thing for us English speaking humans. And this time of year, when the flowers return – that’s one of those “re” words, we are reminded”, that’s another one, of the power of going back and starting again.

On the Christian liturgical calendar, Easter is the feast day of the “re” word. Especially one in particular, “resurrection”; meaning, to rise from the dead. Easter is a big challenge for many Unitarian Universalists because we want to honor such a huge day from our Judeo-Christian tradition, but “rising from the dead” is difficult to believe through the lens of reason.

For Christians, the resurrection of Jesus is a defining miraculous moment that marks the divinity of Christ. Even though our culture is obsessed with zombies these days, we know that humans don’t rise from the dead and walk on down the road as if nothing happened. For someone to rise from the dead requires supernatural intervention.

A couple of weeks ago, I talked about not mistaking the finger pointing to the moon with the moon itself. We here on earth cannot grasp the entirety of the moon from our vantage point. We can see parts of it and talk about it with others, but no matter what we do we are only pointing.

When it comes to Easter and all the theological implications of resurrection, I believe that those who were telling the stories about Jesus after he died were using his life as a finger pointing to God. I do not want to disparage anyone’s beliefs or to downplay the importance of metaphors and symbols. They often speak to a deeper truth than facts and beliefs.

The Gospel of Mark, which we heard from today was written about 35 years after Jesus died. It was a terrible time for Jews in the Middle-East. The Jews revolted from Roman rule in the year 60 of the common era. The Romans responded by absolutely crushing them. They slaughtered villages, crucified countless revolutionaries, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and stamped out any remaining pockets of resistance.

Jews fled Palestine and resettled all over the Mediterranean area. Think of what is going on in Syria now, but way worse. There were no allies who came to the aid of the Jews. The full force of the Roman Empire descended on the Jews and annihilated them. This was a defining moment in the history of Judaism, which reverberated in many directions.

Jesus, the Messiah did not save the Jews from suffering under the yoke of the Romans, was reimagined and re-explained by the early Christians as the guide to rebirth in this life. Jesus, who was crucified by the Romans, became a powerful reminder that no matter what earthly powers like the Romans could do to them in this life, there was always a more glorious life waiting for them when they reunited with God.

Easter isn't about God showing off that God can defy nature and raise a human being from the dead, but that God also has a compulsion to go back and start again. In this case, to reset the relationship between God and humans.

Up until then, Yahweh, the God of the Jews, and the Jewish people had had an up and down relationship: loving, fighting, being nice to one another, breaking vows and then smiting and punishing. The breakaway Jewish sect that worshipped the prophet Jesus saw their Messiah's death as a cosmic act of redemption for humanity. Through the risen Christ, God was wiping the slate clean and opening the gates of heaven.

Think of this as a reboot of the system. Anyone who has used a computer has experienced the frustration of having your system lock up and not respond. It usually happens at the worse time. One time when I was in seminary, I had to give a sermon in front of my classmates and teachers. As I turned on my laptop about 5 minutes before class, I got what's called the "blue screen of death."

No matter what I did, I couldn't get the system to respond. I had to perform a full reboot in order to correct the problem. I needed to allow the computer to check every single nook and cranny of the hard disk and every software setting to restore the health of the system. I had let things get so out of whack without periodically cleaning up my hard drive that everything just shut down.

In case you were wondering, I had to wing it and tell my sermon from memory. Not only did I let the system get clogged up, I hadn't backed up my file or printed it out. Years of bad practices finally caught up with me and I had no choice but to restore my computer.

My story is a trivial example in the grand scheme of things, but our criminal justice system is a much larger and critical example of a system drastically in need of a complete system reboot before it hits its own "blue screen of death."

The statistics that describe how much we've let the system get out of whack are appalling. Our nation only comprises 5% of the human population, but we account for 25% of people in jail or prison. We have 2.2 million people behind bars. We executed more of our citizens than all but 4 countries in the world: China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

African-Americans and Hispanics comprise 58% of people in prison, but only 25% of the population. Since the mid-90's when we started the "war on drugs", we have gone on a binge of mass incarceration particularly among people of color. If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime. This is totally unsustainable and immoral.

If ever there was a need to go back and start again, it would be with the way we treat victims and those who commit crimes. Right now our criminal justice system centers on offenders and making sure they get what they deserve in the form of

punishment. But there is another way, one based on the very notion of resurrection and redemption. It's called restorative justice and it's being used around the world in a variety of settings from juvenile infractions to violent crimes and even genocide.

Restorative justice is focused on addressing the harms and needs of those who were harmed, holding those who caused the harm accountable for putting things right, and involving the offenders, victims and relevant communities in this process. It is a collaborative process built on engagement among all stakeholders.

Restorative justice encourages outcomes that promote responsibility, reparation, and healing for all. When I was a child, my friend and I thought it would be fun to break into another friend's house who we knew was on vacation. We didn't steal anything we just wanted to hang out in his house like it was a clubhouse. A neighbor saw us and told the homeowners when they got back.

They didn't call the police, they notified our parents. I'll never forget it. We had this big meeting with all the families present. My friend and I owned up to what we did and apologized to everyone including the neighbor, our parents and of course the homeowners. Then we spent a whole weekend cleaning their house and fixing the window that we broke. I thought my friend who was on vacation wouldn't want to have anything to do with me anymore, but he forgave me even though he never let me forget what a stupid thing I did.

We put things right and in the process healed the damage it caused in the relationship between our families. I didn't know it at the time, but this was restorative justice being practiced by those directly involved. This is not a replacement for our current justice system or a panacea. But when used properly it can have a profound impact on redirecting patterns of harm.

Schools have become an important area for restorative practices. Courts are using it more and more to address wrong doing before charges are filed. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation and Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Commissions are recent examples of restorative justice being applied to large community issues such as racism and genocide.

The underlying value behind restorative justice is that all things are connected to each other in a web of relationships. Wrongdoing represents a wound in the community and a tear in the web of relationships. We all cause harm to others at one time or another, but as Bryan Stevenson says, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

The important thing is to create communities that allow us all to restart no matter what we have done wrong as individuals or as societies. Easter reminds us that even an offense as egregious as an unjust crucifixion can be restored as long as people are willing to engage one another in the healing process.

During the course of this sermon I used 33 different words that started with "re". I didn't set out to do that, but it goes to show how prevalent it is in our language and how central the value of starting again is in our lives.

Let us celebrate Easter by always leaving room in our lives and in our relationships for starting again and again and again through love and compassion. Let

us look for ways to repair the brokenness we encounter in the world by working as a healing community. We are all more than the worst thing we have ever done, and together we are greater when we breathe new life from the death of those things that harm us all.