

Coming Alive!

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Easter and Passover
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Reading

The Jewish feast of Passover began with the setting of the sun on Friday. This festival commemorates the story of the Israelites moving from captivity in Egypt to the new lives in the Promised Land.

This reading from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner speaks to that dramatic moment when tradition says the Israelites entered into the parting Red Sea and made their way to freedom.

It has always seemed to me that the miracle was not that the waters parted for the Israelites but that they all walked into the midst of the sea, and emerged free men and women on the other side. You want to be reborn, you want that a new and better you should emerge from the frozen hulk [that] winter has made of you, you want to be free again? Then you have to let go of the old you. You must be willing to walk into the middle of the sea and risk it all. But you say, "What if I don't come out the other side?" And I say there were probably a lot of Jews who were also afraid to step into the midst of the sea. They chose to bank on [the] old, but sure lives [they knew as slaves]. We never heard from them again. But the ones who entered the water, hungry for a rebirth were rewarded. Not with the Promised Land, but with the strange honour of being able to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Theirs was the ultimate act of faith and was rewarded with the ultimate gift: rebirth in the wilderness.

Reading

Our second reading, titled "Halleluiah," is by Mary Oliver, the poet who is often described as writing the "scriptures" for Unitarian Universalism.

Everyone should be born into this world happy
and loving everything.
But in truth it rarely works that way.
For myself, I have spent my life clamoring toward it.
Halleluiah, anyway I'm not where I started!

And have you too been trudging like that, sometimes
almost forgetting how wondrous the world is
and how miraculously kind some people can be?
And have you too decided that probably nothing important
is ever easy?
Not, say, for the first sixty years.

Halleluiah, I'm sixty now, and even a little more,
and some days I feel I have wings.

Sermon: "Coming Alive!"

On the first day of the week,
at early dawn they came to the tomb, saying:
"Who will roll away the stone from the entrance?"

They looked up and saw that the stone had already been rolled back,
and on the right they saw a young man.

They were alarmed. But the man said to them:
"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

So they went out and fled from the tomb,
for terror and amazement had seized them.
And they said nothing, for they were afraid.

I stand before you this morning to speak of paradise—
of paradise lost, and the possibility of paradise regained.

As Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists,
we stand in a stream of religious history
that traces its origins to the headwaters of Judaism, Christianity,
and the complicated mix of spiritual, philosophical, and political history
that is the Middle East.

We don't always stand comfortably in this stream.
On a morning like this, when Jews are in the midst of celebrating Passover
and Christians mark the resurrection of Jesus from the dead,
it's rather easy for us to feel alienated or annoyed by all the fuss.

While outwardly we may treat these religious commemorations
with appropriate and respectful tolerance,
the truth is that a good number, if not the vast majority, of us
struggle to understand how people can seriously believe stories
about the parting of the Red Sea or a dead man coming back to life.

There is very good reason why UU ministers have
for the better part of a century
preached Easter sermons that draw on the metaphorical images
rather than the literal content of this holy holiday.

As agnostics and skeptics, who see the use of reason as a spiritual practice,
it's not easy to make sense of, let alone find meaning in,
stories that stretch so far beyond the limits of all credibility.

It's no surprise then that for the last many decades,
UU preachers have so often used Easter sermons to celebrate
the renewal of life that is ushered in with spring—
that we've worked with the metaphors of rebirth and renewal,
that we've discussed the possibility of spiritual resurrections,
and left the messy details of the traditional stories
tucked safely in the back of the Bible.

Now, let me go on record as saying there's nothing wrong with any of that,
and that I certainly plan to go back to doing that very same thing next Easter!

But, this year, I want to lean a bit more toward the literal.

I want to unpack Easter and some 2000 years of Christian history, in the hopes that we can rehabilitate the better bits, and relinquish, or even reject, the rest with a stronger understanding of *why*—a why that goes well beyond our traditional UU responses of disbelief and discomfort.

Besides, I want to give you something to talk about this afternoon at Easter Brunch—something that, I should warn you, if you're in conservative company, may mean you never get invited back.

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There is little that we know with any certainty about the historical Jesus, other than the fact that he was Jewish and lived in a time of political tumult in a backwater of the Roman Empire.

The gospels are not a great source of help. Mark, the first of the gospels that made it into the Bible, was written two generations after Jesus' death.

The Gospel of John was written three or four decades after that, at least a century after the person called Jesus of Nazareth was likely born.

Between the four gospels included in the Bible, there are some serious discrepancies.

Just looking at the accounts of the resurrection can make your head spin.¹

They each tell us that a group of women went to the tomb of Jesus on the first Easter morning to prepare his body for a proper burial.

But, Mark says there were three women, Matthew two, Luke says five or six, and John only one.

It's not clear if any one of them claimed to see a risen Jesus. Mark says no; Matthew says yes; Luke says no; and John says yes. That seems to me to be a pretty significant detail

¹ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, p. 120.

that you'd want to get right...

But, there's more!

There's no agreement about who or how many messengers announced the resurrection, or whether these messengers were angels or men.

There's no agreement about exactly who was the first witness to the resurrection, or just where a resurrected Jesus might have appeared.

And, as John Shelby Spong points out, there's a real question about what any of these writers actually meant by resurrection, in the first place.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians in the midfifties
[two decades before the first of the gospels was written],
provides us with not a single descriptive detail;
he says only that 'Christ was raised.'

Mark, likewise, never describes an appearance of the risen Jesus.
Matthew says he appeared out of heaven.
Luke says he was known in the breaking of bread.
[And,] John says Jesus forbade Mary to touch him
because he had not yet ascended....

All of these episodes, Spong says,
"are filled with the language of a revelatory encounter;
they describe a different kind of seeing.
It is more like the seeing of insight, or second sight.
It is not the language of physical sight and literal history."²

Now, all of this begs the question of what, if anything, actually happened.
Of whether anything out of this story is true and trustworthy.

If we're looking for an accurate historical accounting,
I believe the answer is no.

But, if we're looking for meaning, I think there is a lot more to go on.

The group of followers Jesus assembled around him—
the people he had taught and loved—

² John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, p. 123.

likely watched with horror as he provoked the Roman authorities and was then swiftly executed for his crimes.

They likely disbanded, distraught and fearing for their very lives.

All surely seemed lost.

Their teacher was gone, and they faced persecution or death themselves through simple association.

But, then, something happened.

Something had to have happened.

Something had to have happened to turn that bumbling band of disciples into a movement of people who, quite literally, were willing to risk life and limb to profess the faith that Jesus had shown to them through the living of his life.

I don't believe this "something" was in any way supernatural, but I do believe it was remarkable.

I don't believe the dead are returned to life, but I do believe those who have died live on in love and memories and can sometimes change the world for good with their enduring example long after they are gone.

In the wake of Jesus' death, his followers somehow remembered what he had so powerfully taught them about life.

At great peril to their own well-being, they came fully alive, and the world has never been the same.

While I don't believe Jesus was in any way literally resurrected, it's clear enough to me that his church certainly was.

Tremendous good has come from the movement he sparked with his life.

And, of course, the small group of followers that grew over time into the complex and diverse thing we now call Christianity has also brought about more than its fair share of suffering.

When I look across the history of Christianity,

I am so often left asking “what if?”

What if another path had been chosen?
What if this or that horrible series of wrong turns had been avoided?

So often, across this history, there were proto-Unitarians and proto-Universalists close at hand when those wrong turns were made—very often demanding a different decision, and too often being persecuted for their troubles.

Unfortunately, as the Jesus movement grew into Christianity, it lost the egalitarian ethos that existed in the beginning—when women were recognised as leaders, when it was forbidden to shed blood or wage war, and when the material needs of all were the concern of the whole community.

Over the past several years, I have been wrestling with some of these wrongs turns through the writings of feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, who also happens to be a UU minister and the president of our Starr King School for the Ministry.

In their first book, called *Proverbs of Ashes*, they questioned the doctrine of “substitutionary atonement”—the idea that God sent Jesus, as a substitute, to die for the sins of humanity.

Not only can such an act be seen as divine child abuse, but they argue that sanctifying the violent death of Jesus sanctions violence at all levels of society—leading to the dangerous notions that suffering is redemptive and that violence has the power to save us.

In one of the books most pointed passages, Rebecca writes:

I could see that when theology presents Jesus’ death as God’s sacrifice of his beloved child for the sake of the world, it teaches that the highest love is sacrifice. To make sacrifice or to be sacrificed is virtuous and redemptive. But what if this is not true? What if nothing, or very little, is saved? What if the consequence of sacrifice is simply pain, the diminishment of life, fragmentation of the soul,

abasement and shame?
What if the severing of life is merely destructive of life
and is not the path of love, courage, trust and faith?
What if the performance of sacrifice is a ritual
in which some human beings bear loss
and others are protected from accountability or moral expectations?

It's possible to pin-point when and where this particular doctrine came from.
And, it's not nearly as old as you might think.

In 1095, Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade.
He summoned Christians from all over Europe
to take up arms and attack the Muslim Turks who held Jerusalem.

He promised that their efforts would erase all their sins,
reversing “nearly a thousand years of Christian teaching
about the sin of shedding human blood.
War ceased being a sin and became a way to atone for sin.
Killing became a mode of penance, [and] a pathway to paradise.”³
Three years later, Anselm of Canterbury, the Archbishop,
worked out the theology to back all of this up,
emphasizing, for good measure, how humanity's incredible sinfulness
had required Jesus to ransom us from the debt
we would be required to pay with our lives.

Suddenly, almost overnight,
the whole reason for Jesus' life became focused on death.

In Brock and Parker's latest book, comes an even stronger catalogue
of Christianity's wrong turns.

The title of this book really says it all:
*Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World
for Crucifixion and Empire.*

They begin the book by explaining
that it actually took Jesus a thousand years to die.

³ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, “This Present Paradise,” *UU World Magazine*.

As theologians, they had only recently learned what most art historians all seem to know: that you can't find an image of a crucified Jesus in a church dating before the 10th century.

They couldn't quite believe it, so they trekked through the oldest existing churches in Italy and Turkey and the Middle East.

Looking in corners and peeking behind altars, they searched everywhere for an ancient glimpse of Jesus on a cross.

But, he wasn't to be found.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

"He is not here; he has risen."

Indeed, what they found was a Jesus very much alive.

Having now traipsed through many of these same churches, straining my neck looking at mosaics and frescos, I have found what they say to be true.

The Jesus depicted in the first millennia is alive. The focus is on his life, not his death.

But something happened—something else. A wrong turn was taken. The Jesus of the second millennia is crucified. Death is now everywhere to be found in Christian art.

The first major crucifix appeared in the Cologne Cathedral around 970.

In short order, crucifixes became a central feature in churches all over Europe over the next couple of centuries, fueled substantially by the rhetoric of the Crusades and that damaging doctrine of atonement.

It has taken a long time to even begin to turn things around.

In 1805, the great Universalist minister, Hosea Ballou declared in his *Treatise on the Atonement*:

The belief that the Great Jehovah was offended with his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers.

Unfortunately, while UUs now regard this as one of our key points of departure from the doctrines that had reigned for centuries, most of Christianity failed to notice or register our objections.

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Last month, in Jerusalem, Bob and I crawled into the strange shrine within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built around what is purported to be the site of Jesus' tomb.

It's now a tiny, cramped room that can hold no more than four people. There are icons, and flowers, and oil lamps blazing, and a simple, empty white slab of marble.

The wait to get in took forever. Pilgrims stood in line and sometimes shoved, lighting fistfuls of candles along the way.

Their experience, as moving as it clearly was, was different from mine.

Standing in the tomb, I wondered, what if? What if the focus had remained on his life and not on his death?

It's not a misplaced question.

In the churches of the first millennia, what is seen instead of crucifixion and death is resurrection and life.

What is depicted are scenes of paradise, with starry cobalt blue skies, flowing rivers teeming with fish,

rolling hills dotted with sheep,
guided by a gentle and loving shepherd who is very much alive.

Paradise was not a distant heaven for the early church.
It was something that was possible, here and now. Available every day.

Jesus had had a habit of pointing out to his followers
that the dominion of God was at hand.

It's what they likely remembered when they first experienced resurrection.
And, it's what they depicted in the art adorning their buildings
for almost a thousand years.

* * * * *

I'm mindful that I promised you a sermon about paradise.
Instead, I've swept you along through centuries of history and theology—
telling a story that speaks more to a paradise lost than a paradise found.

As it turns out, on this Easter morning, though,
the finding of paradise is actually yours to do.

The original Easter story was one of hope overcoming despair,
of joy overtaking sorrow, of life overpowering death.

It is a story rooted in the even older story of liberation
that is at the heart of Passover,
and in the ancient story the earth tells over and over again,
as we spin toward spring and the resurrection of the world around us.

So, my hope for you this morning is that
the freedom of Passover, the hope of Easter,
and the great uplift of life itself
may fill your hearts this day with the knowledge
that you dwell already in Paradise—if you will come alive to see it!

Amen.