

Why Certain Stories Endure

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Easter Sunday

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation Reading

Whether something lasts or not has nothing to do with whether it's made of stone or steel or wood or fabric. A house built all in wood can be a monument that lasts for hundreds of years because it seduces people to live in it, to use it and maintain it. Eternity depends on whether people are willing to take care of something. In Greece, ordinary white houses are repainted every year. Today we are often told to use materials and structures that are free of maintenance. But no building can be neglected entirely. We need constantly to renew our relationships—to the houses we live in, to our friends, to our own bodies—all the time, every day.

- Werner Herzog

Reading from *The Gospel of Luke*, with verses from Chapter 23 and 24

Now, there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, of Arimathea, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan to crucify him. This man went to Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned home and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath day they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the

ground, and the men said to them, “Women, why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Sermon: “Why Certain Stories Endure”

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

It is the incredulous question at the very heart of Easter.

Why do you—why do I, why do we—look for the living among the dead?

Why do we search for hope amid despair,
assurance in the wake of devastation and loss,
faith in the face of doubt and fear?

Why, when we’re brought to our knees,
do we yearn for the abiding promise that life abounds—
for the confidence to believe that even when all has seemingly been lost,
that life, somehow, goes on?

The way the story is told in the closing chapters of Luke’s gospel suggests, with more than a hint of derision, that the women who came to his tomb to give Jesus a proper burial were unaware of the great miracle that had taken place.

And so they were.

They had come, at first light,
after what was surely a sleepless night,
to tend to the body of a loved one they had seen executed
on a cross by Roman authorities two days before.

Stricken by grief, they had come to give him the burial
they felt he deserved—an honour that had been impossible to provide
as the sun set and the Jewish Sabbath began on the day he actually died.

Sent from heaven or not,
what I think was lost in the question the two angelic beings

put to the mourning women, was the recognition that it was actually life itself that had drawn them to the grave that day.

Why did they look for the living among the dead?

Because it is what we do.

Not always immediately.

Not always with ease.

But after the long night, more often than not, we gird ourselves for what must be done and rise to affirm that life goes on.

The journey those women made to the grave that morning was a great labour of love, an affirmation of their deepest devotion, an outward sign of their enduring commitment and connection to one who had deeply touched and transformed their lives.

And it is, to this day, a remarkable testament to the resilience at the heart of being human.

They could have stayed, after all, hunkered down in their beds. They could have left well enough alone, deciding that the hasty burial he'd received would have to suffice. (Besides, it had already been two days.)

But they resolved instead to affirm the bonds of their love.

Making their way to the tomb, they were propelled by a connection that would not let them go.

And, so it was all that they knew of Jesus, still alive in their hearts, that drew them back to that garden of grief.

There in that cemetery, they were searching for what they knew of the living Jesus.

Much in the same way, I imagine, so many of us have made our own way to the graves of loved ones

seeking out what connects us still to those whom we've lost.

Now, obviously enough, the Christian tradition makes a much more miraculous claim about what happened that day.

It is, after all, a physical resurrection being proclaimed and celebrated this morning in most of the churches of Christendom—though, it must be said, quite a few people in both the pulpits and pews of those churches harbour some deep doubts that they keep mostly to themselves.

In scholarly circles, though, regarding the question of bodily resurrection, it's long been clear that the Greek verb translated as “raised”—as in “he is risen”—most frequently meant someone had “been lifted up.”

This verb was also typically used more as a metaphor than not.

Which is why there's a distinction to be made, I think, between resurrection and resuscitation.

And while that debate is really for another sermon, it's worthwhile to recall that it was over the more orthodox claims made about the meaning of Easter that Unitarians historically diverged from the dominant Christian story.

The focus in our tradition has long been on Jesus as teacher, guide, role model and moral exemplar.

We have, by and large, followed the pattern set by Thomas Jefferson, who while President of the United States, cut and pasted his copies of the Christian gospels to reflect his own Unitarian understanding.

Late at night, in his White House study, with a razor and glue, he compiled what, today, is called *The Jefferson Bible*.

In his final version, all the miracles were tossed out, including each of the accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

He also removed most everything that might be called supernatural, including the angels heralding Jesus' birth, the long biblical genealogies, and any references to Jesus being divine.

What was left was a collection of his teachings, told mostly through parables, and a rough narrative of his earthly and very human life.

And while I deeply appreciate the work Jefferson did to boil down the gospels—arguably to their Unitarian essence—I feel something precious is lost when we jettison the bits that make us uncomfortable or confused.

Now, to be absolutely clear, there is much in the resurrection narratives that goes beyond what I, and I suspect many of us, can or care to believe.

Yet there is also in these complicated and conflicting gospel accounts, a deep and tender display of humanity to be found.

Again and again, there are stories that point to the ways that we grieve, and to our feeble human efforts to make meaning out of our heartache.

There are stories of fear and doubt and outright disbelief, as well.

When the women were asked why they were looking for the living among the dead, the two angelic figures—told them, “He is not here, he is risen!”¹

When they returned to share the news with Jesus’ other followers, no one would believe them, thinking they were talking nonsense.

But the text then says: “Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.”²

Apparently, not able to take the women’s word for it, he had to see for himself. And yet doing so left him baffled still.

In the last chapter of *Luke* is the poignant account, later that afternoon, of several of Jesus’ disciples walking the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

All it seemed that they could talk about on the journey

¹ *The Gospel of Luke*: 24:5.

² *The Gospel of Luke*: 24:12.

was this unsettling news they had just heard.

How were they to make sense of all that had happened over the past few days?

In short order, they had seen their friend and teacher
take up his ministry in Jerusalem,
only to provoke the authorities in the process,
be sentenced to death,
and swiftly executed as a criminal.

And now this strange possibility that he was, somehow, alive.

They were understandably bewildered.

And they were so caught up in their conversation,
that they didn't even notice Jesus walking alongside them.

It was only when they stopped for the night and sat down to eat,
that they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

And, yet, as soon as they did, he vanished from their sight.

The gospels contain several more stories
of Jesus being seen by those who had followed him.

Suddenly, he'd appear in a room with locked doors
or along the shore of the lake while they were out fishing.

The stories are odd and defy all that we know of logic.

Rather than getting tripped up, though,
it is better to suspend our disbelief and take in the message that
the disciples knew in a powerful way
that they were in Jesus' continuing presence,
and that somehow his death had not been the end of the story.

That they found to be true Jesus' promise that:
"where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."³

³ *The Gospel of Matthew*: 18:20.

Or as he says in *The Gospel of Thomas*,
a text lost for most of Christian history,
“Split a piece of wood, and I am there.
Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”⁴

Each of these passages speak to me of what endures beyond the grave.
Of how our connections can be sustained—and can sustain us—
despite the distance of death.

Whatever we might think about bodily resurrection,
I’m pretty certain Jesus wasn’t speaking literally
when he promised to be found by splitting wood or looking under a rock.

Rather, all of this speaks, to me,
of what it means to live on in the lives of others—
for the connections of the heart to be a tie that binds us,
even to those who are gone.

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Easter can be a very complicated day for us as Unitarians.

As I said earlier, the miraculous claims are where we have
typically parted ways with mainstream Christianity over the centuries.

In the words of Theodore Parker, we’ve been more interested
in the religion *of* Jesus than the religion *about* Jesus.

And, yet, we have not come together today to declare what we don’t believe,
but to affirm what it is that we do.

I’ve been especially mindful of this, as I’ve prepared today’s sermon,
because I was approached by a member here at First last Sunday,
who in response to my Passover sermon shared the hope
I might also try to explain what we as Unitarians actually believe about Easter.

She explained as a child who grew up in this congregation,
she didn’t exactly get a clear understanding of the Unitarian take on it all.

⁴ *The Gospel of Thomas*, Sayings 30 and 77b.

I don't know whether the sermon, thus far, has helped, but, perhaps the following story will.⁵

A group of friends of various religious denominations were seated in fellowship discussing the true meaning of Easter one Sunday when the Baptist said:

“I believe we place too much emphasis on chocolate bunnies, coloured rabbits and Easter eggs, instead of the spiritual aspect, which is the real meaning of Easter.

That's what I believe,” said the Baptist.

“Me too,” said the Methodist. “Me too,” said the Lutheran.

“Me too,” said the Catholic. “Me too,” said the Anglican.

And the Unitarian was silent.

“I believe the real meaning of Easter is that Christ died on the cross for our sins,” said the Methodist.

“Me too,” said the Anglican. “Me too,” said the Lutheran.

“Me too,” said the Baptist. “Me too,” said the Catholic.

And the Unitarian was silent.

“I believe the real meaning of Easter is the triumph of Jesus over the grave,” said the Lutheran.

“Me too,” said the Catholic. “Me too,” said the Anglican.

“Me too,” said the Baptist. “Me too,” said the Methodist.

And the Unitarian was silent.

“I believe the real meaning of Easter is not only what each of you have said, but also that all people who believe in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus are cleansed of original sin through baptism and are restored to the favour of God to share in eternal life,” said the Anglican.

“Me too.” “Me too.”

“Me too.” “Me too.”

And the Unitarian was silent.

⁵ Adapted from a telling of this story by Jim Wallace.

“I believe the real meaning of Easter, in addition to what has already been said, symbolizes that the bodies of all people will be resurrected and joined to their souls to share their final fate,” said the Catholic.

“Me too” was heard again from them all.
And the Unitarian was silent.

The group then turned to their Unitarian friend,
whom they all recognized as a little strange, and said,
“Your silence is a mystery to us. Just what do you believe
as a Unitarian is the real meaning of Easter?”

And the Unitarian said: “I believe the real meaning of Easter
is the appreciation of life’s renewing cycles
and, that for all things there is a season.”

“I believe the real meaning of Easter is the acknowledgment,
with its accompanying sadness, of a very human Jesus
who was forced to die on the cross because of his radical religious views.”

“But most important of all, I believe the real meaning of Easter
is the celebration of thanksgiving for the presence of the sacred
in each and every living person and thing;
for the presence of the sacred in the birds that sing;
for the presence of the sacred in the flowers which sway
and the grasses that rustle in the gentle breezes of spring.”

“This is what I believe is the real meaning of Easter,” said the Unitarian.

“Me too,” sang the birds. “Me too,” waved the flowers.
“Me too,” rustled the grasses. “Me too,” sighed the wind.
And all the rest were silent.

Friends, on this frigid Easter morn,
let us summon the strength and courage to be silent no more.

Let us lift up the bright, bold strains of Hallelujahs,
affirming that this life is precious and good.

Let us sing the triumph song that proclaims love endures,
and that we live on and on in the hearts of others.

Let us know the deep promise of living in all that we do and are.

And with great and grateful joy,
let us celebrate the renewal of the earth around us,
and with it, the resurrection of our own hearts.

Hallelujah!, and Amen.