

True Resurrection

A message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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For years when Easter rolls around I've preached about rebirth, the pagan roots of Easter, spring, and the environment on Easter Sunday. You see, the resurrection of Jesus was never a big draw for a Unitarian Easter. On both our Unitarian and Universalist sides, we come from a Judeo-Christian tradition. The centering message of Jesus' life – and his death – are a part of our inheritance. At the same time, there is not a widespread UU belief in the literal resurrection of the body of Jesus. When you add to this the strange conflation of older pagan traditions – egg hunting, the centrality of the rabbit, both symbols of fertility – then throw in a lot of candy...well. Spiritually, at best what you have is a bit of a mess. There is an old, painfully self-deprecating joke about Unitarian Universalists that goes that if you drive through a town on Easter Sunday you can always tell the UU church apart. All the other churches will have signs that proclaim, "Hallelujah! Jesus is risen." The Unitarian Universalist sign will announce, "Hooray! Flowers are pretty."

This Easter I'm going to spring the resurrection of Jesus on you. But I'm going to do it the way Unitarian Thomas Jefferson did it. He created what we know as the Jefferson Bible. *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, commonly referred to as the *Jefferson Bible*, refers to one of two religious works constructed by Thomas Jefferson. The first, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, was completed in 1804, but no copies exist today. The second, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, was completed in 1820 by cutting and pasting with a razor and glue numerous sections from the New Testament as extractions of the doctrine of Jesus. Jefferson's condensed composition excludes all miracles by Jesus and most mentions of the supernatural, including sections of the four gospels that contain the Resurrection and most other miracles, and passages that portray Jesus as divine. Yes, that is why we are Unitarians. We believe that Jesus was a man whose ministry we should imitate. There, that wasn't so bad was it?

That is the kind of resurrection I call true resurrection. Bringing back the ministry of Jesus, resurrecting his philosophy and ministry on this day. Around the world people are celebrating the resurrection and soon Jesus' ascension to what some call heaven. It is disturbing to me that many of the same people that have a Christ centered theology, who worship Jesus and are celebrating accordingly today are the same people burning black churches, murdering LGBT folks, are wearing hoods or carrying torches in the name of white supremacy, oppressing women and caging children, and who are fighting for the rise of homophobia, bigotry, racism, classism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism. They are building walls, building prisons, and encouraging violence and creating an uninhabitable planet. I ask you, how can you both embody the ministry of Jesus and kill, oppress, and destroy? You can't. In this case you would be resurrecting hate and ill will this Sunday morning, not Jesus.

We need Easter. We need resurrection. Easter matters. Easter is our call to remember: what has passed away? What has suffering brought us? What needs to be reborn? What metaphor or

experience pulls you back to life, to being able to love more deeply or feel loved more deeply? That is true resurrection. When I think of what Easter means for Unitarian Universalists, true resurrection, this is the lesson that I would point towards. What happens to us, to our own spirits, to our relationships, to our sense of community, when events shake our world and disappoint our dreams? Do we practice denial? Do we engage in petty feuds? Do we practice destructive betrayal?

Or, do we do something else? Do we turn not away but towards one another? Do we find ourselves strangely in love? Do we minister to the disappointment of our brothers and sisters? Do we return to our ability to let go of our own ego needs and to take the time to understand the needs of someone else. Or, as Daniel Budd puts it,
 “We’re not sure what happened. But, we know what it’s like to feel sorrow and loss, despair and grief. We know the waves of tears and the thoughts of the past which flow through us, which begin to fill the emptiness with stories and memories, begin to shore us up again with a different presence which will live with us for all of our lives...
 “We know that there is a difficult hope, a faith, that through the living of whatever sorrow and grief we feel (and will continue to feel on occasion) there is also a growing sense of grace and gratitude, of joy and thankfulness, in the mysterious and abiding astonishment of human being.”

Earlier I pointed a finger at Christians who have Jesus at the center of their theology yet they abandon the ministry and teachings of Jesus. Christians haven’t cornered the market on hypocrisy. Christians aren’t the only ones who declare a theology and not live up to it. Look at our principles listed on the back of your order service. How did you do this week in living Unitarian Universalism? How do we measure up to the timeless teachings and ministry of the human, Jesus? Jesus was a teacher, a healer, a prophet within the Jewish tradition, a mystic, and a social radical, like us. He taught that people could have the ability to transform their own lives – by loving one another, by loving even their enemies, by living simply and not placing their faith in money, material things, status, and power.

If people followed the model of how he lived his life, and if they followed his teachings, he seemed to suggest, their lives would be changed for the better. And Jesus lived and taught about a new social order – what he called “the Kingdom of God” – that would be based on love and compassion. People could transform their congregations, their communities, the world around them, if they followed his teachings. The possibility of such a transformed world is all around us, Jesus taught, but people don’t see it. And why don’t they see it? Because they are so caught up in their egos, in their materialistic desires, in their efforts to obtain power over other people, that they forget to live simply and compassionately.

And this, it seems to me, is the essential message that Unitarian Universalists can gain out of the Easter story – our community should be a community of transformation – transformation in our personal lives, transformation of this community of faith, transformation of the world around us. It is appropriate that Easter is celebrated in the spring – the time when the world is transformed from the dormancy of winter to the vibrancy of new growth; the time of rebirth; the time of hope.

We gather this Easter morning perhaps for messages of spring, rebirth, the pagan notion of fertility. Those are worthy messages. But don’t give up on resurrection this Easter. Return to your ability to love, your commitment to our faith and its principles. Be open to true

resurrection. May we find the strength, the wisdom, the clarity of mind and purpose, to continue the work of transformation in our own lives. May we find the love, the compassion, the sense of beloved community, to continue the work of transformation in the life of this congregation.

May it be so.