

Easter – It's Not Just For Christians Anymore

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Good morning, and Happy Easter. For several years, Joyce and I attended Easter sunrise services outside on the lawn at Plymouth Congregational Church, and it took me awhile to figure out that even if spring had arrived, sunrise in Montana in April was inevitably going to be darned chilly. I generally froze my tush off sitting on a cold metal chair during the service, and I mainly hoped that we could sing our Hallaleujahs! in a hurry and get inside where it was warm.

But sunrise services are an Easter tradition in most Christian denominations in America. More secular traditions include a ham dinner, the Easter bonnet, the Easter bunny, and Easter eggs, and I suspect some of those might be part of your Easter today, no matter what your thoughts about the underlying event.

Other countries have different Easter traditions. One of the most interesting I found while researching this service was in Norway, where an Easter tradition is – and I swear I'm not making this up – murder mysteries. Television networks have Easter week crime and detective specials. Publishers put out special Easter packages of murder mysteries. And even milk cartons have 'mini-mysteries' printed on the side for you to read over your cereal during the Easter season.

One of most intriguing customs comes the day after Easter in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where men make a special whip called a *pomlázka* out of willow branches, then go around and spank women with it. Women who are spanked show their thanks by giving the man a decorated egg. And apparently,

women are insulted if no man comes by to spank them. I will not attempt to interpret this custom, but I will note that Joyce showed absolutely no enthusiasm whatsoever for the idea.

Whatever the custom, Easter is of course one of the two most important celebrations in Christendom, along with Christmas. It marks the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday, and his resurrection on Easter morning. In the Christian faith, Jesus takes on the sin of the world, and expunges it through his death. His resurrection represents the promise of eternal life for all believers.

And that, of course, makes Easter THE most important celebration of Christianity. Christmas may be observed more enthusiastically, or at least more commercially. But Easter and the resurrection represent the heart of Christianity. No one says it clearer than the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 13: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."

So this is the crux of the issue for Christians. They can believe whatever version of the Nativity story they want, whether it's the three kings or the shepherds in the field, or neither one. They can believe in the virgin birth or not, and really do no harm to their faith. They can still call themselves Christians. But if they do not believe in the resurrection, then what is the basis of their faith? How are they still Christians?

That's what I faced in my youth. I was raised in the Lutheran Church, Missouri synod, which preached the literal truth of the Bible. But by the time I had finished high school, I no longer accepted the Bible as literal truth. I did not believe the world was created in seven, 24-hour days. I did not believe that a talking snake got a human couple thrown out of the Garden of Eden by tempting Eve. And I did not believe that a body could lie dead for three days, then

miraculously be physically returned to life. And that ended my churchgoing for 25 years or so.

When I returned, it was in a much more liberal faith – the United Church of Christ. But even then, I have to admit that with my Lutheran background, I was startled when a Congregational minister said from the pulpit that he wasn't totally persuaded of the literal truth of the resurrection. I was shocked. A minister? Not believe in the resurrection? It seemed to me to be heresy. But while I cannot speak for everyone in this room, I suspect it is a heresy shared by most folks here.

So where does that leave Unitarian Universalists in regard to the resurrection? Does it have any relevance to us, other than as an interesting story, pervasive in our culture? Are there truths that we can learn from the story of the resurrection, even if we do not accept its literal truth?

In the reading I've done of UU ministers and their Easter messages, the answer is yes, but the reasoning varies. Here are some of the answers offered by UU ministers about the meaning of Easter to Unitarian Universalists.

The first, and simplest, is the notion of renewal and new birth. This goes all the way back to the historical non-Christian roots of the Easter festival. The name Easter comes from Eostre, a pagan goddess of spring. Feasts celebrating the goddess Eostre included eating eggs, symbolic of new birth. In this theme, we can celebrate the story of the resurrection as a metaphor for new life, new beginnings. We can celebrate the symbolism of the flowers, which wither and die each fall but are born again each spring, bursting with life and color and hope. We can celebrate the continuing cycle of life.

This is certainly valid, and I respect that many people are satisfied with this. But for my own part I was not satisfied; it seemed a bit too simple. I wanted

something deeper, and so I looked further. And I found what I call the Dietrich Bonhoeffer school of thought.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an evangelical Lutheran minister in Germany in the 1930s, as Adolph Hitler came to power. As Hitler's power grew and Bonhoeffer's preaching against him became more dangerous, friends in America found him a position at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, for his own safety. But after only a short time in America, Bonhoeffer found his conscience could not let him stay. He returned to Germany. He helped Jews escape, and was active in the resistance. He was part of a plot to assassinate Hitler, which of course failed. He was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. There, he wrote famously on the meaning of life. He was executed, gruesomely, only a few weeks before Germany fell.

To some, Bonhoeffer stands as a parallel to Jesus, one who realized that a life well lived is a life concerned about more than simply avoiding death. There are causes worth dying for. And death, for a worthy cause, can result in a form of immortality in the better world that results from this sacrifice. The memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his writings, inspired countless others, and so there are some that suggest his story parallels that of Jesus.

It is a powerful statement, and at first I thought it was one I could live with. In fact, the first working title of this sermon was: The Death and Resurrection of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But the more I thought about it, the less I was satisfied with it as my explanation of the meaning of Easter. It seemed unnecessarily grim, more of a pep talk for soldiers embarking on a suicide mission than a story that will help us direct our lives. Certainly, we know that personal sacrifice can lead to a better world. But few of us will ever be called upon to sacrifice, or even to risk our lives for a greater good. It is far more likely that we will be called to sacrifice by using cloth grocery bags instead of plastic, or by using compact fluorescent

lightbulbs. While this may well help build a better world, trying to draw it as a parallel to Dietrich Bonhoeffer seemed a little over the top.

The interpretation of Easter that finally struck a chord with me was one that some commentators have argued was the original position of Jesus' followers after the resurrection. It is simply that the resurrection of Jesus refers to a spiritual resurrection, not a bodily resurrection. I mentioned Paul's epistle to the Corinthians. This was, of course, a letter to a new church in a new religion, trying to explain what the teachings of that religion were. Later in the same chapter, Paul says this about the resurrection: "When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed. ... It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

A UU minister in Wisconsin named Glenda Claire Walker wrote about this in an Easter service awhile back. And she argues that the interpretation as a spiritual resurrection rather than a physical resurrection is consistent with biblical accounts, if they are read from an allegorical rather than a literal point of view.

For example, when Mary Magdalene met Jesus outside the tomb, she thought she was talking to the gardener. But after she and the gardener talked about Jesus, she saw Jesus in him. When two travelers from Jerusalem to Emmaus talked to a stranger on the road about the crucifixion and the lessons of the man who died, they came to realize that Jesus was with them. When they told the disciples about this occurrence, suddenly Jesus was among them. Reverend Walker argues that, in the Gospel accounts, nearly every time Jesus appeared after his resurrection, he appeared first as a stranger. But as his disciples, friends and family mourned his death and talked about his life, the stranger in their midst was recognized as Jesus.

This is what Reverend Walker wrote: "It was where two or three were gathered in his name, mourning for him, talking about him, that the seeds Jesus

planted during his life grew in the souls of those who knew him. It was there, as they walked and talked together, that the truth of Jesus' life was resurrected in the spiritual body of his followers. That spiritual body became the Christian church."

"So what is the message for UUs in the Gospel stories of Jesus' resurrection? ... These stories confront us with the meaning, not just of Jesus' life, but of our own lives as well. They confront us with the meaning we give our lives and the meaning others give to our lives."

This past Friday, Joyce and I attended the funeral of Joyce's Aunt Eula in Billings. Eula died last Sunday at the age of 88; Joyce was able to be there, to say goodbye, and to tell Eula that she loved her. On Friday, Eula's children and her grandchildren, friends and extended family, all gathered to say goodbye and to tell stories about Eula and how she touched their lives.

Now, in my mind's eye, I do not picture Eula as an angel, sitting on a cloud and strumming a harp – not unless they're willing to let her have a cigarette while she's playing. And I don't expect in any hereafter to come face to face with Eula and her husband Arnold and talk with them about old times. But I can say this: Eula was there on Friday. Her spirit pervaded that memorial service. She lives on in her children and grandchildren, and she will continue to live on in their children and grandchildren. The seeds she planted in the souls of her family and friends will grow and prosper, and that is immortality. It is the same immortality, I believe, that infused the apostles after the death of Jesus and led to the birth and growth of the Christian church.

That of course raises the question of our own immortality. As Reverend Walker asks, what seeds are we planting as we live in this finite, perishable, physical body? What of our essence, our spirit, will rise in our children, our

brothers and sisters, our friends? In the days after our death, when our family and friends come together and talk about us, what essence will be resurrected?

I believe that there is a resurrection and immortality, and I do not believe it is exclusive to Christians. On the contrary: everyone lives on after their death, in thought and deed.

And so perhaps that is the true value of Easter. It reminds us that we all will leave a legacy to those who follow us. And remarkably, we have the ability to shape that legacy, to shape our own immortality, through the choices we make through life. May they be wise choices.

Shalom, and Happy Easter.