

Resurrection and Other Mundane Events

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Perhaps no other Christian holiday presents as many challenges to Unitarian Universalists as does Easter. Even Christmas, admittedly a much more secularized holiday than Easter, fits very well within Unitarian and Universalist theology. But we have been at odds with the Easter story almost from the beginning; hence Greg Ward's test for aspiring ministerial candidates. Easter, as he correctly points out, is a holiday that has double vision. It is as much about the Pagan undertones as it is about the Christian overtones. What are some of the key messages of Easter that UUs have struggled with?

Sin and salvation for one. This is particularly strong within Protestantism. To have faith that Jesus' death and resurrection are real events that took place in human history is the litmus test for salvation according to most Christians. To deny the events that are described in the Bible, and commemorated during Easter week, is to miss the boat and be abandoned to an eternity of sinfulness and suffering. Many church doctrines flow from this single act of faith. If Jesus can die and

come back to life then he must have two natures, a human one that dies and an immortal or spiritual one that comes back to life. Therefore he must be part God. Or was he fully God? Who can figure out this mystery precisely? Yet if you get it wrong, you get burned at the stake as a heretic.

Which raises another challenge the Easter event has for Unitarian Universalists: the tension it creates between reason and faith. Perhaps the most eloquent commentator on this point was William Ellery Channing, the “Father of American Unitarianism.” He lived during the Enlightenment, and was both a believer who had faith in God and Jesus, but who was not afraid to bring logic and reason to bear on that faith. How could this fuzzy math of three really being one be anything other than illogical? Channing asks. It made more sense logically, and frankly was more consistent with the scripture, to separate the three members of the Trinity. While most Christians would consider this heresy of the highest order, Channing and others rather liked where this led them. For the Unitarians Jesus was a prophet and a teacher, no less and certainly no more. This is actually rather similar to what Muslims believe about Jesus. But it does raise an issue: if Jesus is a human being like any other, and not the “son of God” in some ontological sense, then why did Easter happen? What was the point of it all if not to wash away the sins of the sons and daughters of Adam? Unitarians would counter that such

washing away is unnecessary since we don't believe in Original Sin. This is also why we don't child dedication and not baptisms.

And the Universalist half of us fairs no better at Easter, and actually worse. Indeed, the whole orthodox Christian interpretation of the Easter event starts with the premise that God requires a blood sacrifice so that the sins of all humanity throughout eternity can be forgiven. In other words, it assumes that God is angry, wrathful, and literally out for blood. This is God who condemns. The Universalists start off with a completely different set of assumptions about who God is. God, they teach us, is loving, compassionate and forgiving. This God blesses and is the source of grace, love, and creative good in the universe. To place a limitation on God's love and mercy would be to restrict her infinite nature. It is we who are limited and finite. The Universalists placed their emphasis on Jesus' life, ministry, and teachings. This gave a pretty consistent picture of God's love applied to and for everyone. Grace is for all. But this raises the question, which their opponents would ask, why would Jesus then have to suffer, die and be resurrected? Hosea Ballou, the great Universalist theologian of the 19th century, really didn't have a good response to that. The best he had was that the resurrection was to demonstrate God's love and power to humanity. OK

So those are the classic Unitarian and Universalist answers to the "Easter Exam" as Greg Ward puts it. What is our answer to the Easter

Exam today? What is yours? Well it is a hard question; one that is wrought with landmines. It is easy to paint yourself into a theological corner if you are not careful. Whenever I find myself stuck like that I find it is always best to return to the text itself. What does this piece of scripture say about Easter? What doesn't it say, but rather imply, or have as a subtext? And eventually, if it's late at night and I am really wrestling with the Bible like Jacob at the banks of the Jabbok, I start to ask questions like, "Who wrote this stuff? What were they thinking?" So this morning I want to do something I don't normally do with you guys, but seeing how it is Easter it feels appropriate, and that is exegesis. Exegesis is just fancy way of saying that we are going to drill down a bit further into the Biblical text which was our Ancient Reading this morning.

Here is what we know about the author of Luke. First of all it probably wasn't a guy named Luke, but more likely someone who was a member of a church founded by Luke and was writing in his name so as to carry a greater degree of authority. This is was not uncommon in those days to do. The same author also wrote the book of Acts. He is probably a Greek convert to Christianity, but is pretty familiar with Judaism too. It was most likely written around 70 or 75 AD; approximately forty years after the events described in it take place.

In 70 AD a lot of what we take for granted about Christian beliefs had not yet been fully formed. There was a group of Christians called

the Docetists, from which we get the word “deceit,” who believed Jesus was a spirit who did not become human but instead pretended to die on the cross. Jesus, they believed, was a God and therefore could not die. In the later portion of our reading Jesus repeats again and again, “look at my flesh” and he eats food! These are things you can only do with a human body. So Luke is telling a story that takes place forty years before his time, but he is also arguing against some of his contemporaries who he feels have mistaken views, to put it kindly.

Which I suppose begs the question of why write any of this down at all? Or better, why right it down in 70 as opposed to immediately after Jesus died. The early Christians believed that Jesus was coming back very soon, and that he would end the rule of the Roman Empire. Needless to say this did not happen, and in fact the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem right around 70 AD. This was a catastrophe of epic proportions to the Christians and Jews. Jews were expelled from Jerusalem and the Diaspora began. Their God had not protected them, and in fact their enemies had desecrated the most sacred place in their religion. Christians had a double whammy because Jesus hadn't returned like they had thought he would. They were trying to make sense of their faith and their world, and the best way they could was to write down what they knew.

In many ways the Christians of 70 AD had something in common with Jesus' disciples whom they were writing about. The disciples were

also faced with a crisis of faith and meaning. Their guy, the guy who was supposed to be the Messiah at least, and perhaps more than that, had died a humiliating death—a death reserved for common criminals. But you know something miraculous happened. If you are a believer, then the miracle is that Jesus showed us that you can go from the absolute lowest and nastiest place of suffering to the highest and most glorious heights. If you are not a believer, then the miracle is that the followers of Jesus, devastated by his death, were able to still find meaning in those events. Indeed, they took what should have been the end of their movement and brilliantly transformed it into the central event of the Christian religion. Even the most crusty and cynical of atheists has to give them points for creativity if nothing else.

Although my personal theology is no longer Christian, I draw a ton of inspiration and admiration for and from that tradition. Humiliation and brokenness are a part of life. That is the story of Good Friday—the day Jesus died. His followers, decades later when they were penning this story, could easily relate to that dark moment. I am sure it held a great deal of resonance for them. We all feel broken sometimes—like everything that meant something important to us in our life has just evaporated. You saw this in the financial world when the stock market crashed a couple of years ago. That is why brokenness is our theme for the month of April. Normally we talk about the theme for the month on the first Sunday, but for April I wanted to wait until Easter. I have

always thought it was ironic that Easter is so often in the month of April. There is a lot of suffering that seems to happen this time of year, and I don't mean taxes.

April 20th, last Wednesday, was the one year anniversary of the explosion and oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico; the worst environmental disaster in our lifetime. I remember that date nagging me in my head—it is also the anniversary of the Columbine shootings. The killers chose Hitler's birthday to attack their classmate. Another notable anniversary in the news this month was April 12, the 150th anniversary of the attack on Fort Sumter which began the Civil War. This got me thinking: what else has happened in the month of April?

April 15th was the date Lincoln was assassinated. This was the first of a number of notable April assassinations: Martin Luther King was killed on April 4. April 16th this year marked the fourth anniversary of the murder of 32 students at Virginia Tech; one of the worst massacres committed by a single individual in American history. April 14 is easy to remember for me because it is my parent's anniversary, and the date the Titanic sank. Why they got married on that date I don't know. This Tuesday April 26 is the silver anniversary, twenty-five years, since the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl. April 19 has two. It is the date the FBI invaded the compound of the Branch Dividians in Waco Texas. The Dividians set fire to the compound killing themselves. Two years later a disturbed Gulf War veteran named Timothy McVeigh, blew

up the federal building in Oklahoma City on the same date as an act of revenge for Waco.

I, like you, remember many of these events, and the ones further back in history we have read about and know how the people of the time reacted. The reactions are really all the same: disbelief, shock, horror. The mental supports we operate under were torn asunder on these days, and we remember them for that reason. I am not a superstitious person when it comes to dates. I am sure you could create a list similar to mine for any month you choose. And there are lots of good things that happened in April; my youngest son was born in April. But the anniversaries of these tragic events, and so many dramatic ones in such a short period of time, point to how fragile our sense of well-being is.

Even though the death of Jesus and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans took place a long time ago, and may mean nothing to us, to the people at the time that was as bad as any of the things that happened in our time. Events like these make us question, “Why did this happen to me or to us?” These events force us to look death and evil square in the face, and make us question the nature of humanity. No small number of people question their faith at such times. We might categorize these April mega-tragedies as “Good Friday” events. Like Jesus on the cross we ask, what is the meaning of it all?

But Easter is not Good Friday. Easter is the resurrection that follows the dark night of the soul. Easter is about taking humiliation, shame, and defeat and somehow transforming it into victory, salvation, and life. Easter is finding hope unexpectedly in the very darkest of the darkest night when there was no reason to ever expect hope. Christians believe that Easter is the presence of God in our lives no matter what, no exceptions. Romans 8: 38-39 “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Grace comes as a gift to us without doing anything to deserve it. It comes from the God that loves.

That is why I propose a change in symbolism. The symbol that best represents Easter is not the empty cross, or even the tomb with the stone rolled away. No the greatest symbol of Easter is the Easter egg hunt. I remember as a child scouring my grandmother’s house looking for Easter eggs. Being the oldest, I was only supposed to get the eggs that were up high, while my sister could get the ones that were hidden down low. I would always check the ladle that hung above my grandmother’s stove; the Easter Bunny found that to be an irresistible spot. We also had to find where the Easter Bunny hid our basket full of candy. When you finally found that; man that was something. You were searching and searching, and then finally you open the closet door

and there it is as big as life. You count the number of Cadbury eggs you got and maybe a Star Wars action figure if you were good. It was an amazing thing to find.

That is what Easter is about: encountering the amazing right in your own back yard. In these Good Friday moments we are questioning our life and searching for answers and meaning. Easter teaches us that in the middle of all that we can still find grace; a surprising gift. For those of you less deity inclined let me offer you this: remember hunting for Easter eggs in your backyard or your living room? Here was a patch of land that you probably knew like the back of your hand. Maybe you stopped paying attention to it or noticing details of it most of the time. But on Easter morning every one of your senses is attune, your eyes are peeling away doilies and trying to catch a glimpse of a brightly colored round object in the place where you eat breakfast every morning. In the midst of the mundane, your everyday life, there is a hidden treasure. During an Easter egg hunt you are open to that treasure far more than you are any other day. I assert to you that the real miracle is paying attention to our life with that level of intensity. Oh if only we looked upon our spouse and partner with the same eyes of attention and understanding; or our children, our parents, or our co-workers. What Easter eggs, what miracles would we discover in them? Those hidden treasures surround us. They are all over the place. Usually we don't go looking until we have had one of those mega-tragic Good Friday

experiences come our way that forced us to question the key elements of our lives that gave us meaning. Don't wait for that day to come—look for your eggs, your grace, your sense of purpose, today. You might just find it hiding in an unlikely spot. Here ends my answer to the exam.
Amen Blessed Be.