

## Easter All Over the Place

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Good morning and happy Easter Sunday ... a day of finding Easter eggs (which links back to Osiris) as well as a celebration devoted to the fertility of spring and rabbits; a day for egg hunts and baskets of candy; a day of wearing huge beautiful hats to church and if one is very lucky a dinner of ham and perhaps scalloped potatoes. And a day when your preacher starts out her Easter sermon with a joke. It's one of the only jokes I know.

There were two Rabbi's Moshah and Yonkel who were best friends. They had actually been best friends for many years, since before they went to Rabbinical School. They remained friends after each went their separate ways to lead different synagogues. They were old men, long retired. They spent a lot of time together playing chess and eating fabulous deserts, because really why not? And they were obsessed with the final question, the big question, what happens after you die? They made a solemn vow to each other that whichever of the two of them died first, he would stop at nothing to contact the other and let him know.

And it came to pass that Moshah died first. Yonkel sits Shiva and says Kadish for eleven months. Nothing happens. Then after a few years, the phone rings one evening, "It's Moshah!"

"Moshah is that you?"

"Yes, it's me but I can't talk long."

"So then quick tell me what's it like asks Yonkel!"

"Oh it's wonderful here. I sleep late, have a big breakfast and then I make love. If the weather's nice, I usually go out into the fields and make love again. I come back inside for lunch and take a nap. Then I go out into the fields and make love, sometimes twice. I have a big dinner, and then most evenings, I romp through the fields again and celebrate life. Then I come inside and go to sleep."

And that's heaven?" Yonkel gasps.

"Heaven?" says Moshah. "Who said anything about heaven? I'm a rabbit in Minnesota!"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Kushner Kabbalah A Love Story.

Such a great story and it has some elements of the Easter Story like rabbits, renewal and regeneration or as some would call it, life after death. Easter is also a reminder that suffering and death are not the last words and that new life takes a lot of energy and commitment. All too often though, people take the Easter stories in the bible literally as if they were facts. They are not, and were never meant to be taken this way. They are metaphors useful for the life of our spirits.

In mainline and evangelical Christian traditions, Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some, but not all Christians, understand the resurrection stories as metaphor.

I was on Facebook (*font of all knowledge!*), a few weeks ago and one of the threads that an old college friend of mine commented on frustrated me. Apparently, there have been more ancient manuscripts and gospels found that have different versions about how Jesus died, where he was buried, and made no mention of the rolling away the tomb and Jesus, glowing in a dazzling white garment, sort of like a laundry commercial. My friend's friend, having read of this new piece of history, was devastated. He said this new information made him sick and he didn't think he could be a Christian any more. I was only slightly surprised that he felt this way, but I was even more shocked how my friend, who has a degree in history, responded. She, too, seemed not to understand several pieces of knowledge that I find helpful in evaluating the resurrection messages in the four canonical gospels; Mark, Luke, Matthew and John.

First, it's important to remember there were hundreds of gospels written. Every small community had their own stories about the life and teachings of the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. Each of them emphasized elements of Jesus' life and teachings that spoke to the life of that particular community. It was only when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity that uniformity of gospel and belief in the trinity became mandated as the "correct" beliefs and other beliefs were labeled as heresy. In fact, bishops in the various communities were instructed - required - to destroy all gospels other than the final four.

Some of these monks, priests, elders and bishops could not bring themselves to destroy these texts so they buried them in caves and in pottery-itself buried deep in the ground. Some of these texts include the gospels of Thomas, Mary, and Peter.

This rigidity of Christian belief remained fairly contained and unchallenged with the exception of the split between Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics until the 1500's. But when looking at our Unitarian and Universalist history we can see prior to the 300's there was not an orthodoxy, nor a singularity of beliefs regarding Jesus and the nature of the Divine. In fact, there was a plurality of beliefs similar to what we have now in Christianity.

So back to this sad, shocked Facebook guy who felt that this newly discovered ancient gospel, written at the same time as the others but without mention of a resurrection, ... if true, tainted his entire Christian life as he knew it and called all his beliefs into question. I wanted to reach through my computer monitor and shake this guy by the shoulders and at the same time hug and comfort him.

I wanted him to know that many Christians and UU's follow the teachings of Jesus rather than the stories about his life and dying. The spiritual truths that Jesus shared are much more fertile than the stories about his death. His primary spiritual truth was: love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor. He took all the legalese of the Ten Commandments and boiled them down to what he thought was paramount to good spiritual living. Urging people to let go of the *letter* of the law and move with the *spirit* of love. This is a core part of our theology as elucidated in our 4<sup>th</sup> source: Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. It is also a foundational piece of our "Standing on the Side of Love" justice movement.

When many sects of Judaism back then focused on and taught that some people were clean and others like Samaritans were unclean, Jesus told stories about Samaritans who were heroes. Jesus hung out with women who were also labeled as unclean. He hung out with beggars, lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes; all folks who had been marginalized by certain unfortunate Jewish teachings which themselves perpetuated false divisions and injustices. Jesus first and foremost was a rabbinical reformer. When Jewish scriptures described a jealous, vengeful, deity, Jesus referred

to God as dad and friend. Some people thought that having a personal, direct non-mediated relationship with God was heretical. Others reinterpreted this teaching and turned Jesus into a God with whom they could have a personal relationship.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with a many-threaded story of new life, new hope and courageous living and loving. All the way back to one of our super heroes, Theodore Parker...the guy who came up originally with the saying “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” ... That guy from mid 1800’s preached that we concern ourselves with the teachings and lessons of Jesus rather than those about Jesus, in a sermon entitled, “The Permanent and the Transient in Christianity.”

We may take refuge in the Buddha or Jesus, but we do not expect them to save us from life or hell. In fact we believe that hell is created by how we live and treat each other and earth. We do not need any one person to die in order to repay a debt to an angry god or redeem us from those original sins. So these are not the ingredients we bring to our Easter Celebration this morning as faithful Unitarian Universalists.

Yes, the Easter story is about suffering, death and new life. It is a very human story deeply familiar to us all with the living texts of our own lives as examples. I do not understand why the story of Jesus’ death has been fetishized with the torture he suffered raised up, encased and it seems almost gleefully reenacted. Here is the thing. We all suffer. The folks in Syria are suffering. I have suffered. As I get to know the folks in this congregation, I see how many of you have suffered, too. And this congregation has suffered. But that is not the end of the story.

When I say that I privilege the teachings of Jesus rather than the teaching about Jesus, it does not mean that how he lived doesn’t matter. I have very little tolerance for judgmental people who proclaim one thing but live an incongruent life. What we say matters becomes empty breath and talk if we don’t live into our stated values. Jesus did not just say there is no “us” and “them”, he hung out with the oppressed, marginalized, unclean folks. In fact how he lived his life had such an effect on people in his community that his teaching live on imperfectly followed even now.

All I can say about his death is that he died. In fact that is how the original text of the Gospel of Mark ends. There was no mention of resurrection. What happened after he died was an unexpected miracle. More and more people found his teachings to challenge both how they thought about life and how they lived their lives. They found spiritual nourishment in letting go of the letter of the law and instead loving and accepting people.

The moral imperative that Jesus of Nazareth set down for his followers is still super important today. This moral imperative calls us to not privilege people of one skin color or country over another. It calls us not to throw people with pre-existing conditions away ... not to deny them health insurance, in fact, not to in any way make a profit off of health. It calls us to demand that transgendered folks and those that identify on other parts of the LGBTQ spectrum to be treated with dignity, with the ability to marry, to walk down the streets at night, to be able to safely relieve themselves in a public restroom without fear of harassment, arrest or jail time. In the teachings of Jesus, God is loving, the very embodiment of love and we express that love when we clothe the naked, feed the hungry, care for the sick and visit the prisoner.

Easter is an invitation. In practical terms, it reminds us that how we live our lives and how we live into our beliefs can have an impact long after our physical bodies die. Spiritually we are reminded that after the inevitable suffering in life, after the times we feel dead inside, or shut down, or crushed, when we feel encased in darkness and can't see our way forward ... those times ... times that many of us have known at some point in our lives ... these times do not have to be the end of the story.

Not only have I seen this spiritual reality unfurled in my own personal life, I am seeing it right now. Right here with you and our Church of the Desert. Take a minute and let's think about it. This community has experienced the death of Rev. Suzanne and the resultant confusion, disorientation, sense of loss and sorrow. There was conflict and anguish. Some people left. For a while, it seemed that one disaster and unfortunate event after another came winging toward us. It was as if we were in a very tight space and more boulders of sorrow and confusion came tumbling down upon

this congregation and especially our board of directors and many of the committee members and chairs of committees. Think about it. UUCOD had it's own suffering ... one might say of biblical proportions.

But was that the end of the story? NO. Did UUCOD cease to exist? No. As Tyler Perry's Madea would say, "Hell No!" Instead, this community banded together and lowered their collective heads and leaned in to the headwinds of chaos. Hugs and stories were shared and tears were shed. Hard questions were asked.

And then what happened? I call it the Church of the Desert *superbloom*. The tears, the sorrow and the upheaval ... rather than completely shut down the church ... have led to what I could describe today as a resurrection. Another way of saying it is that Easter is happening all over the place: both here in our church community and in the surrounded countryside.

That being said, it is important to remember two things. Death and destruction are not the last word nor are they the end. And at the same time, Easter and resurrection are not automatic. Nobody does it for us. In fact, they require hard work, patience, a supportive community and an orientation towards new life and new opportunities.

When I think of real life stories that mirror the spiritual truths found in Easter I think of our desert congregation. I think of all that you have experienced and I see all the beauty and flowering and I think "Halleluiah". It is an honor to experience this Easter with you. Blessed Be. Amen.