

A New Day Dawning

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Reading: from “Celebrating Easter: The Many Ways Unitarian Universalists Find Meaning” by Mark W. Harris

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the central Easter message for Christians, but the idea of celebrating a risen savior makes most religious liberals ignore the concept of resurrection entirely. Historically, our Unitarian Universalist approach has been to talk about Jesus the great ethical teacher. A third way to look at the idea of resurrection neither affirms nor denies its reality, but asks us to celebrate the alternative ways we experience resurrection. A resurrection occurs in the wake of a startling life transformation. What will set us free?

We Unitarian Universalists can celebrate Easter by asking when resurrection is a reality for all of us. If we believe in a creative power which shatters the icy tomb of winter with the life-giving miracle of spring, we have seen a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power which moves tens and then tens of thousands of people to cry out against the injustices of society, enabling the downfall of hatred and prejudice, then we have fomented a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power lying within each human breast which enables us to break the bonds of personal pain and know the hope of new tomorrows, then we have experienced a resurrection.

At Eastertide Unitarian Universalists celebrate the many resurrections of the season. We celebrate the glories of the earth when birds take to the wing and crocuses force their way through the crust of snow to announce the arrival of spring. We celebrate the untold numbers of courageous individuals and groups who have sacrificed their lives to liberate others from oppression and create a more just and loving world. We celebrate the ability of the human heart to overcome personal tragedy or disability and affirm once again the strength to love or excel when many others would have given up all hope. Easter celebrates the times of witnessing, experiencing, and creating the resurrection of human life.

Sermon

I wish you all a Happy Easter this morning. No matter what your particular views or beliefs, no matter how you choose to celebrate – or not celebrate – this the holiest of Christian holidays, I wish you a Happy Easter. As suggested in both our meditation and our reading this morning, for many – Christian and non-Christian, Unitarian Universalist and non-Unitarian Universalist – Easter is more about symbols and metaphors than it is about facts and history.

But as my colleague, the Rev. Scott Alexander suggested in one of his recent Easter sermons:

The truth is, most of us are pretty confused about what metaphors and meanings to take from Easter Sunday, but not as confused as the kids from Mrs. Roger's 4th grade class over at the Radner School.

She asked her eager young students about the meaning of Easter, and the hand of a little Episcopalian boy shot up. "I know," he said confidently, "Easter is when we put up a pine tree and decorate it with lights, wrap presents for each other and sing lullabies to Baby Jesus." "No," said the

teacher, "You've got Easter confused with Christmas...does anybody else know?" With that a little Roman Catholic girl's hand shot up. "Easter is when you fill the house with the smell of cooking turkey, watch football all day, and give thanks for all our relatives who come for dinner." "NO," said Mrs. Rogers, "Someone must understand the meaning of Easter." A little Jewish boy in the class thought he knew. "Easter is when we decorate the front of the house in American flags, go to a big parade, and shoot off fireworks all night." "No, no, no," cried the exasperated teacher, "Doesn't anyone know?" Finally, the Unitarian Universalist kid in the class raises her hand. "Easter is when we remember that after a three year ministry among the Judean people Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, was put on trial by the Roman authorities for being a troublemaker, was crucified on a hill with two thieves, and finally buried in a cave." "Yes! That's right, Suzie," said the relieved teacher, but then Suzie finished, "And then after a couple of days the rock gets rolled away...Jesus comes out and if he sees his shadow, there'll be six more weeks of winter."

I guess part of the reason that story appealed to me was the fact that I actually preached a Groundhog Day sermon this year. I want to be sure we don't share that particular confusion.

But the truth of the matter is that metaphor plays a very important role in religious thought and discourse. It's hard to get a direct handle on many of the deep, fundamental concepts and questions which religion deals with. We need some kind of concrete framework to help us wrap our minds around things like love, forgiveness, redemption, transformation. And so we tell stories, about things like miracles and being raised from the dead, in order to point at spiritual truths about the miracle that is all of life, and about the possibilities of spiritual rebirth and renewal. About the power of hope, of the victory of life over death, and the possibility of a new day dawning. That is what Easter is about. To quibble over whether the Easter story is fact or myth, history or imagination, is missing the more important meanings involved.

A part of my mission this morning is to offer a smorgasbord of symbols and metaphors from which you may choose those that might resonate for you. My central metaphor, as reflected in my title, is of a new day dawning. The dawning of a new day, of course, represents the idea of new beginnings, of a fresh start. The rising sun brings new light to illuminate our path and help us find our way. As we greet the new day, we move from sleep to wakefulness, and from the dark of night to the light of morning.

Our life experience presents a number metaphorical analogues to the dawn of a new day. We generally remark, at this time of year, on the transition from winter to spring, with its accompanying signs of new life. Dormant plants emerge to produce new blossoms and fruits. New generations of birds and other creatures make their appearance in the ongoing cycle of life, death, new life.

Another useful metaphor, that we will be commemorating once again in a few weeks at our Annual Freedom Seder, is the liberation from bondage. As we retell the story of the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, we renew our commitment to the struggle against oppression in our own day, as well as celebrating our own freedom – of body, of mind, of spirit.

And so, as we celebrate the season and the spirit of Easter, we look at the dawn of a new day, moving out of the darkness into the light. We look at the emergence of wakefulness out of sleep, of the green of new spring life out of the dormancy of winter. We look at the struggle for

freedom from bondage and oppression. And witnessing all of those transitions helps to maintain our sense of expectation with respect to other transformations that are just as important, if not more so: moving from fear to courage; from sorrow to joy; from despair to hope, from “no” to “yes”; from death to life.

There was an important word there that I think is one of the key concepts that Easter raises: transformation. Transformation implies change. But it’s not just any change. It’s a fundamental change of the form or nature of something. Getting back to metaphors, one of the most common ones for transformation is the caterpillar who becomes a butterfly. The caterpillar entombs itself in its cocoon, only to emerge – to resurrect - at the dawning of a new day, a new season, transformed into something completely new, with wings, and the ability to fly. What seemed to signify the end of life represented, rather, the beginning of a new life. That’s the kind of Easter experience we hunger for. A transformation from what has been, to what could be.

As much as I like the image of the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, there’s a little something lacking there for me. No metaphor is perfect, I guess. While the newly emerging butterfly *is* actively involved in fighting its way out of the cocoon, the process of transformation seems a bit passive. The caterpillar closes itself in the cocoon, and just waits, while something happens to it. And I think some people, in their religious and spiritual lives, follow that example too closely. There’s the expectation that if you say the right prayer, and have the right amount of faith, then something will happen to magically transform you. Salvation will happen.

Well, my friends, I believe that salvation – transformation – is an active, not a passive, process. Getting from here to there takes some real work, some real effort. And not only that. It also takes some vision to have a sense of where it is we want to go. Perhaps a better metaphor, in my mind, is sailing. To go sailing, you must prepare the boat and rig the sails. In order not to get lost, you need maps, and you need to chart a course. There’s the vision!

Furthermore, you must work with the weather, and the wind, that you find yourself in. The wind, a force beyond yourself, provides the impetus for your movement. And yet by controlling the sails and the rudder, the wind can be harnessed to take you where you wish to go. And one final point. While charts and planned courses are helpful, they do not set hard limits. With a bit of courage, and a sense of adventure, you may end up discovering new places that you never even imagined. But by taking the helm, you can say, like William Ernest Henley in his poem, *Invictus*, “I am the captain of my soul.”

I guess what I’m trying to say is that, if you want and hope for a new day to dawn, don’t just go to sleep and wait for it to happen. Figure out what you can do to help it happen. Add to the light of the new dawn by letting your own light shine brightly in all that you do. Follow Mohandas Gandhi’s advice to “be the change you wish to see in the world.” Be agents of transformation.

Opportunities abound, and I’m pleased and proud to witness the work and actions that many of you are devoting to bringing positive change to our world. I want, especially, to thank you for the wonderful outpouring of support for the upcoming celebration of love and commitment in the lives of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. We have helped to lead our entire community in making an important statement that love is much larger than the small minds of those who would condemn its full expression.

Thank you also to those of you who continue to stand up and speak out against the insanity of a dishonest and economically crippling military adventure in Iraq. Many of us were downtown on Wednesday to commemorate the fifth anniversary of that war, and to repeat our calls to bring it to swift end. But I especially want to recognize those, like Bob Newnham, who

have been out there on the street week after week, over the past five years. It is that kind of dedication, and the commitment to live lives of peace ourselves, that add light to our world and move us closer to that new dawn.

Before I leave the topic of the Iraq War, I'd like to share with you a recent Pastoral Letter from Bill Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dated March 14:

Dear Friends,

It has been five long years of war and occupation in Iraq. Five years. Nearly 4,000 U.S. soldiers dead; many more wounded and maimed. An unknown number of Iraqi dead, some estimate a million; certainly hundreds of thousands. And millions of Iraqis displaced from their homes.

Many of you, like me, have been praying and protesting this war, since before it began.

There are some things we know:

We know that the invasion of Iraq and the occupation were based on lies.

We know that our nation chose to act unilaterally, disregarding the international community.

We know that if there had been no oil beneath those sands, and no oil in the region, this war would never have taken place.

And we know that this war has squandered the reputation of this nation; squandered the sympathy and solidarity the rest of the world felt for us after 9/11.

We know all of these things.

We know that the financial cost of this war, ultimately to be measured in trillions of dollars, has made the United States a debtor nation.

But perhaps the greatest cost has been to the spirit, to the soul of this nation.

There is, of course, a value in faithfulness, a value in continuing to raise our voices. But I have to acknowledge that it would be easy to stay in lamentation. It would be easy to simply critique and complain about the actions...and the inactions of our government.

As people of faith, we have to go deeper.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

"In the peace movement there is a lot of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding. The peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not yet able to write a love letter."

What would a love letter to our leaders look like? For me, such a letter would move beyond criticism and search for a ground of hope. For me, such a letter would lift up a vision of what we can become, as well as acknowledge who we are.

We should tell the world, and ourselves, that we are now willing to move into right relationship with the community of nations. We need to promise to hold the values of justice, equity, compassion, and honesty in high regard. We should promise to search for win-win, not we-win solutions.

We might tell the world that religious differences can be a blessing, not a curse. And that the heart of all of the world's great faith traditions, including Islam, rests in the power of love, not hate.

The world should hear from us that the interdependent web of existence does not end at our borders.

And I would tell the world, and ourselves, that we want not only to reclaim the image, but to create the reality of Americans as fair, compassionate and kind people. We want to become the kind of people we thought we were.

As a person of faith, I know that peace will not come because we simply wish for it, or even pray for it.

Peace will only come when we begin to embody it, when we begin to make it real in our personal lives and in the life of this nation.

Although we are marking five years of war, this is the season of rebirth and renewal, the season which every year offers the promise of the transformation of despair into hope. This can be a time of hope. This can be a time when we commit ourselves to the creation of the Beloved Community.

May we hold the vision of what can be in our hearts. It can see us through.

In faith,
William G. Sinkford

Hold a vision, and act so as to make it reality. May we all work together to hasten the dawning of a new and better day. Finally, I leave you with a poem by James Broughton, called Easter Exultet. I believe it wraps up and summarizes much of what I've been saying this morning:

Shake out your qualms.
Shake up your dreams.
 Deepen your roots.
Extend your branches.
 Trust deep water
and head for the open,
 even if your vision
 shipwrecks you.
Quit your addiction
to sneer and complain.
 Open a lookout.
 Dance on a brink.
Run with your wildfire.
You are closer to glory
 leaping an abyss
than upholstering a rut.
 Not dawdling.
 Not doubting.
Intrepid all the way
Walk toward clarity.
At every crossroad
 Be prepared
to bump into wonder.
Only love prevails.
En route to disaster
insist on canticles.
Lift your ineffable
out of the mundane.
Nothing perishes;
nothing survives;
everything transforms!
Honeymoon with Big Joy!

May it be so.