

Easter Sermon: “Born-Again Unitarian Universalists”
Rev. Martha Hodges April 12, 2009

Easter is a bigger deal in some Unitarian Universalist congregations than in others. Those that do make any kind of fuss over Easter tend to celebrate it as a rite of spring. It’s about rebirth and renewal of the earth. A holiday that is basically pagan in origin. The welcoming back of light and warmth and new growth. Even the death and resurrection of Jesus have their roots in ancient, pre-Christian traditions: the death or sacrifice of the male god, the sun god, and his resurrection in the spring.

Now I grew up before the days of acknowledging pagan roots, when paganism was still a bad word, but nevertheless, the Easter of my church was all about spring: hyacinths and lilies, Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs. Not to mention a new pair of patent leather shoes, white gloves and a hat. Yes, I’m old enough to have worn gloves and a hat on Easter. Minus the gloves and the hat, this is still pretty much the conventional UU approach to Easter.

And it’s a perfectly good one. Easter **is** about spring, and renewal and rebirth of the earth. It’s about the resurrection of nature. But it’s also about the resurrection of spirit, and the Resurrection with a capital R: the resurrection of Jesus. That impossible story about the god-man who was laid in the tomb, a rock rolled before the mouth of that cave tomb, and the purported miracle of his disappearance from that tomb. A disappearance that was explained by his later followers, the authors of the Gospels, as a rising from the dead, followed by a bodily ascension to Heaven.

Easter is about all kinds of things that we UUs find distasteful – like the idea of sacrificial atonement for our sins. To most of us, it’s a gory and violent tale that glorifies suffering and is premised on the conviction that we humans are innately depraved, cursed with damnation as punishment for the original sin of Adam and Eve. The idea that we might be in need of salvation is insulting to many of us; the sacrifice of Jesus barbaric; and the story of rising from the dead so much superstitious hocus-pocus.

What can the Easter story possibly have to say to us as Unitarian Universalists? Is there anything deeper to be gleaned from this story? Anything more than chirping robins and blooming daffodils?

Now, don’t get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with robins and daffodils. But could there be more to the story? Why, after all, do robins and daffodils move us as they do? Spring celebrations are no doubt an expression of a primal urge. A celebration of fertility; a universal expression of relief and joy that the hard days of winter are past. The resurrection of the earth moves us at this primal level, as a celebration of survival. But I believe that it speaks to us of even more than this. The meaning of Easter cannot be grasped without looking at the meaning of Good Friday. And that is something we enlightened and rational UUs are reluctant to do.

For those of us who are atheists, and especially for those of us who are Jewish, Easter is understandably suspect. UU ministers even have a name for this denominational avoidance: “cross-tinge.” So bear with me today, as I, a non-Christian, a humanist by birth and choice, take a look at the Cross and what it can say to us if we have ears to hear.

Two days ago, I participated in an “interfaith” Good Friday service offered at a local United Church of Christ church, involving the various churches that support the South Sacramento Interfaith Partnership. Now, you might be thinking that an “interfaith Good Friday service” is an oxymoron, and you’d be right. Nevertheless, in a spirit of interfaith connections and collegial cooperation, I agreed to participate. I was nervous about what words I would be asked to read and was prepared to bow out if I were assigned anything I couldn’t say with integrity. So I was relieved when I was asked to read a passage from Isaiah, which, as you may know, is one of my favorite books of the Bible. How bad could it be, after all, if it came from the Hebrew Bible, the so-called Old Testament? I knew that Isaiah was popular with Christians because portions of it can be interpreted as a foretelling of the life and death of Jesus. A version of Isaiah’s words can be found in Handel’s *Messiah*. Well, here is what I read, in part:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;

Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed....

They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

Out of his anguish he shall see the light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities... (*Isaiah*, Chapter 53)

The author of these words was most likely speaking allegorically of Israel, persecuted among nations. That’s one way to understand this passage. However we interpret its historical significance, this passage, I think we can agree, is about injustice, suffering, defiance, hope and, ultimately, victory over oppression – the triumph of good.

If these words of Isaiah offend you, try this. Try imagining that they speak of Martin Luther King instead of Jesus...

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;

Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed....

They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

Out of his anguish he shall see the light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities...

Was not Martin Luther King “wounded” for our national transgression of racial hatred, and “crushed” for our historical iniquities, inherited from the days of slavery? And did not his “punishment” ultimately “make us whole” and did not his bruises heal us? Although “he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth” yet he was crushed with pain. And he, and all of us, have seen his offspring, his people, prosper. “Out of his anguish, he shall see the light... The righteous one... shall make many righteous.”

Or consider this. The cross story, the Good Friday story, is alive, all around us, in the streets, in the schools, in the prisons; in homeless shelters and tent cities, housing projects and food pantries. Consider this: The man standing by the roadside with the sign, “Hungry and Homeless;” the woman stumbling drunkenly down the sidewalk; the man pushing the grocery cart, mumbling angrily to some imaginary enemy... Are not these also “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed by our iniquities”? Our sins of indifference, our unwillingness to see? Do their “punishments” make us whole? In a sense, they do. Those of us who enjoy relative comfort and stability do so, in part, at the expense of those who do not. Our society does indeed sacrifice some that others may prosper.

None of us is unfamiliar with the Good Friday story. We suffer, because we are human and because we are mortal. Because we love and hope and try, and fail. The cross story is all around us and within us.

But here’s the point of this story. The Easter story is also all around us and within us. The Easter story without Good Friday is half the truth. The Good Friday story without Easter is half the truth.

There is no rebirth without death. There is no spring without winter. There is no joy without sorrow. There is no Easter without Good Friday.

The nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist William James, brother of the novelist Henry James and godson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, had this to say about the Unitarians of his day: "It is to be hoped that we all have some friend," he writes, "perhaps more often feminine than masculine, and young than old, whose soul is of this sky-blue tint, whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions, who can think no ill of man or God, and in whom religious gladness, being in possession from the outset, needs no deliverance from any antecedent burden."

This cheerfully optimistic faith is fundamental to our identity. But must it rule out an honest acknowledgement of “dark human passions?”

Ours is among the "once-born" and "congenitally happy" varieties of religion, James wrote. Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing wrong with souls of a sky-blue tint. Nothing wrong with flowers and birds, or, for that matter, with Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs. But we know... We know that suffering is also part of the human condition. Not only the suffering of the abused and disenfranchised, though heaven knows, that ought to be enough to cast some shadows over our sky-blue souls. But what of the suffering of depression, or grief and loss? What of the suffering of job layoffs? Of anxiety and powerlessness? What of the suffering of children? Of burn survivors, for that matter? What of illness, and death? What of despair? What of the cross? Can our souls remain sky-blue in the face of suffering and injustice? Can we celebrate Easter without Good Friday?

I do not believe in the redemptive value of suffering. I don't believe that suffering necessarily makes us more virtuous or better people. But I do believe that it is an inevitable part of every life and that it is less than honest to pretend otherwise. And I do believe that the very meaning of Easter, of rebirth, lies within this truth. So how do we get from the cross to the resurrection, or, to put the question in more UU-friendly terms, how do we get from despair to hope, from winter to spring, from the dark night of the soul to rebirth?

If I knew the magic formula, I'd be something other than a Unitarian Universalist. For, despite our optimism, ours is not the way of the easy answer. Ours is not the Christian answer, that Jesus has saved us. Maybe a more useful question is this: What is the source of hope?

Connection. Connection to each other, to our spiritual longings, to our better selves. Connection to the source of life, the Mystery that surrounds us and embraces us.

Patience. The willingness to wait for the wheel to turn again, and the faith to endure until that time comes. Openness to Grace.

Humility. The humility to recognize that day comes, spring comes, whether or not we will it. The humility to look beyond ourselves for comfort; to recognize that we are not the only ones that matter.

Courage. Courage to keep seeking truth and to revise our assumptions when they prove incorrect. Courage to learn and to change. Courage to love, to risk, to fail, to forgive. Courage to persevere

Gratitude – for the miracle of second and third and infinite chances, of choices for life, every day, every minute.

Love. Love for the unlovable and the lovely;

Compassion, including compassion for our flawed and foolish selves.

And, again, connection. Connection will save us. Connection to each other, to the stranger, to the enemy, to the world of nature; connection to our highest ideals, to our dreams and hopes; connection to our souls. This is the source of our faith. This is our understanding of the Holy... the source of our rebirth, our resurrection, our Easter.