

A SEASON OF MANY RESURRECTIONS

Today we gather on Easter Sunday, a day when over two billion Christians around the world are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. For most Unitarian Universalists Easter comes as a strange and confusing mixture of ideals, values, and memories.

What are your feelings about Easter today?

Is Easter even relevant?

Does Easter mean something to us today as a denomination?

Apparently it does because many of our UU congregations report the Easter Sunday Service remains the most attended service of the whole year, even exceeding Christmas in number of attendees.

I suspect that for many of us the relevance is not rooted in all the doctrinal implications of Easter, but in the feel good memories we bring about Easter from our childhoods.

How many of you celebrated Easter when you were young?

What are your memories?

Who told you about the story of Easter?

Was it your mother or your grandmother?

Was it your Sunday School teacher?

Did you first learn the Easter story from your minister?

Did you hunt Easter eggs?

Were they candy or the real stuff?

I have some fond memories of Easter myself. I remember dying the eggs in the old house that with the cracked linoleum,
the pungent sweet smell of vinegar,
coloring the eggs with crayons,
dipping them in the various colored dyes,
watching with wonder as the white egg shells took on
the various colors.

And I still love the pageantry of great music at Easter,
the grandeur of the old masters,
the peal of the mighty cathedral organs in all their rich tones.

I remember the city park. We kids were confined to the swings while the adults hid the eggs in the park lawn. We weren't supposed to do any peaking while the eggs were being hidden. I am sure I did. Turned loose we scrambled quickly to see who could find the most eggs. Chocolate Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs were not even heard of.

I asked my son how he remembered Easter. "Oh, yes," he responded. I remember we dyed all the eggs. Then you went out and hid them real good, except from our neighbor's dog and he ate every last one of them.

The following year our family went to plastic Easter eggs.

The Christian church of my youth approached Easter with a mixed agenda. On one hand it revered the Christ it believed died to save sinners. On the other hand it, like many Protestant denominations, did not accept as sacred the polytheistic traditions, including Easter, early Christians had co-opted from pagans. Many Muslims have serious concerns about how much the Christian tradition was contaminated by paganism and refuse to celebrate Easter for that reason. But many UU's still find those pagan traditions very meaningful. (I just do not happen to be one of them.) Despite the ambivalence of my childhood church about Easter we still had a lot of fun on.

BEYOND NOSTALGIA how should UU's celebrate Easter this morning?
Or has Easter become so commercialized we should not celebrate it at all?

Did you know, for example:

- Americans spent 1.9 billion dollars In the year 2000 on Easter candy, far more than they spend on candy at Christmas. How far would that go to help a family trying to survive in Haiti?
- Ninety million chocolate Easter bunnies are produced each year.
- Americans consume 16 billion jelly beans each Easter.
- The consumptive trend for Easter candy is rapidly increasing, not decreasing.

- ✓ And an interesting bit of Easter trivia--What is the proper etiquette for eating chocolate bunnies? Well according to 70 percent of Americans they are supposed to be eaten ears first. (Just wanted to see if you were asleep yet.)

Yesterday I passed the White Salmon City Park. A line of at least 100 kids and their parents, brightly colored baskets in hand, stood patiently in the cold, wet drizzle, waiting for a blessing from the high priestess of Easter, a six-foot, pink-suited rabbit. I am not sure who was supposed to be having fun--the wet kids, their chilled parents, or the suited bunny. They all looked wetly miserable to me.

Is there behind all this commercialism some grain of reality about Easter we would not want to miss out on?

I wondered what our UU ministers were saying about Easter and so I looked up Easter sermons by several of them. All of them were quick to note our ambivalence about Easter as a denomination.

The Reverend Nathan Woodliff-Stanley put it this way.

It's a little different going to Easter services in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. We have no doctrine that says you can't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and some of UU's do, but many more of us don't, at least in any traditional sense, so a UU Easter service can sometimes feel sort of like "pretend Easter." It can feel that way, but I don't think it has to. Regardless of what we do or don't believe about Jesus and the Resurrection, there are very real and authentic ways we can celebrate Easter as Unitarian Universalists.

He goes on to suggest Easter is a time for commitment.

Unitarian Universalism is not built upon calling people to commit to a particular set of doctrines or beliefs in Jesus, God, Allah, special holy books, infallible leaders, or anything else.

We don't consider ours to be the only true or acceptable religion, and we don't have the urgency of thinking we are saving people from hell.

But our religion does call us to commitment in our lives, and we do have a message worth sharing, which can very much hold its own with other religious perspectives.

Easter is a time for fun and for family. It is a time for the celebration of life and for honoring springtime and the cycles of nature. It is also a time for revival of our faith and revival of our commitment to a journey of love and truth wherever they may be found.

In 2006 Reverend Peter Morales, who has since become the president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, told his congregation:

There is a temptation, especially among religious progressives, to make Easter simply a celebration of spring and just leave Jesus out of it. I believe that is a mistake [he adds]. Easter is certainly about more than Jesus, but it is also a central religious event in our culture. We would do well to look at what Easter might mean for us.

[Morales commented that he] believed [Jesus'] body, his flesh, died [but it] did not come back to life.

--The power of intolerance killed his body.

--The power of the religious establishment, combined with the power of an oppressive colonial government determined to maintain control, killed him.

--Ignorance and fear killed him.

Ah, but the power of Jesus' message, the power of the vision of human life he taught, did not die. That vision was so strong among his followers that it could not die.

*On this Easter morning, [Morales suggests] our task,
whether you are an orthodox Christian,
a skeptical humanist,
or someone allergic to religious labels
our task is to bring Jesus back to life.*

The Reverend Meredith Garmond at our Gainesville, Florida Fellowship told her members:

We as 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 number 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 terrible personal tragedy or handicap and affirm once again the ability to love or excel when many others would have given up all hope.**

Sometimes grief and pain obscure life and hope.

We can be mired in doubt itself.

We can have acute doubt, as from some specific loss.

We can have chronic doubt, as from long-term conditions that sap hope, that sap the courage to live the conviction that life can be better.

Addictions, or abusive relationships, or work that we resent -- or any pattern of living which is not satisfying -- just goes on and on because we cannot bring ourselves to believe that life can triumph over the forces that beat it down.

And because we DO sometimes suffer doubt that life wins we must keep hearing and keep telling the Easter stories.

- **Jesus Christ is risen.**
- **Jesus taught of a better way of living.**
- **You don't need money, but you do need love.**
- **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

- Love your enemy, too.

Jesus Christ is risen.

Do you doubt it?

Probably, yes,.... sometimes, but let us tell again a story of spring, and remember.

- We *have* overcome losses and failures.
- We *will* overcome others.
- We *can* live a more whole life.
- The earth *has* the ability to regenerate itself.
- We *have* the social ability to join forces with others to overcome greed and violence.

Don't let hopelessness make you think we can't.

Be attuned to reality.

For that reality is,

even though we sometimes forget it,
that reality is resurrection happens and life triumphs.

You see it in the flowers of spring.

You smell it in the air.

It is a truth so real that it cannot be told but only experienced.

It cannot be told, but stories can point to it.

The final ringing message remains.

Jesus Christ is Risen