

Life in Spirit: Reclaiming Resurrection

*Rev. Victoria Ingram
Easter/April 24, 2011*

Happy Easter! As a way to be inspired as I approach writing my sermons, I often look for wisdom in the words written by my Unitarian Universalist ministerial colleagues. And, sometimes around these Christian-based holidays, we UUs seem to run into a problem with Jesus. This week, in looking at sermons preached on Easter in years past, it appears that we UU ministers are more comfortable reaching into the Pagan past and talking about Oestera OR focusing on the traditions of the rebirth and renewal of spring. ANYTHING but Jesus!

I like spring as much as the next person – probably more than some since we’ve now moved to Canada and the signs of spring are a welcome sight at the end of a long, cold winter. But today, I want to talk about the story of Jesus’ resurrection and the message I think is there for those of us looking for hope, inspiration, and celebration in our lives. I hope you’ll listen and hear something new in this story, something to reflect on for yourself.

For a faith tradition firmly planted in the Christian tradition, we have moved far afield from our past. I believe our theological diversity is a strength, a welcoming inclusiveness that offers us a broader field of wisdom, truth, and practice from which to draw. But, I don’t want us to lose sight of our roots. This year, I’ve been sharing with you my thoughts on reclaiming aspects of our Christian heritage that sometimes feel, as least to me, that they have been co-opted by “Christianity Incorporated,” as one of my colleagues termed it.

First, the disclaimer: I don’t believe that the story of Jesus being physically raised from the dead is factually true and I’m not asking you to believe it, either. The stories in the Bible need to be understood within the culture and mythology of their time, just as we understand other stories. Think of Aesop’s fables. We don’t really believe that a tortoise and a hare held a race one sunny summer day, but we do find deeper life lessons in the telling of the tale. Stories, whether factual or not, can contain wisdom and truth.

The story of Jesus’ resurrection must be translated through the mythology and culture of its place in time. And stories of the miraculous were common during the first century of the Common Era. There were many messiahs and healers present in the Middle East of that time. There were many wandering holy men who performed miraculous cures and amazing feats of healing. Virgin births under auspicious circumstances were ascribed to a multitude of honorable figures. Stories of supernatural appearances were commonplace.

Resurrection was also a common theme in the stories of Jesus’ time. Theologian Marcus Borg tells us that, within the cultural context of the time, people did not equate resurrection with resuscitation. And, there were many who were said to have cheated physical death in the stories of that time. One Harvard Divinity School Bible scholar said that “Jesus must have hit a traffic jam ascending into Heaven.”

Jesus didn’t come to start a religion, he came to offer advice about how to live effectively with each other in community. His message to those who listened to him preach was that the “kingdom of God is among you” – it is here and now, in living fully and living within community with others who share your values. Jesus offered a “survival code for the poor and marginalized;” for those in Judea living under the

oppression of the Roman empire. His call was for people to live into life in this very moment, while we are alive on the earth and able to enjoy our relationships, the fruits of the earth, and our very existence in this moment, in these conditions.

Jesus' disciples, and those who followed, believed that his message was too good to die with his physical death. They wanted to share the sense of radical affirmation and acceptance they had experienced in his presence, how they had been transformed by his words and deeds. They wanted people to hear his message of hope for creating the kingdom of God in the here and now, and they knew that to get people to listen and take heart, they would have to emphasize how unique, special, and exalted Jesus was for them in his time among them.

Sometimes we get so concerned about facts that we miss the truth. And, in the story of Jesus' resurrection, the truth is that death does not have to be the end of our lives, that tribulations and troubles do not have to be the sum and whole of the meaning of our existence. What truth are we supposed to take away from this story? That the spirit of life is stronger than the spirit of death.

We Unitarian Universalists have reason to embrace this Easter message, along with the renewal brought by spring, and the hope of new life represented by bunnies and flowers and eggs.

Haven't we all faced adversity – times in our lives when we felt that we were the only one confronting the powers that be, speaking for our hope and conviction that life can be better and more and different than the injustice, pain, and fear we see around us? Haven't we all faced our dark moments of the soul, when we've faced our own mortality or that of those we love because of age, or infirmity, or despair? Haven't there been times when you have felt abandoned and alone, and wondered if you could find the will or courage to go on? We have all spent time in the tomb, waiting and hoping for the stone to be rolled away; to witness the light return to our lives with the dawning of a new day.

In the words of Rev. Dr. Becky Edmiston-Lange, "Resurrection happens all the time....It happens every time people, people like us, face our confusion and grief and pick up our stones and walk; every time the human spirit triumphs over fear and pain. Resurrection happens every time we decide to keep on keeping on, to affirm that in spite of the trials and sorrows of the moment, life still has meaning, that life is still good to live."

Resurrection is a most radical form of change. In order for us to make these kinds of changes in our lives, something must die. In the cycle of the seasons, spring doesn't arrive without enduring winter. We cannot celebrate the joy of Easter without experiencing the pain of Good Friday. To become new selves, we must let some aspects of our old self pass away. Sometimes we choose to enter into this transformative process; but more often it is thrust upon us by changing circumstances or unwanted realities which confront us in our comfort and disrupt us in our complacency. Acorns do not become mighty oaks by staying in their shells.

Resurrection doesn't happen immediately. Change takes time, no matter how much we may yearn to get it over with. Whether we are in the tomb for three hours, three days, or three years, change happens in its own time. We can try to facilitate it, ask for help with it, engage with it, or try to use our time in the tomb of waiting and transforming wisely, but resurrection happens on its own time and cannot be rushed.

In the words of Rev. Peter Friedrichs, “Resurrection is possible, not guaranteed. Some of us may never emerge from our tombs. But it has happened time and again, and it can happen to you and me. We can rise up from the ashes of our defeat, we can roll away the stone, and we can be reborn and remade to live once again.” When we emerge into this new life, into our new and reborn self, we are not in the place where we were when we entered the tomb. With this new energy, new vision, and new understanding comes the promise of possibility and hope.

The truth of the story of Easter – of Jesus’ death and resurrection – is made visible for me as we, imperfect as we are, struggle against the odds to live our Unitarian values. We live the message when we seek to be generous, loving, and welcoming people, encouraging each other to live meaningful lives, no matter what our circumstances. It’s bright promise is in our community of love and care, where we commit and recommit ourselves to one another in our search for truth and meaning.

We conquer death when our faith lives on; when our church community is a source of spiritual strength for people of all ages. We are resurrected when we overcome adversity and live to share our wisdom and learning with each other and those who will move beyond us into the future. That’s what Easter means to us, as Unitarian Universalists.

Hallelujah. Blessed be.

Inspiration for this sermon came from:

Rev. David Keyes, *Being Resurrected* Rev. Peter Friedrichs, *The Truth of the Resurrection*
Rev. Meg Riley, *Discovering a Living Resurrection* Rev. Jane Rzepka, *Skeptical of Sacred Stories?*
Rev. Dr. Becky Edmiston-Lange, *Taking Resurrection Seriously*
Rev. Bob MacDicken, *UU’s Preaching in Vain? An Easter Sermon*