



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Love Lives On

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Senior Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Unitarian Universalists have a complicated relationship to Easter. There's never a time in the calendar of the year that we feel more ambivalent, maybe even openly hostile to the Christian story. It could be that at Easter we are acutely aware of how Christian hegemony is deeply embedded in our American culture. Our school breaks are clustered around the holiday. While Passover food is often relegated to a single shelf at the grocery store, Easter candy and decorations crowd the shelves. And yet it seems like there is never a time of year we are more drawn to the Christian story. For some of us, the holiday remains an important connection to our family traditions and a link to our religious heritage.

Here at Neighborhood, I've never seen a congregation get so excited about Easter baskets! There has been serious joy in making Easter baskets for the children of social workers we sponsor, and absolute glee in prepping for our Egg Hunt. But not all of our memories are positive. One friend of the church I spoke to this week described a very visceral memory of her Catholic upbringing... thick, choking clouds of incense overwhelming her senses, even causing her to faint one year. These memories give her pause at Easter. She's stayed out of Catholic church on Easter ever since she had a choice to do so.

But aside from culture and tradition, there is something deeper at play in our complicated relationship to Easter. Unitarian Universalists are persistent in our search for truth. In fact, we are so persistent we make a claim not to exclude any sources of secular or religious wisdom that might shine a deeper light on life's deepest and most mysterious questions. As close as many of us are to Christianity in our own religious pasts and in our chosen liberal religious tradition, our complicated relationship to it can make us resistant to mining its truth.

Perhaps, like the friend of the church in her childhood memory, we have a visceral memory of feeling choked by our experiences with Christianity. Or it could be our aversion to really sitting with the story of Jesus' life, and in particular, the violent details of his death and accounts of his resurrection.

I wonder what was you might have been feeling when AJ and I told the story of Holy Week. I wonder—even if we are triggered to hearing the story-- Whether we reject or embrace the Easter story as *our* religious truth, or *the only religious truth*, isn't there a part of us that knows there is truth here to be mined?

For me, contemplating the Easter story is an interplay between suspension of disbelief and a childlike wondering—not just about how bunnies lay colored eggs or whether Jesus liked jelly beans, but about why this story is so mysterious, and so powerful. I find myself approaching the story not from a place of doubt seeking evidence that might translate into belief or disbelief to a place of belief seeking understanding, a yearning to discover the kind of religious truth we call wisdom.

Paradoxically, the way to wisdom seems precisely counterintuitive. In spite of all the layers of scholarship on the historical Jesus to sift through, I find that often my approach is less like the Rabbi and more like the child at the Seder. I find myself asking a different set of questions:

Can it be true?

Why can't it be true?

What does it mean if it's true?

Scholar of liberal theology Gary Dorrien has a way of describing this paradoxical of Christian wisdom. He plainly states: "If Christianity is true, it is as true myth." I wonder what how our relationship to Christianity would change if we looked at the story of Easter story as a true myth, trying to communicate a piece of valuable religious wisdom that could have the potential to spiritually nourish us? After all, don't we need the great myths to tell us the truth about who we are as human beings, to teach us about suffering and cruelty, and to give us hope?

The Easter story is a perplexing kind of myth, a reversal of any typical storytelling convention. Here is this myth where the hero is in fact the loser, where God is more powerlessness than powerful. Here's a myth where love lives on as the ultimate victor, passed down from generation to generation through the stories of one larger than life man we call Jesus.

Author C.S. Lewis, perhaps best known for the Narnia Chronicles, was also prolific in his musings on Christianity, and his literary friendship with author J.R. Tolkien. In appreciation of the impressive fictional world Tolkien created in his books, he offered the following praise of the myth:

The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity'. The child enjoys his cold meat (otherwise dull to him) by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savory for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then is it the real meat.

If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.

Lewis somewhat resisted the idea that the Easter story approximated myth, which might imply that it was false. Instead, he argued that called preferred to call it "the myth that became fact." He wrote:

The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. It is not the difference between falsehood and truth.... It is like watching something come gradually into focus: first it hangs in the clouds of myth and ritual, vast and vague, then it condenses, grows hard and in a sense small, as a historical event in first-century Palestine.

In the Easter story, as with myths, perhaps what separates the myth from the fact is the kind of truth and meaning we find in each. We are invited into a mythic space of religious imagination, inviting us to bring a different set of tools to bring us different answers to our religious questions.

One pathway to our religious imagination is through symbols that layer on meaning, penetrating our psyches beyond our rational minds. Easter is full of these symbols. There is the Passover bread and wine, which would become the communion ritual. There is the cross, a symbol of torture and cruelty turned into victory, and the empty tomb, a symbol of life's triumph over death. And then of course there is the symbol of the egg, an ancient symbol of new life and rebirth, which in other places around the globe is dyed an unsettling shade of crimson red to invoke the blood of Christ, not the pale pastels we so commonly see.

In his typical blustery fashion, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked that in fact only those with imagination could grasp the Christian story, saying:

People without imagination really have no right to write about ultimate things. Ultimate religious truth can be grasped only in symbolic form, and the Christ of the cross is the supreme symbol of divine grace. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit.

It's not worth arguing with Niebuhr about whether I qualify as one of those poets in the pulpit, but his point is well taken by this preacher. Whether myth or fact, the mystery of the Easter story mirrors the symbolic language of poetry. At its worst, poetry can seem slightly beyond out of reach, dense, remote, abstract and distant. But then, in moments of transcendence, we glimpse its power. As with poetry, there are moments in the Easter story we feel its wisdom breaking through history to call to us, to touching our outstretched fingers with some deep knowledge we can feel within our bones.

So let's remember the poet's words this Easter:

*Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?
And don't worry about what is reality,
Or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.*

For each of us, may the wisdom of the story shine through like the first rays of sunrise peeking over the horizon, awakening us to experience the warmth of a love that lives on, even after death.

Amen, Happy Easter, and Blessed be.