

Easter Sunday sermon

April 9, 2023

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The story of Jesus' death and resurrection is thousands of years old. The foundations of both Unitarians and Universalists are rooted in that story. Modern Unitarian Universalism is not a specifically Christian faith, but our values are rooted in large part in the story of universal salvation that the apostle Paul spoke of in his second letter to the fledgling church in Corinth. He wrote in chapter five:

15And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

...**17**So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! **18**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; **19**that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,^[d] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Those verses are a part of our understanding that god's love, and thus god's mercy and salvation, are available to all, "not counting their trespasses against them..."

It is in these words about universal salvation that 19th Century Universalist theologian Hosea Ballou based his understanding of the divine, that all people had inherent worth and dignity because God deemed it so. Jesus died for ALL, he said. Not just for the Select few, as Calvin had described centuries earlier. God's love could not, nor needed not to be earned; it was a birthright available to all.

The narrative in the Gospel of Mark we heard at the beginning of our service is unique among the gospels in that it does not end with a tale of the apostles encountering a risen Christ, but instead ends with an empty tomb and instructions to go to Galilee where they would see Jesus.

There is no story in the original text of them seeing Jesus, or speaking with him or any of the other things described in some of the other gospels. Mark's gospel ends with the empty tomb and instructions to move on. In years later, language about the disciples seeing Jesus in Galilee was

added to the text, but scholars agree that those portions were not written by the original author, but added later to provide continuity among the gnostic gospels.

I've been leading a series of adult religious education classes called "Bible Study for Heretics" this spring, and it has provided incredibly rich discussions about the ancient texts, the ancient people who wrote them, and the cultural realities of the world in which those people lived.

Last week, we discussed two gospels, the book of Acts, and a handful of Paul's letters. The group was made up of people who identified themselves primarily in the Humanist/Atheist realm of spirituality, and very few had any significant history of biblical education or literacy. For many, this was the first time in their lives they'd read some of these texts.

And yet, something amazing happened.

We talked about the idea of a historical Jesus: did those ancient texts describe a man who actually lived and died and did all those amazing miracles and things, back then, during the reign of Herod?

Scholars and anthropologists understand that there is a lot of standard Hellenistic mythology and culture layered onto the character of Jesus: the notion of a man with an immortal father and mortal mother was common in both Greek and Roman mythology. The narrative of the demigod offspring being killed and then rising after a period of time spent in the realm of the dead was not unusual among the pantheons of antiquity.

The story of a single man who could turn the world upside down with his words and teachings was the thing that would have seemed far-fetched to those ancient peoples. He could not have been simply a man and accomplished all that. Something about him must have been magical. So, in order to make his story accessible to the people of that time, the storytellers and later writers of the Gospels mapped onto Jesus all of the trappings of Greek mythology, making his life and ministry more credible to those hearing the story.

Just a guy doing all this stuff? That's nuts!

A **demigod** doing miracles and upsetting all the social structures? Now THAT makes sense.

Even emerging from the monotheism of the Hebrew people, the narrative still made sense because it looked and sounded like so many stories about how the god/gods operated.

But getting back to our bible study discussion.

These atheists and philosophers and humanists all agreed that there was a guy named Jesus, probably from Nazareth, who did something remarkable in his life in ancient Judea. There are too many things written about him by too many authors, and too much archaeology that supports his historical existence for anyone to argue that his story was spun as fiction, out of thin air.

There was a man named Jesus.

He told people to be nice to each other.

He rejected authority that was not just or humane or compassionate.

He rejected corrupt institutions and followed his own idea of what was right and just and kind.

And in doing so, he made a whole lot of people very angry.

So angry, in fact, that they killed him for exposing their own corruption.

That much seems clear.

The parts of the story that our 21st century minds view with skepticism: the magic, the miracles, the faith healing of lepers and paralytics and blind and those possessed by demons? There is no way to tell how much of that evolved around the legend of this guy Jesus and how much of it may have happened on the ground in real life.

But the man existed. He was human. He was humble. He may have been a little bit crazy. He spoke very uncomfortable truths to people in power. And it got him killed.

But it also got him remembered in a way unique among prophets. The Hebrew scriptures are filled with stories of prophets, and to be honest, things pretty much always end badly for the prophets.

So revolutionary was his message of love and compassion that the people in power could not let him continue, lest they be reduced to the level of the peasants and faithful they exploited.

There is enough evidence through literature and archaeology to believe that Jesus existed.

There is enough evidence through literature and archaeology to understand that his message was one of love and kindness, not vengeance or obedience.

There is enough evidence to know that he was killed by the institutions of power of his day.

And we need only look around at attendance at Christian churches this morning to know that belief in and loyalty to the legend of his life, death, and resurrection remains strong today.

I cannot tell you what I cannot prove, or what I cannot surmise from reading the work of scholars. I cannot tell you the details of the life of Jesus, or, frankly, of the death of Jesus. I cannot testify to the details of his resurrection, further ministry, or ascension.

But I can tell you with some assurance, that a man lived, he ministered to the downtrodden and those who lived at life's margins, and his ministry was such a threat that he was killed.

Systems of power will always defend themselves against any kind of exposure or attack. Systems of power will seek to crush out and silence any voice that might expose its corruption and perversion.

We saw this play out this week in the Tennessee state House of Representatives, where the body voted to expel two duly elected members who made a spectacle on the house floor and brought national attention to the way the Republican majority there runs business. With a supermajority of more than 2/3 of the members, the Republicans simply do not permit the minority Democratic members to speak on the floor. Ever. They do not let their proposed bills get introduced in committees, and they never come up for debate on the floor. They simply operate as a one-party system because they have the power to do that.

When three members protested that process by standing in the well and speaking, the house speaker shut off their microphone. When someone handed them a bullhorn, the body lost its collective mind and sought to expel all three.

It surprised nobody that the two young black men were expelled, but the older white woman was spared.

The world is hard on prophets.

But the truths offered by the carpenter's son from Nazareth are as profound today as they were back then. Our hymn this morning tells the story:

O young and fearless Prophet of ancient Galilee:
your life is still a summons to serve humanity,
to make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the crowd,
to stand with humble courage for truth with hearts unbowed.

Our world today is as filled with corruption and hatred and abuse of power as were the days of Jesus' time in ancient Judea. People remain people, all down through the centuries.

And just as people remain selfish, and frightened, and cruel, people also remain kind and generous and compassionate.

Jesus' life was an example of how to respond to the hatred in the world: with kindness. He responded to corruption with truth and accountability and compassion: dining with tax collectors and those deemed "unclean" by polite society.

One could take the message of his resistance as a hopeless example like that of Don Quixote, forever tilting at windmills, fated to always fail and be viewed as a madman. Or we can take that message of resistance as an example of how to be beautifully human: kind, generous, compassionate, brave. To be the helpers that Fred Rogers spoke of in times of crisis.

Jesus' message brought us an understanding that all, even – perhaps *especially* – the most humble have worth in this world and in the eyes of God. Everyone deserves love. Everyone deserves kindness. Everyone deserves to be fed. Everyone deserves a safe place to be themselves.

And through Jesus' example is the clear message that this love and compassion and kindness stuff is not something that angels are going to

deliver via FedEx. That kindness is for us to provide. That compassion is ours to offer. That generosity is our call.

In chapter 6 of the Gospel according to Luke, immediately following the beatitudes (blessed are the poor, meek, etc) Jesus instructed his disciples in this way:

³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.^[a] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

It is up to us to be the resurrection in this world. It is up to us to be the force of the divine. To those whom much has been given, much is required. We, who have so much in our lives, are instructed to share our bounty with the world. We are instructed to love our enemies, not by condoning bad behavior, but by seeing the wounded person behind it, and knowing that they are as deserving of God's love as anyone else.

Nobody said this would be easy.

Following the example of a demigod cannot be easy, by design.

But remember this: loving those who do harm does not mean accepting their behavior. It means holding them accountable, while not being cruel about it. It is saying "Hey, that's not ok. If you do this or that terrible thing, there are consequences. You might get fined. You might go to jail. You will have to fix what you broke. But you're still a human being and I will treat you with dignity and compassion. Even if you're still behaving badly. I will not take your abuse, but neither will I return it in kind."

Our hymn asks for help in this work, saying:

Create in us the splendor that dawns when hearts are kind,
that knows not race nor station as bound'ries of the mind;
that learns to value beauty, in heart, or mind, or soul,
and longs to see God's children as sacred, perfect, whole.

Jesus' legacy of love is ours to carry forward. The works of love are remembered down through the ages, to the point where the ideas and values indeed come to live forever.

May we remember that our charge is to carry out the work of love in this world, to all whom we meet, not just the ones we like or the ones like us. The gift of salvation is available to all. All means all.

Blessed Be and Amen.