

## **EASTER, RESURRECTION AND ALL THAT CHRISTIAN STUFF!**

I haven't called myself a Christian in many years, but I still value my best understanding of Jesus and the Jesus tradition. I also am very aware that both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our tradition in this country considered themselves Christian until at least early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Unitarian Universalism includes persons who also identify as Christian, as well as Buddhists, Jews, pagans, humanists, atheists, agnostics, and persons who would identify with several other religious and philosophical traditions. Of the two big Christian holidays, I personally prefer Christmas, but Easter is seen by many Christians as the most important of all holidays. While I talk about our Christian roots to the Unitarian Universalist movement from time to time, I especially try to consider those roots around Christmas and Easter. So if the music, readings, and sermon title seem a little bit too Christian for you, don't worry, this emphasis probably will not come up again for a while!

Easter is the day when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus who had been Crucified on Good Friday and whose body was gone from the tomb on Sunday morning, the Third Day. Some Christians see in this a literal resuscitation to human life, while others understand it in more symbolic allegorical and metaphorical ways.

Neither the beliefs in special births nor resurrections were unique in the time when such stories were written about Jesus. Many gods and demi-gods of the pantheon had such stories told about them, and stories of heroes venturing into the underworld to free the souls of those who had died were also fairly common. Questions around the historical veracity of such myths notwithstanding, such mythic stories were hardly uncommon or unknown. And it was a mythic time, a time long before historians and journalists attempted to chronicle events as they occurred, interviewing witnesses for the evening news. Such mythic stories built the reputation of special people believed to have done great things, they were not written to be taken literally.

In the book *Battle for God* by Karen Armstrong that several of us have been studying, the author attempts to distinguish between mythos and logos. Mythos stories are those archetypal tales that provide meaning. They do not convey literal history or science of the logos centered modern world. They were not intended to be taken literally, and in the times they were first told nobody assumed them to be literally true because that was not even a meaningful question at the time. The stories of the special birth, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus were told and then written as mythos, stories of deep and abiding meaning, not as stories to be tested by empirical scientific methods in later times.

I still enjoy many of the mythos stories of the Jesus tradition and of other religious and philosophical traditions, but the incursion of literalists helped to drive me out of Christianity. As the influence of those insisting that the Jesus stories were literally true while other similar stories were mere fables grew within mainstream Christianity, I could no longer call myself Christian even though I continue to seek to live by my best understanding of the core teachings of Jesus and Buddha and other religious heroes and exemplars.

I regret in some ways that I have become so skeptical that I have lost the joy of celebrating the magical mysteries of the mythic stories of Jesus. I also remain thoroughly modern in my interest in science, history, and philosophy. Additionally, I recognize that there remain great truths not yet understood by scientists and historians. I understand that psychological truths may be revealed in the mythic realm of dreams and ritual and the stories told around campfires on a starry night. Science does not yet have all the answers about the stars and planets and galaxies, nor even about the depths and climate patterns of the earth, nor of all the ways of the human mind, heart and soul.

Personally I do not expect to go to heaven nor to see my soul transmigrate into some other being at the end of this life, but I also know that these are matters that can neither be proven nor disproven. Can I say with any certainty that Jesus was or was not resurrected? No, I cannot say that. I can say that the story of his life, heavily edited by many theologians, ancient and modern, has had meaning for hundreds of millions, probably billions of people in the two millennia since the end of his earthly existence.

Was Jesus resurrected and then accepted, adopted, or affirmed into the divine triad? I cannot say that, but neither can I disprove it. I know that the idea of a divine being having lived in this world of sorrow and joy and looking down lovingly from some ethereal realm is a comfort to millions of people.

So what remains of value in Easter for modern western Unitarian Universalists? Probably it would also be helpful to mention that our western celebration of Easter has been influenced by ancient Anglo-Saxon pagan celebrations of the goddess *Eostre*, who brought us eggs and bunnies! Such symbols of re-birth and spring vitality became symbols of resurrection as well, along with butterflies and lilies. We could either blame Christian celebrations of Easter for taking the emphasis off of the earthier pagan celebrations of the coming of Spring, or we could see the celebration of Easter as a celebration of re-birth along with other Spring celebrations. We certainly do not need to take it as the only appropriate celebration of the new life coming in spring.

Unitarians Universalists have tended to be syncretistic, taking pieces of our beliefs and practice from many traditions, sometimes in culturally insensitive or even inappropriate ways. This comes, I believe, from a desire to claim and understand moments of value from many traditions, but it often has fueled claims that we offer a light version of religion! Though we have a more solid claim to the celebrations of Christianity, having sprung from that tradition, we do not always lend the weight of belief to celebrations of Christmas and Easter and other Christian holidays that many Christians might offer. A few UU congregations, such as the one I served in Little Rock, have even attempted to replace Christian holidays with their own UU inspired holidays such as IllUUmination, which honors the flaming chalice! Some UU congregations continue to maintain a Christian identity and regularly practice Christian communion as well as holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

Psychologically, the archetype of resurrection or rebirth is tremendously important. Most of us have suffered losses of loved ones to death or divorce, the death of animal companions, the loss of jobs or opportunities, injuries or other situations where we have spent periods of time in deep grieving. The big and little changes that we experience as humans often feel like endings and death and require re-orientation, resurrection, or re-birth. These times may not

come often, but when they do they may take us into the depths of despair, existential angst, fear, hurt and anger. Our ability to recover from such times depends on our willingness to see new possibilities, opportunities, and life beyond the darkness and despair. This is where mythic stories such as the death and resurrection of Jesus are tremendously important and powerful even in the modern world. To see possibilities beyond death and the tomb can be wonderfully life-affirming for even modern earth grounded human beings.

The key is really in the affirmation of hope even in the darkest times, hope even in the face of death and destruction. In the natural world, it is a wonder to see new plants and trees springing up where fire, flood, or landslide has denuded an area. It is amazing to see new calves and lambs and bunnies and chicks and puppies and kittens in the spring. It is wonderful to see new possibilities grow out of death and despair. It is life-affirming to believe that there is some kind of re-birth or resurrection beyond death. Even if it is not rational nor provable, the hope of something beyond death provides a stimulus for millions of people. The mythic story of Jesus and the beliefs that grew up around it have offered that kind of hope to millions of Christians. For those who have taken that kind of resurrection hope as literally referring to something beyond this life, it has limited their ability to see the transformational power of resurrection in regard to all the little deaths of life, but it has still provided a sense of hope beyond the trials and tribulations of this life. Those who see the broader mythic power of resurrection in this life have the benefit of more hope and possibilities within this earthly human existence, but everyone who wants to can find some kind of hope in the resurrection story of Jesus as well as in similar stories.

So even out of our modern scientifically oriented Unitarian Universalism, we can find a sense of hope in a story such as Easter which offers a mythic possibility of a triumph over death and despair. We may not see Easter hope in the same way that fundamentalist Christians see it, but it is there if we choose to find it!

When Easter comes, I try to make it a family time, calling my kids and checking to see how they and their families are doing. In recent years, I haven't often been able to celebrate Easter with family, but it gives another

reason to stay in touch. When family is near, it can be a time for a gathering or feast. When I was growing up, my family got together with my Aunt Margaret's family for many holidays each year and other parts of the family were always welcome if they were around. My generation hasn't stayed in touch as well as my parents' generation did, but I do think of my widely scattered cousins on holidays. Even without shared beliefs around the meaning of Easter, it can be a time to think of loved ones and when possible gather with family and friends. I like to think that even in the case of the religious divisions surrounding the birth and resurrection of Jesus, that Easter can be a time to bring families and friends together.

Easter has often been a divisive time, separating those who would take the story literally from those who do not and also separating Jews and Muslims and practitioners of other religions from Christians. Many Unitarian Universalists want nothing to do with Easter, for the resurrection is for some as problematic as a special divine birth. And the claim many make that Jesus fulfilled the Jewish Messianic expectation serves to divide Christians from Jews even more than the idea that Jesus is the Son of God who came into the world at Christmas. Many Jews and Muslims could accept Jesus as a Prophet, perhaps even a son of the Divine but for the exclusive claims also made about him by Christians.

For Easter this year, let us put aside our religious differences with friends and family and celebrate a holiday that reminds us of the possibility of resurrection, new life after the winter is gone, re-birth of trees and plants in the spring, births of spring animals, and possibilities for life after the big and little deaths we face in the course of our lives. If we take them metaphorically, even the grumpiest humanists can sing the happy melodies of Easter. It isn't so hard to wish any Christians we might run into today a happy Easter without even getting into any theological or philosophical differences we might have with their views of Easter!

Have a Great Day and Happy Easter!