

**Living with the Texts:  
“O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?”**

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Easter—probably the trickiest holiday of all  
for Unitarian Universalists.  
We understand it on a gut level, we really do—  
spring coming back to life again,  
the flowers blooming like crazy:  
the sun and warmth on our skin,  
the thick sweet smell of jasmine on the breeze  
all the proof we need that Earth resurrects itself gladly each year.

But the Easter *story!*  
We who are skeptics find it so hard to believe  
in this *story* of Jesus coming back from the dead.  
Sure, we can tell the story and appreciate it as metaphor,  
but to take it as literally true?  
Jesus literally coming back to life?  
For most of us, that just doesn't work.  
We are open to love and grace, yes,  
we are open to springtime and hope renewed, yes!  
But we just can't wrap our heads around the idea of dead people  
coming back to life again.  
It makes no sense.  
That is not how our world works.

And we think our skepticism sets us apart, don't we?  
We see ourselves as rebels,  
*Not Like* all those other people  
crowding into churches of every kind this Easter morning.  
We are set apart by our skepticism.

Would it surprise you to hear some of the very first Christians  
were also pretty skeptical  
about this business of people being raised from the dead?  
Let me tell you about a people very like us,  
a small church of folks from a shipping town called Corinth.  
Corinth was a town of immigrants, different ethnic groups  
from all over the Roman world,<sup>1</sup> not so unlike Stockton today.

Paul and a few other missionaries had come to Corinth  
around the year 50 C.E.  
and spent a year and a half there,  
preaching and teaching and telling the stories about Jesus.  
People listened to those stories of how Jesus healed people  
with just a touch.  
They heard how he taught people to love their neighbors,  
*really* love them and care for them,  
especially the ones everybody else said didn't deserve it.  
Some of the Corinthians fell in love with that vision.  
They came together and formed a congregation.

They heard the stories of how Jesus gave himself up to be killed,  
up there on the cross.  
And they heard the story of Jesus coming back from the dead  
after three days and nights in the tomb—  
risen from the dead, laughing and talking just like you and me.  
Now, in those days, you have to understand,  
the Romans told all sorts of stories  
of gods who died and came back to life.  
This was one of the great themes of pagan religion:  
the god who sacrifices himself for the people  
and is reborn with the spring so life can continue.<sup>2</sup>  
So the stories of Jesus fit right in.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "I Corinthians," *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, Revised Ed. (2000), p. 1075.

<sup>2</sup> See Patricia Montley, *In Nature's Honor* (Skinner House, 2005), p. 99.

Paul added a promise.

He told them, if they accepted Jesus as god, after they died, *they* would be brought back to life too!

Now, this also was a pretty typical claim for the times.

All over the Roman world, there were religious secret societies focused on special gods or goddesses that promised life after death.

But it seems at least some of the Corinthians found the life-after-death part really hard to believe.

It just didn't make sense to them.

So the congregation at Corinth wrote to Paul.

Their letter has been lost,

but it probably said something along the lines of:

We don't get it; we can't agree on this;

please help us out and explain this life-after-death thing again.

Paul replied with confidence and passion.

But to understand what Paul told the Corinthians, first we have to understand his story.

Paul used to be called Saul.

He was a Jewish man from Syria who hated the Christian movement.

He persecuted Jewish Christians,

rounded them up and herded them back to the synagogues to be punished. This went on for a few years.

Then one day, Saul is traveling along the road to Damascus.

He's all excited to go make trouble for the Christians there.

When all of a sudden, a bright light flashes all around him.

It's so bright, he falls to the ground.

He hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

He asks, "Who are you?"

The voice says, "I am Jesus, who you are persecuting."<sup>3</sup>

Is it real? Is it a dream? A vision?

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:1–22; see also Acts 22:4–19, Acts 26:9–15, Gal 1:13–24.

The people with Saul hear nothing.  
But Saul hears it.  
He gets up at last and opens his eyes,  
but he can't see a thing. He's gone blind, just like that.  
He's blind for three days.  
When his sight comes back, he has been changed forever.  
This vicious, hard-line persecutor of Christians  
has become a Christian visionary himself.  
He is completely convinced that Jesus the man  
has become Christ the risen Lord.  
He takes the new name Paul as a sign of his conversion.  
For the next thirty years, he works as a missionary,  
converting people and working with Christian congregations  
all over the Middle East and Greece.

Corinth was his first stop and these people are dear to his heart.  
He's far away from them now,  
and in those days there's no email, no cell phones,  
no sermon mp3 files.  
But they can stay in touch by writing letters back and forth.  
The Corinthians write down their questions for him  
and send them off by courier,  
by ship or horse or whatever's available,  
and he writes back trying to teach them and give them advice  
as best he can from a distance.  
So when they write to him asking, among other questions,  
"What's this about the resurrection of the dead?"  
he writes back with the best explanation he can give them.

Our text today is from the first of two letters he wrote to them  
that have been preserved in the Bible,  
with the lofty titles of First and Second Corinthians.  
I always think that sounds rather stuffy and intimidating.  
But they're just letters back and forth between people trying to  
communicate with the technology they have.

Who knows, maybe some of our email correspondence at church will go down in history as “First and Second Stocktonians”!

So try to imagine Paul sitting down  
and thinking of the people he loved  
and doing his best to explain something to them  
that he really cares about.

This is where we go back to the text.

Paul starts out with a question,  
“How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?”<sup>4</sup>  
For him, this is totally illogical.  
He says, look, if you deny people can be raised from the dead,  
it means Jesus himself could not have been raised,  
and that means the entire Christian faith is founded on a lie.

I’m not going to spend much time on this part of the text,  
because, for it to make sense,  
you really have to believe Jesus came back from the dead.  
That’s just not where most of us are at.

But what happens next gets wild,  
and this is the part I hope we can connect to.  
“Behold, I tell you a mystery,” says Paul,  
and now we’re into the realm of the imagination—  
everything which cannot be literally understood as fact  
but *symbolic* truth, intuited, glimpsed.  
Paul makes this wild declaration:

For the trumpet will sound,  
and the dead will be raised imperishable,  
and we will be changed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 15:12.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 15:52.

You know this text if you've ever heard Handel's *Messiah*, the glorious duet for bass and trumpet. If you try to understand this as a literal prediction of something that will happen in the physical world—as in, a supernatural trumpet is going to blow and dead bodies will come flying up out of the ground, somehow brought back to life with “Imperishable” bodies (whatever that means!)—like, tomorrow or next year or in a hundred years—If you read this as a literal prediction of real, historical events, it's nonsense. At least that's my opinion. Others believe differently. That's where I stand.

But I don't think Paul is talking literally. Think of how it feels when you wake up from sleep, and you've had a vivid dream you know is really important. Imagine trying to explain that dream to someone else—what you saw, what it looked like, what it felt like, what it *meant* to you—and it's so hard! You try to put it into words, but no matter how hard you try, you can never really convey what that dream means to you, because dreams are fundamentally untranslatable—dreams and visions, like what happened to Paul on the Damascus road, like this vision of the last judgment: “The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised....”

I'm not asking you to accept as literally true Paul's teachings about the resurrection of the dead. Some of the earliest Christians found it hard enough to accept. Why should we be any different? But still there's something there for us on this Easter morning. Paul sings out with wild assurance:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”<sup>6</sup>

Can he prove it,  
this incredible promise that death is not the end?

No.

But he believes it with a conviction  
born out of a mystical vision granted to him  
that changed his life forever.

Because he believes it, must we therefore believe it also?

No.

Each one of us has to seek the answers  
to these Easter questions of life and death in our own hearts.

But does it matter that *he* believed it?

It matters to me.

Behind his words, on one level so inaccessible and implausible,  
behind his words still

a Truth peeks out, hinting and beckoning to us.

I can't put it into exactly the right words, but I feel it's there.

I would never ask us to abandon our skepticism,  
our commitment to reason and reality.

But can we *hear* him with the ears of a child,

the child alive within all of us,

alive to the truth of visions and fairy tales and dreams?

I read to you earlier from the Narnia books

the story of Aslan's death and resurrection<sup>7</sup>

because it's the story that has opened *my* heart more than any other  
to the possibility of truth which is not literal scientific fact,

truth through story and dream and legend,

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 15:54–55.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Collier/Macmillan, 1970), pp. 154–160.

beautiful and true and *real*,  
calling to us through a glass darkly,  
*daring* us to hope wildly,  
daring us to believe that maybe the old tales are true  
and happy endings are promised for us all  
and you and I will yet be granted  
joy far beyond our practical expectations  
and peace beyond our understanding.

On this Easter morning,  
is there still room in our hearts for magic and mystery?  
May it be ever so.  
Happy Easter.  
Blessed be all the teachers  
and all who seek and hope and dream.

Amen.