

EASTER FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

Easter isn't a big holiday for a lot of Unitarian Universalists. It is problematic for many UUs because it has become such a big factor for Christian Fundamentalists. More liberal Christians for centuries have believed in the mythos of Easter without literalizing it. Fundamentalists demand a literal belief in Jesus returning to life on the 3rd day after being crucified. For anyone with a more scientific mindset, this is problematic. There have of course been a few cases where people thought dead, or even pronounced dead have suddenly come alive as much as a few hours later, but these have been explained by extremely slow pulse rates and shallow infrequent breaths due to disease or poison. Most often, those folks don't return to full health anyway but succumb soon after these episodes.

As with many other differences between the gospels, the discrepancies between the stories of Jesus' resurrection are merely harmonized by fundamentalists, so they do not notice differences in who went in to check the tomb or whether there was an angel or gardener to greet them, or whether there was an earthquake as reported in Matthew. That Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and to others about the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection decades before the Gospels in the Bible were written also seems to be of little consequence to fundamentalist Christians, though many scholars believe Paul's writings deeply influenced the writing of the canonical Gospels as well as the formation of the church.

The theological and historical arguments and discussions of Easter could and do fill libraries. The questions many UUs have around the Easter stories fill other libraries. The arguments and discussions are interesting for theologians and theological students, but have little impact on most Unitarian Universalists today. Even those who consider themselves UU Christians tend to be far more liberal in their theological approach to Easter than most other Christians. Those of us who no longer call ourselves Christian or never did, find little sustenance in another unnatural and otherwise unsubstantiated miracle perpetrated on humanity for unclear reasons by an unseen but judgmental deity.

And yes, I have always been a doubting Thomas. That is one more thing that led me into theological studies as well as into scientific exploration. Metaphysical questions can be quite compelling. I early became convinced of the value of the supportive religious community, but never really did embrace a virginal birth or bodily resurrection. The mythos, on the other hand is quite powerful. The psychic and emotional impacts of the incarnation of divinity at Christmas and the crucifixion and resurrection of the divine son speak to the deepest questions of the human condition, whether this is all that there is and whether we are ultimately loved by God or the Universe.

Christians see both the gift of the Christ-child Jesus at Christmas and the resurrection of the Messianic adult Christ at Easter to be deeply significant gifts to humanity. From a liberal Christian perspective, the metaphoric accomplishment of these deeds is sufficient for faith and for the church, whereas fundamentalists demand followers to literally believe in each of these, that Mary was a virgin, and that Jesus was raised into the Divine Trinity as voted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D. Fundamentalists in every religion tend to make it harder for more liberal and scientifically oriented followers of each tradition to maintain their faith.

Those matters form the background against which modern Unitarian Universalists view Easter. I previously mentioned mythos and metaphor, which I believe hold far more meaning for UUs. The springtime images of rebirth, the bunnies and egg which held importance in myths of Oestra among Northern European pagans, and the Caterpillar to Butterfly story borrowed from Mother Nature, help to convey some of the meaning of the Easter mythos in the Christian tradition. That there is new and possibly transformed life in the Easter story is really at the core of the mythos. Easter is seen as a hopeful holiday because it offers the possibility of a different life. Paired with beliefs in heaven for those with terribly difficult lives, it suggested for many that believers would awaken in paradise following their deaths in the worldly realm. This idea was promoted in the writings of Paul to the scattered early Christian communities around the Mediterranean. For those whose lives in this world were more enjoyable, the need to escape this life was tempered by a hope of enhanced life here.

Today, even in a world that accepts the possibility of other dimensions through String theory and other work of physicists, the lack of a discoverable location for heaven leaves belief in heaven somewhat a distant hope for scientifically oriented people. The quest to make this life more meaningful however, remains a significant motivating force for millions if not billions of people. The mythos of Easter can help to make life more filled with meaning.

Human life is filled with little deaths, deaths of dreams, deaths of relationships, deaths and endings to jobs and educational experiences, deaths/endings/changes to periods of health due to illness or injury, deaths of beloved pets, friends, and other loved ones. Some of these deaths strike us harder than others, but each little death brings about changes in how we do things and how we see life. In fact our lives are a series of deaths or changes that take us from innocence to aware maturity. If we did not experience those things that we experience in life, we could not become mature adults, we could not transform from the single-minded caterpillar to the beautiful butterfly. Stories of innocence in the Garden of Eden aside, who would not want to transform into a mature human being? It seems to me that this is the whole point of human life. If I had other lives previously as something less or more than human, I don't remember, so I really can only speak about this human life. For me human life is a quest for meaning/maturity, which isn't getting all the money or stuff, but understanding as much as I can about myself, others, and the world.

The symbolic power of Easter then, is in the possibility of transformation into mature humanity. It isn't the magical resuscitation of literally dead people or even their later ascension into heaven if there is such a place that matters to most of us, it is in the help we get to become better more complete healthier human beings. I have to believe that if we are the best selves we can be, anything that might follow this life will come in its own time. That of course is not the official position of many Christian groups, but I suspect that it fits far more UUs than not. We are grounded in this life in this world, and if there is more, terrific, but if not, we are not going to waste a moment of this life! I don't know about you, but I find hope in that, hope that this life and this world will get better for you, me, all of us!

Now of course, I give you only my opinion, for each Unitarian Universalist is entitled, even obligated to form her/his own opinion about this and everything else. Whether you agree or disagree, we stand together on the basis of our Principles, our humanistic values. We can have interesting discussions, arguments, or classes about these and any other beliefs, but the core of our Unitarian Universalism is in the Principles on which we stand including acceptance and respect and in the actions we take for the betterment of humanity and the world. That perspective by the way, is probably somewhat more from the Unitarian side of our movement, though the Universalists also practiced a non-creedal acceptance of those who generally agreed in love.

Speaking of love, the original theological message of Easter was in the love of God for humanity that would offer up the son even unto death and then raise him from the dead as a transformed leader. This was articulated by Paul around the middle of the first century and was elaborated in the canonical Gospels and other early Christian writings. This was the dominant message of Easter until it became a test of literal faith in the late 19th Century. Unitarians and Universalists mostly celebrated Easter at least until humanism came to dominate our heritage by the mid-20th Century. Today many UUs celebrate Easter in their own way while many choose not to celebrate Easter in any fashion. Culturally in America, it is one of the family holidays for which many families still gather. Hopefully those families that gather, gather in love, but it can also be another divisive time for families! I hope that this will be a peaceful and happy Easter for all those who are celebrating!

I mostly have good memories around Easter. The United Methodist church in which I grew up had an Easter Sunrise Service each year, usually planned and led by the youth group, followed by Easter breakfast before the regular Easter services. I have fond memories of singing folksongs like *Pass it On* and *Morning Has Broken* to guitar music for those services. When I became a Church Youth Director and then a Minister, I brought those traditions to other churches. In my family tradition, we usually would get together with my Aunt Margaret and her family for holidays, so we would drive over to Indiana or they would drive around to our place.

Oh, and there was always Chicagoland's own Fannie May candy, usually mints as well as Easter eggs. We colored Easter eggs many years with the store-bought kits. And when I was really young, there were plastic Easter eggs hidden around the house with money and little toys. Easter wasn't nearly as big as Christmas for gifts, but it was a nice holiday, a good time for family and for the church. There are things I miss about Easter celebrations of old, but not so much the theology!

What are the things you remember about Easter celebrations if your family or church celebrated Easter? Was there special music? Special food? Special family gatherings?

Thanks for sharing your memories. What does Easter mean to you now? Is it still a special day, or is it just another Sunday? How do you celebrate Easter today?

Thank you for sharing your perspectives. I hope that you will have a pleasant rest of the Easter holiday!

However you take Easter, it is likely to remain an important holiday for Christianity as long as the Christian church exists. As Unitarian Universalists it is up to each of us to decide whether we celebrate Easter and how we celebrate Easter. Many of us celebrate holidays from several traditions or at least seek to learn about them. Easter at times has been important for our forebears, but it is seen differently by many UUs today. I hope these thoughts about Easter for Unitarian Universalists have been helpful and I wish you a Happy Easter!

Amen!