

IS EASTER A UU HOLY DAY?

(even if it is April Fool's Day?)

Theologically, Easter has always been the ultimate April Fool's Day, even if it often happens in March! At least in the nature of a surprising twisting of expectations. So too, for that matter are many of the parables attributed to Jesus. Not the outcomes you would expect. Surprises that startle and make one think differently about things, maybe everything! Easter for Christians is the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection, a continuation of the Jesus Story even after the apparent ending of his life on the cross for insurrection. It is a story of transformation, resurrection, new life. It has found analogies in the apparent death and resurrection of plants and trees Fall to Spring, the journey of Persephone into the underworld in the fall with her glorious return in the spring, and the metamorphosis of Caterpillar to Butterfly.

Christian Easter, tied to Passover by the Passion story in the Gospels, attempted to replace the Spring holiday of Ostara, celebrated with bunnies and eggs, and managed to dominate a mixture of traditions in Europe for hundreds of years into the modern era. With our Christian roots, both Christmas and Easter were celebrated by Unitarians and Universalists at least until the middle of the 20th Century. Many UU congregations still celebrate one or both holidays in some fashion. Though there have been attempts to create a uniquely UU holiday, there are no official UU Holidays. Every UU Congregation is free to celebrate whatever holidays it wishes to honor. Christmas is probably the most widely celebrated holiday coming from one of our source traditions, but Easter is also celebrated in some fashion by many UU congregations.

The Winter Festivals of Light service celebrated by many UU Congregations attempts to honor a number of festivals celebrated around the Winter Solstice, though it has been accused of cultural and religious misappropriation. Many UU Congregations that have Jewish members celebrate a UU version of the Passover Seder, which we have done here previously. Few congregations celebrate holidays in the same fashion as do our source traditions.

So is Easter a UU Holiday? I would have to say yes and no! It is certainly an important holiday to the Christian tradition from whence our roots reach deepest, but it does not have the same hope and expectation for most of us that it does for many Christians. Few if any UUs take the resurrection of Jesus literally, and few expect that we will enjoy eternal life in heaven. More of us may value death and resurrection as a maturational or transformational metaphor, but few of us take Easter in a more literal fashion. Even when I considered myself a Christian, I found more comfort in the metaphor than in aspects I found literally hard to believe.

There is a power to believing that Jesus would die on behalf of humanity. There is a personal reassurance and a level of hope for the future. There is also a level of hope for humanity in the goodness and purity of Jesus' act of self-sacrifice. One of the problems with making Jesus into God is that it makes the self-sacrificial aspect confusing for God to Sacrifice Godself, but that is a much longer sermon for another day.

What I would rather focus on for the remainder of my sermon time this morning, is the need for transformation in society which could be seen as stemming from resurrection.

[Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates (/ ˌ t ɑː n ə ˈ h ɑː s i ˈ k oʊ t s / TAH-nə-HAH-see KOHTS; born September 30, 1975) is an American author, journalist, comic book writer, and educator. Coates is a national correspondent for The Atlantic, where he writes about cultural, social and political issues, particularly regarding African Americans.] --Wikipedia

Ta-Nehisi Coates, journalist, correspondent for The Atlantic, and author of *Between the World and Me* (c. 2015), and more recently, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (c. 2017), sparked some lively and timely discussion in the Book Club through discussion of *Between the World and Me* this past Wednesday. The premise for the book is that it is a letter to the author's son, telling the author's life story, warning him of what it means to be black in modern day America but also apologizing for the author's tendency to be too protective and to make his son too cautious in his approach to the world. This discussion was set against the unhealthily resurrected racial animosities sparked by Trump's approach to the world, minorities, immigrants, and women; as well as the all too recent killing of Stephon Clark by 2 police officers shooting 20 bullets in his grandmother's backyard in Sacramento, seven of which it now appears hit him in the back.

One of the points brought up in the discussion is that the book seems to declare that the situation in this country between blacks and whites has not and almost certainly will not change. More than 300 years of American history do seem to favor that viewpoint. Particularly under Trump, the racism that had at least been less visible, has returned with a vengeance. Similarly fears of immigrants have been stirred up against Muslims and Mexicans with executive orders preventing Muslims from entering the country and the ongoing quest to build Trump's (10-20 Billion dollar) Wall.

Is this racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice always going to prevent a more harmonious existence of global citizens? Couldn't the transformative powers of the Easter metaphor be better used in bringing a different kind of salvation to all people? Trump, still apparently the darling of gun-toting, family loving, abortion and welfare opposing, Christian evangelicals, has done more to divide people during the last 2 years than anyone in recent decades. John Bolton, Trump's new choice for National Security Advisor has already advocated first strikes against Iran and North Korea. Somehow, I can't see the Jesus who talked to the woman at the well, who told stories about good Samaritans, cared for the poor, and welcomed the children as favoring the Trump agenda. What would Jesus do to respond to the issues of today?

There is a sense in which Christians see Jesus' sacrifice as salvific, healing, restorative, bringing humanity into right relationship with God. Scriptures suggest that Jesus died on behalf of all humanity, not just to bring good stuff to the rich or powerful, but to make a difference for all people. Celebrating Easter by excluding at least 2/3rds of humanity does not feel inclusive or accepting or loving. Jesus' death and resurrection was already seen by some of the next generation as a stumbling block to faith, but doesn't it seem like it ought to unite rather than divide?

Here we are in the 21st Century of the Christian or Common Era, and we have more ways to divide people than to bring them together. The human population of Earth is larger than it has ever been before and the chances for nuclear war which we thought had been drastically reduced decades ago have crept back up to an unsustainable level.

Whatever the Easter story of Jesus was originally about does not matter nearly as much as the ways we can find to think differently about other people and nations. There is a commonality to people that is too often ignored by the rulers of nations and even religious leaders. Around the globe, we are more alike than we are different. We have the same hopes for a peaceful and satisfying life for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren. It doesn't matter whether our skin is pale or dark, nor whether our eyes are blue or brown or black or green, nor whether our hair is blond or red or brown, or black or purple or green or pink, nor whether we are straight or gay or bi or trans! Easter should be a celebration of our similarities, our worthiness, that all of us are valuable and capable of loving and being loved.

Easter should not be used to divide people into washed and unwashed, saved and damned. Easter shouldn't be another day when blacks and whites celebrate separately in their own churches, but a day when barriers and walls are broken down and bridges built to bring people together. Easter ought to be a unifying celebration in which all people are welcome.

Instead, even in the name of Christianity, walls are being built to keep people apart, prisons are being built to confine more smokers and sellers of weed, with profits going to Trump and Sessions, and all their corporate friends. EPA rules to make cars more efficient, prevent pollution and slow global warming, and clean the air are being torn up and eliminated. And wars are being considered that could escalate to the point that they endanger all life.

Jesus was not known for bowing down to those in charge in his day, nor has Christianity ever been at its best when it just goes along with emperors and kings. Jesus came out of Galilee, followed by a community of fishermen and their families. He never accepted the title of king, being a radical supporter of the common people. He was put to death because he stirred things up, causing the people to question the Sanhedrin, Herod and Pilate and Caesar.

If Christianity is behind racist misogynist Trump, there is a problem. Of course, only a few prominent people claiming to be Christians are really supporting him. Many others are going along because of those leaders following him.

Many support him only on certain issues. Many Christians, Catholic and Protestant, do not and will not support Trump or his racist misogynist war-mongering fear-spreading ideas and behavior. But here we are, divided into the haves and have-nots, whites and blacks, old and new immigrants, powerful and ordinary, men and women, gay and straight and so many more points of division. Our nation is sick and we have no balm to fix it other than the hope that the next election cycle will bring change.

And here, even in California, we have seen an escalation of hate-crimes, an increase in over-reactions by police when someone being chased is black, a return of racism and sexism and hetero-sexism. And I ask, where is the hope? Where is the chance that this is only a passing backlash to progress that continues but perhaps came too quickly? Are we falling back into the racism, prejudice and divisions of earlier times, or will this turn out to be just a passing anomaly?

I want to believe in progress, to go forward in hope, to rage against the idea that the divide between whites and blacks remains as virulent as during slavery and Jim Crow. I want an Easter kind of transformation that inaugurates a new age of harmonious interactions between white and black, men and women, gay and straight. I want a new reality, not just a truce between warring factions that leaves underlying differences to fester until they explode. I want our nation to treat people with equal justice and compassion. I want a nation with a \$15 dollar minimum wage set to increase with the cost of living. I want a real safety net for those unable to work, with adequate housing and the kind of quality care that our nation should provide. I want fairness in the justice system and health care for everyone. I want our nation to become the nation that we all were taught that it was meant to be. And if it takes taxing corporations and taking the wealthy down a few pegs, I'm ok with that.

I don't have much use for an Easter that just divides, but I would love to see an Easter that brings people together, that revives the kind of inclusive accepting love that I think Jesus tried to bring to the world. Until then, I challenge us all to work for justice, treat people with compassion, reach out to all people in welcome, and try to shape the kind of world in which we all would like to live.

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, Amen, and Happy Easter!