

Another Look at Easter

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Alleluia, indeed! After all, it is Easter, the holiday of the empty tomb, the victory of life over death, Christ's miraculous resurrection. As it says in First Corinthians, "Where, death, is your sting? Where, grave, is your victory?"

This is a compelling message, coming as it does with the emergence of springtime. As our hymn says, "Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain, wheat that in dark earth many days has lain; Love lives again, that with the dead has been: Love is come again like wheat that springeth green."

After months of cold and darkness, the frozen earth covered with dead vegetation, the sudden burst of warmth and abundance is naturally overwhelming. Whose heart doesn't leap in joy at the return of springtime? And not just humans, either. Out my window I've seen birds sing and rejoice, squirrels running and jumping with renewed energy, and deer frolicking with irrepressable joy at the turning of the year.

The message of Easter's springtime is clear: we can take comfort in Spring's abundance after winter's hardship. And, as all good metaphors do, it can extend far beyond the change of the seasons to the promise that hope can be renewed, whatever the difficulty. This is the pagan holiday of the millennia, as people have greeted Spring's return with joyous celebrations throughout the ages.

And this pagan, relatively secular view of Easter is what we often celebrate in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. And it's where I started, too. But experience and deep reflection has taught me that this interpretation is a shallow reflection of the profound teachings embedded in the story.

Of course, Unitarian Universalists aren't the only ones who tune out those deeper teachings. Many if not most Christians share the literal interpretation of the elements of the story as it's told: Jesus' death and resurrection were unique historical events, miracles that made it possible to anticipate a peaceful eternal life after death in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But I recall one of my Bible professors explaining that, “There are thousands of ways to read the Bible. But there’s only one wrong way: literally.” We miss the point if we read the Bible the way we read a newspaper or scientific journal – as a collection of facts – but it wasn’t written that way. The Bible was written in the richly metaphorical language of myth and legend. The stories, while powerful, were never meant to be taken literally.

When faced with fantastic stories that contradict everything we know about how the world works, many of us decide that they are nonsense and reject them out of hand. But I believe we impoverish ourselves in so doing. For me, miracles like changing water into wine or coming back from the dead stand out like flashing beacons pointing to deeper messages that just might yield some wisdom when subjected to the kind of critical inquiry that Unitarian Universalists love to practice.

So let’s take another look at the Easter story. One of the first things we see is that Jesus knew he was going to die. In fact, he seems to have brought it upon himself. The regal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was probably enough to get the Romans to kill him, but just in case it wasn’t, he went to the Temple and upset the tables of the money changers who were as necessary as the currency exchanges in our airports. Jesus made sure that he was noticed in ways that would lead to his death. That’s how the Romans kept order. They killed a lot of people. It was called “Pax Romana,” but it was achieved by getting rid of all the troublemakers, and Jesus was acting like a troublemaker.

Ok then, Jesus knew he was going to die. And we have the story of him praying all night in the Garden of Gethsemane, accompanied by his disciples. We’re given a few hints, but we don’t really know what went through his mind that night, but he must have been facing his fear of the execution he knew was coming. And what was the result of that night’s reflections? He didn’t resist but went calmly to his death. And the final outcome? It was the triumphant resurrection, the victory over death and the splendors of Heaven becoming available to all.

One of the keys we can use here is to acknowledge again that this kind of story isn’t meant to describe the details of an actual historical event. It may be based on something that actually happened, but remember, it was never meant to be taken literally. Once we make that step, we can appreciate that this story is trying to teach

us something that is relevant to how we live our lives, that these events aren't external but internal. We can begin to reflect on their meaning to us in our hearts, in our lives.

I think that the deeper meaning here is that Jesus faced his greatest fears, embraced them rather than contracting in defensiveness and, in so doing, transcended and transformed them. And Easter's message is that when we can do this, we open ourselves to the possibility of a life that is not governed by what we fear. And that a life free of the shadow of fear is exactly what is meant by dwelling in the Kingdom of Heaven right here, right now, on Earth and not in some hypothetical afterlife.

In a talk on the TED Radio Hour his month, the former astronaut, Chris Hadfield, shared some reflections on fear.

He said, *"It's like that feeling in a roller coaster, I think, where you get into that little chunka-chunka-chunka chain thing that drags you up the hill to make the ride begin.*

"And the closer you get to the top, you see more and more of the world. And there's sort of this – OK, nothing bad is happening right now, but this process is leading to something. And our process [as astronauts] is, like, 20 years that leads to – it's 20 years of chunka, chunka, chunka up the hill. And that last day is where suddenly you're – you come over that crest, and you're away.

"So you wake up in quarantine somewhere where they've been protecting you from catching a head cold. There's sort of a wedding feel to it of all these practiced and unusual places where there's a whole bunch of expectant people. And you're wearing clothes you don't normally wear. And it builds. It builds in complexity. And it definitely builds in danger until, finally, after all of the preliminaries, you are wearing the right outfit, and you're sitting in the right seat.

"There's an enormous amount of fuel gurgling and jostling in the tanks down underneath you, in between you and the Earth. And somewhere there's a spark and, bam, some unseen giant just stuck his foot in the small of your back and is now hurling you . . . with a lot of vibration and very little pity. And you're along for that ride.

"The scariest thing I've done is ride a rocket ship to space."

And this is from an astronaut who spent decades getting ready for it. For the rest of us, he says that, *"Fear is an autonomic reaction to perceived danger. I mean, if they grab you right now and stuck you in the cockpit of the space shuttle and tell you, 'OK, we're launching in fifteen minutes and you can't stop it and if you touch any of the wrong switches you kill yourself and everybody on board.' Then you would be rightly terrified."*

No kidding! Now that is something to fear. But it's actually pretty easy for us to avoid being on that rocket ship. In fact, it's almost impossible for any of us to do, even if we imagined that we wanted to.

But we all have fears, things that make us cringe just to think about, and many of them aren't as easy to avoid as going up on a rocket ship. What are your fears? Death? Most people don't really fear death; it's the dying that we fear. The pain, the loss, the regret, the sudden horrifying moment or the slow descending spiral.

Or do you fear poverty and the loss of choice and comfort that would mean? Many of us fear humiliation more than anything else. Or public speaking. Many fear losing their memory and even selfhood from encroaching dementia.

We all have fears. And we have inherited a sophisticated system that reacts to them with a hormonal authority that recruits us into the service of limiting, controlling, or avoiding them. And it's more than a little bit ironic that most of what we fear isn't actually happening to us in the moment. Most of our fears are about things that we worry might happen rather than fearing the things that do happen.

The result of this is that we are not free. We tend to spend our lives in reaction to our fears, either anxiously avoiding them or driven to quiet them through achievement. Even our desires are affected as we fear that they might not be satisfied. As a consequence, we either increase our anxieties or deaden ourselves to them through the various strategies our culture provides. Either way, the result is a decrease in joy. This decrease can be so intimate and chronic as to make the very idea of joy seem strangely irrelevant and fantastic.

But the deep teachings of the ages always come back to reaffirming the reality of joy. As Thomas Merton wrote, *"The reality that is present to us and in is: call it Being . . . Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or*

recovering the natural capacity to listen) we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations. . . . It will not fail us.”

The secret teaching at the heart of this understanding is that the way out is in. We can never overcome our fear, our suffering, our hardship by, as Shakespeare wrote, *“taking up arms against a sea of troubles and thus, by opposing, end them.”* We can only go beyond the treadmill of reactivity to which we’ve been chained by facing our fears directly, encountering them without resistance and, like Jesus, transcend and transform them. Only then will we enter into the peacefulness of the Kingdom of Heaven, the peace that is beyond understanding.

My teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote that, *“Happiness is possible right now, today – but happiness cannot be without suffering. Some people think that in order to be happy they must avoid all suffering, and so they are constantly vigilant, constantly worrying. They end up sacrificing all their spontaneity, freedom, and joy. This isn’t correct. If you can recognize and accept your pain without running away from it, you will discover that although pain is there, joy can be there at the same time.*

Some say that suffering is only an illusion or that to live wisely we have to ‘transcend’ both suffering and joy. I say the opposite. The way to suffer well and be happy is to stay in touch with what is actually going on; in doing so, you will gain liberating insights into the true nature of suffering and of joy.”

I had a personal experience a couple of months ago that gave me new insights into Easter, although I wasn’t looking for them at the time. I was practicing Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings as I experienced an old familiar feeling of frustration and anger about something that was also old and familiar in my life.

So I decided to calmly observe what was happening in the moment. There was the feeling of physical discomfort from the emotions, a burning across my abdomen and a tightness in my chest. I mentally embraced those feelings sort of the way one might hold a crying baby, just being compassionately present to the suffering taking place. I observed the thoughts connected with those physical feelings and how they were also connected to experiences and behaviors over the course of many decades. I just compassionately allowed them to be present.

The next thing that happened wasn't too great a surprise; it was something I had experienced before. The pain and tightness, the emotions of suffering were brought into relationship with a quiet inner joy, a joy like that of a loving parent holding a crying baby. You know the child is suffering but also know that it isn't really in danger and you are overwhelmed by your feelings of joyful love for the precious life in your care.

But what happened next was a surprise. As I held my suffering in a compassionate embrace, it calmed, and as I felt the calm spread through me it was as though my life presented itself to me in sedimentary layers of experience, with good and difficult periods as different colored layers. And the healing feelings that surrounded my suffering in the present expanded, extended to those times in my past when I'd suffered from similar feelings. And as they did, they were transformed as well. Not only was the healing taking place in the present, but my past was being healed as well.

This led me to reflect on a part of the Easter story that I had never taken seriously, the part where it says that Jesus descended into hell for three days. I mean, what the hell was that all about? But in light of my experience, I realized I had stumbled upon one of the deeper inner meanings of the story. When you can compassionately embrace your suffering in the present (the image of the crucifixion), you can embrace the hurts of your past as well (the image of hell), making it possible to emerge, healed and transformed, into a life of unlimited joy (the Kingdom of Heaven).

I've heard it said that it's never too late to have a happy childhood. I'd taken that to mean that we can experience feelings of freedom and happiness that had been denied to us as children. Now I see it differently. It is possible, with a little help – from Thich Nhat Hanh or Jesus, take your pick – to actually transform and heal the hurts of the past and emerge refreshed into a life of joy and freedom.

Happy Easter! Alleluia!

May it be so.