

Sitting in the Not Knowing
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With each Spring, we know Easter is right around the corner. Easter has many Unitarian Universalist squirming in their seats, ministers too, and so some congregations choose to celebrate Easter by honoring spring. There is nothing wrong in this, since so many of the rituals of Easter, including the name, come from the pagan ritual celebrations of the coming light and life that spring calls forth. For Unitarian Universalists, it is important to struggle with the theology and meaning of Easter and to arrive at a place where we are no longer squirming but perhaps simply sitting with Easter, sitting, even, in the not knowing.

Each spring, Easter invites us to hear the story of Jesus anew. Like the story of Passover, the story of Jesus is an ancient one told over and over again, year after year, generation after generation. The story is an old story, old and familiar even for those who are not Christian. Like the story of Passover, the story is told to help people remember.

We do not know much of the “real” story of Easter because what we do know is wrapped in two thousand years of myth and fact, hope and faith. Here is the basic story: A man called Jesus had been teaching and preaching all over the region near Jerusalem. He was telling people that it was more important to care for others than to follow the Jewish religious law. He was telling people that outcasts and even enemies had inherent worth and dignity. He was telling people that justice was possible here on earth. It came upon Passover time and so Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday. The people of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus as if he were a king. He was seized by the Roman authorities and executed on a cross as was the custom of the day. After three days, some followers of Jesus came to retrieve his body to bury it. When they arrived they found that the tomb was empty. His body was not there.

The early followers of Jesus put meaning to the story, to this tragic event, to help them understand how and why. They needed hope when they lost their leader. They needed faith that things would improve for them. They wanted to believe what Jesus had taught them but how could it be true when the one they depended on was now gone? How would they remember if their leader was not in their midst?

Christians over the centuries have told and retold this story. Through telling and retelling they have added meaning to this story. Jesus returned from the dead, he was resurrected, he died for the sins of humanity. Jesus is the son of God. Christians put meaning to the story that in turn fed them what they needed- hope, faith, forgiveness, possibility. This is not unusual. We know the telling and re-telling of important stories in our families and in our society keeps them alive for us—they help us to remember. And in the re-telling sometimes the details of the story change, or something gets added to it. We need not agree with the story that our sibling Christians take as an elemental part of their faith. What we should try to do is be open to how

this story of Jesus gives profound meaning and hope to the lives of millions of people. Christians give meaning to the Easter story and we can too. It's the meaning we put onto it that counts for everything. So, what is the meaning for us?

The most obvious meaning is that out of seeming death, can be resurrection. We have witnessed this, if not in our lives then in the lives of people we know. Out of the pain and misery of addiction, a slow suicide, a person finds hope and a new life. Out of a wrenching, grieving loss of a loved one come new connections and appreciation for the people still here. Out of the ashes of destruction and chaos comes community and purpose. Out of the pain of change there is opportunity. Out of depression there is light.

The story of resurrection at Easter is more than the story of Jesus. It is the story of love breaking through sure death. It is the story of hope that cannot be consumed by hate or fear. It is the story of each one of us not turning away from the brokenness and pain in ourselves or in the other. The story of resurrection is the story of possibility coming out of struggle and loss, pain and grief. It is the universal longing to have a different ending than the one we know and the possibility to make it happen.

But resurrection is not dependable. It is not certain. It requires tenacity. It requires vision. It requires sheer will against all the odds.

It demands hope and faith. And this is another important meaning we can take from Easter. Easter is about hope and faith. Unitarian Universalists don't always know what to do with a word like *faith*. In fact, some of you have told me it is not in your personal vocabularies. Faith means believing something in the absence of proof. That is hard for people in this day and age where evidence and hard proof shape our reality. But we know, our eyes do not always see; our ears do not always hear. Tricks can be played on us. Despite all the evidence things can turn out a different way. We want to believe with reason and our minds. But it happens that it is our hearts and our guts that sometimes know the truth.

Hope and Faith tell us that death does not have the last word. Fear does not have the last word. Betrayal does not have the last word. Oppression does not have the last word. Death does not have the last word. Life has the last word. Love has the last word.

No matter how many times the story of Jesus at Easter is told, no matter what we believe or do not believe, the story still ends in the same way- the tomb is empty. We can never really know what happened after Jesus died. As the story goes, we do know when they came back to the tomb the stone was moved and the tomb was empty. We do know that a linen shroud was left draped over the stone. But there is so much that we do not know after his body was taken down from the cross and removed to the tomb.

It is hard to sit in the not knowing. For Christians, there is none of that for they are sure they know the rest of the story. But for skeptics and for many of us, we must sit in the not knowing.

Now sitting in the not knowing is not something Unitarian Universalists like to do. We would prefer the mystery to be solved. We would prefer science to offer the proof. We would prefer the puzzle to be figured out. At least, then, we would be doing something. Diogenes Allen, a theologian writes: “When a problem is solved, it is over and done with. We go on to other problems...but a mystery once recognized is something we are never finished with. Instead, we return to it again and again and it unfolds new levels in us. Mysteries to be known must be entered into. The deeper we enter into them the more illumination we get. Still greater depths are revealed to us the further we go.”ⁱ

It is tempting here to fill in the void that the mystery leaves us with. But I invite you to sit with it. I invite you to sit in the not knowing of it. The awe and wonder of it. The despair and loss and grief of it. The temptation to fill the void of that mystery—sit with that. Listen to whatever may open up for you in this not knowing. Accept that some things are meant to remain a mystery.

Let us sit in the not knowing for a few minutes.

I close with these words that have become my traditional way of ending my Easter sermon:

Whoever you are or whatever you believe or know, remember this:

Easter is recognizing with a leap of the heart that the ancient cycles of new life will again repeat itself. Easter is rebirth, renewal and spring. Easter is resurrection. Out of nothingness is a new creation. Out of seeming death is new life. Easter is the resurrection of hope when there is none, and life when it seems all but gone, and faith when there is nothing to prove it. Easter is an empty tomb. No eyes to see but love, ever present, even in the mystery that is life.

Amen and blessed be.

ⁱ Hilary landau Krivchenia. “Jesus of Mystery: An Eater Sermon” Quest: Church of the Larger Fellowship.