

## Easter Gifts

There are many of you that are interested in Jesus' life; in His wisdom sayings and His legacy. His message of compassion for all beings as well as his healings through the power of love ...most of that feels accessible to many of us.

I believe it is Trinitarian theology, and the idea of a human—a person-being considered Divine...I think that is where Christian theology gets inaccessible to Unitarian Universalists, and frankly, to many Christians.

Today, because it is Easter, I feel it's important for me to share a different message about Jesus than you might be used to hearing.

I am a Progressive Christian Universalist. Quite clearly, I am part of a subset of what we think of as Christian today. I am not evangelical nor do I have a need to convert people to my way of thinking because I trust each of us to find our own path theologically. That to me, feels like one of the great privileges in life. Finding our own way...Living into the truths we uncover along our spiritual journeys.

So, for me, Jesus, expressed more of the Divine than other people. But he was a person. A man. A human. And by the way, if he were a woman, most everything about Him that was extraordinary would have gone unnoticed. Women always washed feet, helped the sick, loved the children. Jesus, as a woman, would have been a big "so what" as feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson has written.

It is Jesus' humanity that has drawn me toward Him time and again because I know he felt many of the same emotions I feel; experienced much of the disappointment and pain I have felt, and of course, He was so very brave. He spoke truth to power without regard to the consequences of His actions.

There is sadness these days, for many of us who identify as Christian, because the good work of people like those in the United Church of Christ, my denomination, has been overshadowed by a nationalistic Christianity that is more reminiscent of Constantinian Imperialism than what we would call The Jesus Movement. Folks in

the UCC, like folks in the UU, have worked long and hard to ensure: gun safety, total equality for all regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation. WE Too respect the inherent dignity of each person and fight for health care for all, and an end to poverty. We understand what it is like to be a “stranger in a strange land” and therefore embrace those fleeing unsafe lands.

Sadly, Christianity today, particularly to young people, is now associated with intolerance, homophobia, capitalism and greed. Exclusive salvation (meaning salvation for Christians only) often gets rolled into this. To me, this is painful and antithetical to the message of Jesus. This taints the “brand”. And it might get much worse before it gets better.

Nevertheless, I want to share what Easter means to Christian Universalists like me, and a few others in our congregation. Today is the most sacred day on our liturgical calendar. Much more important than Christmas. This is Resurrection Sunday, and that means the world to me

(Explain) Jesus’ LIFE, HIS DEATH, HIS RESURRECTION

1. HIS LIFE: As John Dominic Crossan writes and I’m paraphrasing:

“Jesus lived in an occupied land among peasants living at subsistence level—peasants who were being pressed harder and harder within a world of structured inequality and injustice. He offered and lived out an alternative vision and invited others to share it.”

Note: Jesus was not a middle-class fellow from a family where the bread winner was a carpenter. That is anachronistic. There was no middle class back then. Approximately 95% to 98% of people were living in poverty with the government taxing them out of their own land. The other 2 to 5% held the wealth and the power.

Jesus pulled together a community characterized by free healing and shared eating. A community of equals which included women, children, men, lepers, the destitute, the disturbed. To each he offered the same invitation: Come eat with me and be healed. Then take this

experience out into the world and share it with others.” Jesus knew that it is connection, community and compassion that heals.

Let me offer a visual: a horizontal table, enormous in size, with a seat for everyone. The opposite of Musical Chairs. This is called “open commensality” and my brand of Christians refers to this as “radical hospitality” which we try to emulate.

What Jesus advocated was in direct violation of the purity codes set forth in Leviticus.

His community organizing posed a threat to the way things had always been done.

## 2. HIS DEATH

Jesus’ death teaches us about the consequences of speaking truth to power. As Liberation theologians will tell you, when you call out the powerful and the oppressors, there will be a price extracted. See: Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela;..... My understanding of Jesus’ death centers around the knowledge that from the time he turned over the tables of the money changers in the Jerusalem temple---threatening a profit center and challenging the authorities ---he was headed for certain death.

I do not believe Jesus died so that our sins are forgiven. If you are not familiar with this concept, I can say with relative certainty that most modern-day Christians believe Jesus had to hang on the cross as a living sacrifice, so that our sins could be forgiven by God. This is called “substitutionary atonement” and it comes into Christian thinking via the story of the Sacrifice (or Binding) of Issac in Genesis 22. The idea of God requiring a human sacrifice---in fact the sacrifice of God’s beloved son---creates a lot of avenues for the glorification of violence and the cruelty within patriarchy. This is a road I cannot go down.

Returning to my earlier understanding: I believe Jesus died because people who speak truth to power in flame-throwing blatant ways, do not live a long life in authoritarian cultures.

## The Resurrection:

I do not believe in a literal resurrection of the body, of Jesus' body, or my body for that matter. Nevertheless, my faith rests on the concept of resurrection. It is a beautiful and meaningful concept.

I will turn to the late Christian scholar Marcus Borg who is known for his work on the historical Jesus: "Good Friday (the day of the crucifixion) was the domination system's NO to Jesus. The NO anyone who steps out of line will receive when pushing hard against oppression and oppressors."

Easter: Easter is God's YES to the vision of radical egalitarianism, God's YES to the quest for justice. Easter takes Jesus and his rag tag group of Jewish mystics and makes of them AN EASTER PEOPLE, hopeless in their belief that we can create a kingdom of God "on earth, on earth as it is, in heaven".

And in so doing, we call ourselves The Body of Christ. Not the body like a dead body and you get to be one part....no, the body of Christ as in helping hands that serve others and listen carefully when people express pain or frustration or the reality of their dire circumstances.

The concept of resurrection, the central gift of Easter, makes me an Easter Person. That means that as frustrated as I get, as angry as current events might make me, I believe that out of darkness comes a new light.

Put another way: Have you ever seen a dead tree on the ground while hiking? You know how new flora and fauna wrap themselves around it? Perhaps a new shoot comes off the dead tree? Observing that, makes you an EASTER PERSON. You saw new life where once, all was dead.

The words from the Easter story: "The tomb is empty" is another way to say this. Death does not have the final say. Hope will always triumph over evil. This truth feels more important now than ever before.

Resurrection is the metaphor to describe Jesus' presence among His followers and friends long after he died. Long after he died He lived

on. The Story of empty tomb is not historical. As Walter Bruggeman famously said: "The story did not happen as written. Nevertheless, it is true."

Former priest and historical Jesus scholar, John Dominic Crossan, wrote this: Resurrection is a word-picture of Jesus' continuing presence among His followers."

If so, let me elucidate what His presence means for many of us:

It means that we RESIST bigotry and hatred

It means that we stand together speaking truth to power because there is strength and safety in numbers.

It means justice is worth fighting for

It means that healing, in the form of compassion, is the greatest, strongest, most useful gift we can give to one another

It means that birth and death (not life and death) form a circle of life into perpetuity

It means second chances...new beginnings...rethinking...hoping against hope....it's all worth it. Cynicism has no place in our theology.

Finally, as Crossan says: "Easter for me means the divine empowerment that was present in Jesus , but once limited to those who lived in Galilee and Judea who had contact with Him, is now available to anyone, anywhere who finds God in Jesus... unconfined by time or space."

For Easter People, Death does not have the final word. Love and life and hope are stronger than fear and death.

May it be so. Amen.