

Happy Easter! What's Happy About Easter?

Rev. Roger Jones
New Member Sunday, April 20, 2014
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #38, Morning Has Broken; #61 Lo, the Earth Awakes Again; #269, Lo, the Day of Days is Here.

Special Music: A Peaceful Alleluia (Meg Burnett, choir conductor); Will the Circle Be Unbroken? (Ross Hammond, guitar)

Sermon

Happy Easter! So, what's happy about Easter?

What's happy about our world, on this Easter Day? Refugees from Syria cower and flee, and wait in crowded camps while a civil war bleeds on and on. People in Ukraine suffer and fight with one another as the Russian ruler plays them like pawns in a game. Families from small island nations watch as rising ocean waters threaten their lives due to global warming. Polar bears die off and coral reefs die off, and warnings echo around the globe from the United Nations Panel on Climate Change—Slow down the burning of fossil fuels! Turn back!

In South Korea, parents weep and wail as they count the days with no news—or bad news—of the fate of their children on the capsized ocean ferry. *You* can find your own headlines, I'm sure. There is enough going on this Easter to make us weep. And I think that both you and I could reflect on our own lives and the lives of those we know, and we could find reasons to worry and weep ourselves.

Happy Easter... What's so happy?

Easter is a holiday in the Christian calendar, and for all the reasons I've just given, that calendar is wise also to include Good Friday, just a few days earlier. Good Friday is a holiday that says, "It's okay to feel dreadful. There's no shortage of material. There is no lack of agony in the story of

human life." But what Easter says in reply, is that no matter how bad the story gets, the story is not over. No matter what is going on for *you*, the story is not over. No matter what's besetting your own family or the family of humanity or the family of all beings on this earth--no matter how you might feel about the story—it's not over.

The original Easter Sunday took place during a very sad story. Over two thousand years ago, in many lands around the Mediterranean Sea, desperately poor people lived under the grinding oppression of the Roman Empire. In the Roman province of Palestine, a band of Jewish peasants had begun following a carpenter's son, Jesus of Nazareth. He was an untrained healer and teacher. As a storyteller, he would leave listeners scratching their heads and contemplating the moral challenge of his ideas. He taught the men *and the women* around him that the Emperor Caesar's punishing rule need not oppress their spirits, need not pervert *their own sense* of right and wrong.

This teaching drew people toward him, and he brought them along on his journeys of healing and proclamation. By example and by encouragement, he showed that even in times of pain and scarcity, anyone can reach out to others, and show kindness, compassion and courage. We need not be alone or isolated, he said; we are *not* alone. For all these reasons, the people followed him with a new sense of hope.

This did not last long. As a prophet, he broke religious rules. Even worse, he refused to accept Caesar, the Emperor, as God. So the empire struck back.

Jesus the prophet was hung on a cross on a hill where other criminals and rebels also met their death by this method of suffocation and dehydration—all of them objects of state-sponsored terrorism. After this atrocity, the followers and friends of Jesus were stricken with grief and confusion.

Stumbling in pain, they were no longer able to count on his guidance and encouragement. Or so they felt.

Not long after this cruel outcome, they told stories that gave them hope once again. Women were walking to the hole in the wall of the mountain where Jesus had been entombed, to anoint his body, but they found the stone rolled away, and his body was gone. Later, a few friends felt his presence, walking with them on a lonely road. Some others were sure they had seen him appear, even with wounds in his hands, feet, and abdomen. *He is risen*, they cried!

Over time, their cry became a refrain, and the refrain became their faith. *He is risen!* Eventually, after decades of passing along these stories by word of mouth, claims of his resurrection were written down on scrolls. Also written down were the accounts of his healing miracles, his parables, his compassion, and his friendly exchanges with Roman tax collectors and with women outside of his own family and even his own ethnic group.

Even people who had not yet been born while Jesus was alive were passing along the words he had said about faith, prayer, ethics, humility, and especially about giving of yourself and your possessions to those around you most in pain or need.

It's worth noting that in those early centuries, there was no single, monolithic form of Christian faith. Modern scholars have explained that, early on, there were multiple Christianities, rather than just one version. In various towns and provinces, different followers developed a variety of rituals and prayers. They argued about creeds and rules. What most of them did hold in common was that they would break bread together and would share a cup of wine in his memory, and would encourage one another to live as he had urged them to live. They gave testimony to their faith in him.

Most Unitarian Universalists do not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected, as is proclaimed in traditional Christian circles. Regarding the afterlife, we Unitarian Universalists are not of one mind. We can't know for sure what happens after any one of us dies. But whatever happens after we die, most of us don't think our fate will hinge on belief in Christ's resurrection back on that original Easter. For this reason, I think it is a bit odd that here at UUSS, we get a good crowd on Easter. Early this morning our staff had to set out extra chairs for the extra people expected. And I hear that, in UU congregations around the continent, attendance at services is greater than usual on this morning.

Why would this be the case? What is this about? I think it's about hope.

Any story of hope can stir us, and we long to be stirred. Any ritual of rebirth and reaffirmation can renew our tired spirits, and we long to be renewed. In moments of worry, pain and self-doubt, and with concerns for our loved ones, we long to be reminded of the possibilities that lie within us, and the blessings that exist around us and among us. In these times of tragedy, injustice, greed and global danger, we seek encouragement. We seek to hear, once more, the call to hope and renewal and even the call to celebration.

We are not the first gathering of people to bear anxieties and feel despair. Not the first to lament when bad things happen to good people. And we are not the first ones to know that, even with the wearisome trials of life, renewal and celebration are possible.

~

Around Easter in Chicago nearly 20 years ago, when I was in theological school, a classmate organized a field trip up to the north side of the city for us to visit a small Ukrainian heritage museum. On the streets of its neighborhood were storefront

restaurants and corner markets featuring Slavic specialties, with signs I couldn't read. Towering over this Ukrainian Village were several stone-built Eastern Orthodox Churches, with their carved golden wood interiors and their painted icons of Christ and the saints.

We arrived on time for our tour at the small cultural museum. A gray haired immigrant woman greeted us in her Slavic accent. Then she taught us about the craft of Ukrainian Easter eggs. She showed us how an artist etches a pattern on a beeswax covered egg, and dips the egg in one dye, before etching the next design for the next color of dye.

The finished eggshells are like jewels! The patterns are mesmerizing—in colors of red, yellow, blue, gold, green. The lady explained the symbolism of rebirth in this tradition of decorated eggs. The ancient Slavic peoples had worshipped a sun god, the source of life. The only beings that could approach this fire-y divinity god were birds, who were able to fly toward the sun. The closest that human beings could get to the divine source of life was to have the eggs of those birds—hence the importance of the egg as a symbol of renewal.

She explained this while showing us eggs with a variety of designs. I asked, “You mean this tradition...these designs... they go back before Christianity?”

“Oh!” she blurted out, “Christianity is like yesterday!” Of course. Easter eggs are an ancient art, more ancient than the old stone Orthodox Churches, more ancient than the stories of Jesus and his disciples. In the car on our drive back to our seminary, my friends and I smiled as we said her words, “Oh, Christianity is like yesterday!”

Although Ukrainian immigrants had been in Chicago for generations, our little field trip was taking place less than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's new independence. Now, in 2014, Russia and Ukraine are struggling again. Ethnic Ukrainians and Russian Ukrainians

and Crimean Tatars worry about losing their culture or sense of identity—or their lives. Citizens protest the unraveling of new forms of democracy they have been trying to knit together. Ordinary people bravely resist armed guards and thugs, and they are repaid for their courage in blood and grief. There is nothing new under the sun. Happy Easter...

~

Under a mother bird's feathers and care, a new bird's egg is vulnerable, at risk. But inside that shell is throbbing an urge for new life. A new being longs for light and air. A decorated eggshell, and covered with designs and colors, is such a fragile thing that museums have none of the ancient, early specimens of the traditional Ukrainian Easter eggs. We have only recent eggs.

Yet the ancient patterns endure. The designs and colors and the creative craft—the spirit of it all—these all persist and endure, and show the endurance of people and of life itself.

The folk art of Easter eggs is a creative response to the uncertainties of life and its transience and pain. American writer Thornton Wilder said that hope and despair are both “projection[s] of the imagination.”¹ He urged us to devote our imaginations and our actions away from despair, toward hope. This is the message of Easter to me.

Life is fragile, fortune can be harsh, and human history is not fair. Yet the patterns of hope and courage endure from generation to generation. The craft of building community and celebrating the gifts of life is our legacy to receive and pass along. We pass the gift of human hope among ourselves now, and pass hope along down the ages of the human family.

The traditional Easter story is called the Good News. If you don't believe in the bodily resurrection, are you left only with the bad news? The bad news of the Easter story, the bad news of

the life of Jesus, is that giving voice to your calling can get you in trouble. Speaking the words of the values and longings and love that we know to be true—doing this can get us killed. Yet if it's a true calling, if we speak true words of courage and purpose, we can trust that the calling and the words will continue even after we're gone. This is the good news.

William Channing Gannett, a Unitarian from the 1800s, wrote a hymn text about the divine music of human dignity, which rings in every time and place of history, for all time. He wrote: "It sounds along the ages, soul answering to soul; it kindles on the pages of every Bible scroll; the psalmist heard and sang it, from martyr lips it broke, and prophet tongues out rang it, till sleeping nations woke."

You and I are part of the sweep of history, carried to this moment by forces we could not control or choose. We are carried along as members of the family of all souls, and of the family of all beings. Yet as part of the sweep of history, we can help to move it along by our choices, our actions, and our words. James Luther Adams, a Unitarian from the 20th century, said when people join in solidarity with others to work for justice and aim for peace, we can make history, instead of just feeling pushed around by history. This is the good news.

A friend of mine with decades in recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous used to give me this advice when I was confused or overwhelmed. He said, "Choose to do the next right thing." I don't know if it's wisdom from the recovery movement or just from him, but it's helpful. "Do the next right thing." This is how we participate in the sweep of history, and renew our hope. We *dare* to do the next right thing.

But we dare not try this alone. *This* is a true lesson of Jesus of Nazareth. It is unfortunate that the *usual telling* of the story of Easter limits its focus to Jesus and his resurrection, *alone* with only God as a source of strength. But in the larger story,

the wider story, Jesus is connected to a circle of comrades, friends, and those he called his family.

Jesus gathered people together, and he taught community and solidarity. He shared meals. He taught by his actions that no matter what is going on, we are not alone. We need not be alone. We need not leave others out of the circle of our kindness or hide our needs from others. We should not hold back the tender touch of our hands, reaching to others.

Happy Easter. Really?

Really!

Of course, violence and oppression continue. They are nothing new under the sun. But they do not have the final say. Humanity always has a new choice to make—a choice toward more pain for one another and our selves, or a choice toward compassion and hope. Each one of us has a new choice to make, the next right choice, every day.

At times, hope can seem to be crushed. Yet hope also can be renewed, it can be reborn. For hope is not a thing, an object. It's not even an idea or a thought, but a way of engaging life, a way of moving in the world and a way of living. Thornton Wilder said, "Hope is an energy." To live with hope is to generate and share that energy.

To move ahead with all of our senses open to the energy and beauty of this world.

To put our lives to work, giving energy to our values, and lifting our vision to what is possible, together. So may we live, with hope.

So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

¹ *Illustrations Unlimited*. James S. Hewitt, ed. Wheaton, Ill., 1988 (Tyndale House), p. 290.