

The Brassiness of Easter

Rev. Roger Jones
Sunday, March 27, 2016
Unitarian Universalist Society of
Sacramento

Hymns: #203, 61. *Choir:* Lo, the Earth Is
Ris'n Today (text Longfellow/tune
Williams), Sing for Joy (Handel).

Brass:
Victorious Love (G. Gastoldi) Salute (W.
Byrd), Minuet from Water Music (Handel).

Reading: [Gospel of Mark 16:1-8](#)

Sermon

Easter is here! Today is *the* pivotal day for those of the Christian faith. It is the holy day that brings together the doctrine of Jesus as the son of God and the faith in him as the Savior by way of his death and resurrection. Second only to Christmas Eve, attendance is highest on Easter in Christian churches. Most of them pull out all the stops. They add extra services, even one at sunrise in some congregations.

In our heritage, both Unitarians and Universalists made the humanity of Jesus their point of departure from the Christian tradition. Given that most of *us* do see Jesus as human (hence we are not Trinitarians), and we have no explanation for the resurrection, what brings us here on this day?

Is it the big, brassy, celebratory spirit of our worship service? Is it our colorful, musical Easter extravaganza?

All of that *may be* what comes to mind as we prepare for this holiday every year, but that's *not* how Easter started. It started in failure, confusion, trembling, astonishment, and only a few/ shreds of hope. Consider the disciples of Jesus, the followers of that healer, preacher, boundary-

breaker and prophet from Nazareth. They had their hopes raised by his leadership, and in a few short years their hopes were dashed. Their leader was killed by the Roman Empire through a torture so public it would traumatize generations of imperial subjects out of hoping for a better life. The first Easter was a day of quiet grieving and humiliation.

I read an article last week by a Christian pastor who expressed his annoyance at seeing big banners in front of churches during the weeks of Lent before Easter. In bold colors they proclaimed, "He is risen!" This pastor said, "No he's not. He's not even dead yet." That's because the story of his death doesn't happen till Holy Week, when Jesus is accused and convicted, shares the Last Supper on Thursday with his disciples, and is executed on Good Friday.

It's been said that celebrating the joy of Easter is fraudulent unless we also observe the sadness of Good Friday, unless we note what the tragedy of that day shows that humans can do.

It's like a state of denial, ignoring how hard things can be, how precarious our lives and those of our loved ones have always been. The brashness and brassiness of the party tempt us to ignore *how fragile* is any time of peace, how endangered is our future or our planet's future. There is just as much evidence for Good Friday's bad news as there is reason for Easter's brassy cheer and faith and hope. Yet we need the hope, too. I certainly do.

The first written testimony of Jesus' resurrection comes from the Gospel of Mark. It's the oldest one available, and it wasn't put on paper till about 40 years after Jesus. Mark is brief yet full of dramatic episodes.

Unlike the later Gospels, Mark has no confusing long passages; nor does it have legends about the baby's birth in Bethlehem.

Mark starts with Jesus as an adult, recruiting disciples. It ends with his trial in Jerusalem, public mocking, and execution on a cross. Unlike the other Gospel stories, there's no bright celebration after the resurrection, no stunning re-appearance to his followers.

In Mark, three women disciples go to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body. Instead of that, they find a young man dressed in white. "He is not here; he is risen," this messenger says. The messenger, the angel, tells the women to alert the other disciples not only that Jesus is risen: "Tell them all that they will see him when they arrive in Galilee, just as he promised."

But the women go away, confused and afraid. They don't tell anyone.

The authors of the other Gospels, the later ones, can't leave it at this. John, Matthew and Luke have to add the special effects and other-worldly Jesus appearances that Christianity likes to celebrate. In fact, within 200 years some new writer couldn't bear the vague ending of the Gospel of Mark, and added an extra ending.¹ These new lines include exhortations to accept Christ and avoid hell. The new lines give a nod to snake handling in worship, and even say that Christians can drink poison and survive.

In modern translations of the Bible, scholarly footnotes tell us where the older, original Gospel of Mark ends. *It ends* in quiet and confusion. It says: "The women went out and fled from the tomb in terror and amazement."

The women were afraid to say anything. I understand that fear. It's easier to keep our heads down, try to not make anything worse. One translation says they were "trembling and bewildered." That sounds authentic, for them in their day, and for us trying to live with courage and hope in these times. Trembling and bewildered.

It's only with the benefit of hindsight that people who follow Jesus can see their faith affirmed by the story of his resurrection and the spread of his movement. Those who knew him in person--and lost him--had no such assurance. People who are not Christians but who value his brave message of compassion and inclusion can see that his teachings have not been forgotten.

Every year as I reflect on the coming of Easter I think about all the challenges we face.

For me, that includes good friends and congregation members facing medical challenges, grieving losses, worried about loved ones, or feeling heartsick about the situation of our world.

Also, I feel empathy for the parents of young men of color, warning them how to behave around their local police, lest they become another story in the newspaper and another statistic. I feel fury at fanatical terrorists and sadness at the lives lost and bodies maimed in Belgium, Turkey, Yemen, Ivory Coast, and Iraq. I'm worried and impatient about climate chaos, and I worry for friends I've made in the Philippines and other places close to the sea.

I'm disheartened by the anti-immigrant anger I hear (in this land of the free), and I pray for the frail young Latin Americans running from violence and starvation, who then face further agony walking over cactus and sharp rocks in the hot Arizona desert.

Perhaps you have your own list or litany of matters that weigh on the heart.

Things are bad, and our hopes can feel worn. On the other hand, we are not the first people to feel heartbreak or dread. We are not the first people who long to renew our hopes, to look for courage instead of

¹ If you read the King James translation, you can't see where the original Mark ends and the new stuff is added.

resignation. In their grief, the followers of Jesus did stumble in confusion at first, but later they came together. They renewed themselves by spreading his message of compassion and his charge to treat your neighbor as you would want to be treated.

Here's a more recent example of the renewal of hope: fifty-three years ago, this country was in the middle of the Cold War, with children practicing nuclear drills in school, and our President threatening war with the Soviets over missiles in Cuba. Last week saw the President visiting Cuba, and celebrating baseball, travel and commerce between the two countries. Another example: When I was growing up, rivers burned and belched with toxic industrial waste in many cities. Now cities feature bike paths and sculpture gardens along downtown rivers. We are not the first people to seek for signs of renewal.

In looking toward Easter, a friend of mine said the holiday symbolizes the letting go of what we can't change, and letting go of what is passing, in order to start anew, and allow a fresh beginning.

Perhaps this is what draws us out on a Sunday morning: the desire to be reminded that no matter what's happened or how bad we feel, no matter what painful mess we find ourselves in, we still have a choice.

We can decide how to look at the situation, and how to affirm our potential and our gifts. We can choose how to respond, choose the words we say, choose the efforts we will make—whether to hide and stay hidden, or to rest and then to rise again to engage with life's hardship and its blessings. Starting anew, rising again, taking a new step into life.

The brassiness of Easter for me is about *this* life, and about living it. We can let the mystery of death and eternity unfold however it might, after we are deceased, but

for now we can choose to love and give and do what we can to make a difference and give hope to others.

Recently, I drove to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Napa Valley to attend a Celebration of Life service for a member of that church. Bob Jones and I had become friends when we worked together on the Growth Committee for the Unitarian Universalist Pacific Central District. In his former career in Washington, DC, Bob had worked a fundraiser for a diversity of political campaigns and not-for-profits. He was a cheerful promoter of progressive causes, and a direct-mail whiz. His enthusiasm for financial support of Unitarian Universalism spilled into his volunteerism at the Cedar Lane Church in Bethesda, Maryland. In retirement, he and his wife Sylvia moved from Maryland to California.

At our Growth Committee meetings Bob was fired up to enroll more UUs as contributors in our district's crowdfunding program, known as [Chalice Lighters](#). At his Napa congregation, Bob would call up other Board members or their minister when he was fired up with a new idea. When a church property went on the market in town, he led the charge to buy it. They did, with cash raised in a few months, and moved out of their rented space. Later he'd call and say: "We've got to fix up the RE building," and he'd create a campaign.

Bob was short and athletic, with thinning hair, glasses and eyes that twinkled. Bob always had a good word and a hug for me and for others. Like me, his name was Jones, and we called each other "cousin." When the Reverend Bonnie Dlott asked me to attend the Saturday afternoon service for Bob, I cancelled other plans and went over to honor him.

This was no ordinary Celebration of Life. Bob was alive and present for it! Bob

knew that he had lost his struggle against cancer and was a few weeks away from death. He wanted to see people, hear their words, and hear the congregation singing familiar hymns. The family scrambled to invite relatives and faraway friends and to hire a caterer for the reception. Napa's minister, Bonnie, pulled together a service in a week's time.

As I walked up to the church door, a board member asked me to make a name tag and use hand sanitizer before going in. With Bob's compromised immune system, catching a bug could end his life sooner rather than later. I saw another friend I knew from UU district work, gave her and her husband a hug and found a seat in a back row with them. Bob sat up front by the pulpit, facing the congregation. His skin looked green and his body sagged in a director's chair. He had on a floppy hat and glasses, and his eyes were closed before the service. He could have been gone already.

After prelude music, Bonnie spoke words of welcome with a tone of celebration, with no hint of the gravity of Bob's condition or his coming death. It was a tone of joy which Bob had wanted for the service, because that is how he embraced life, with joy. Bob showed gratitude for the gifts of life, so this was a time of gratitude. All the expressions of joy and gratitude affected us in an interesting way – we were grateful, and we felt his joy, and we wept for the coming loss.

He spoke from his chair to thank people for coming. Then family and friends who loved him spoke for a time. We heard about the campaigns he'd consulted with, including two in other countries. His longtime UU minister from the East Coast offered stories from years past, showing again how Bob was a tireless, ambitious and optimistic soul. We sang three of his favorite UU hymns.

By the end of the service, Bob wasn't sagging in the chair or green in skin tone anymore. He was like a plant that had risen in the warm sunlight of love and appreciation. He was beaming.

As Bonnie concluded the service, her voice cracked as she spoke words of thanks for all he'd given to our movement and to everyone there. She then invited us to the reception, which included Bob's wine collection. She said, "Please resist the temptation to come up to Bob and love all over him. Instead, the videographer will be in one of the classrooms. We invite you to record a message for Bob to view later." I did. When I faced the video camera, I thanked Bob for the celebration and for his friendship. I praised his leadership and his generosity. Recalling our shared work on the growth committee of the District, I said, "Bob! the [Sacramento congregation was chosen for Chalice Lighter donations](#) for our A/V system. You'll get a letter soon!" Then I said, "Goodbye, Bob, and thank you. I love you."

I walked outside, enjoyed veggies, crackers and cheese, cookies, and a glass each of Bob's red wine and champagne. His wife came up: "Have you talked to Bob yet?"

"No, I was afraid to get too close, so we waved, and he winked at me." She said the crowd near him had thinned. "Go ahead," she said. I joined the small circle of people around him. Bob was holding court. They asked him questions about his life, his work in raising funds as well as children, and his passion for politics. He stated his worries for this country, and his hopes for our future. He spoke words of encouragement to each one of us. His eyes were full of life and his voice full of enthusiasm. As I left, I felt inspired to put more of myself and my money into the

institutions that embody my values, and to invite others to do the same. I felt sadness and gratitude.

Bob died a couple of weeks later. As I look back on that experience, I think that Bob had his resurrection before he passed away. He chose to bring his life and his death front and center. He showed how we can make any day matter, including what may be our final day. When trouble weighs us down, when so much in this world makes us want to keep our heads down, we can lift our heads and face life. We can bring our gifts to life, any day of our lives.

Perhaps this is why we like Easter's extravagance. We need to say and to sing, loud and clear, that *your life* makes a difference. We need to recognize life's gifts and blessings, and to extend and share those blessings with a world in need of them.

We need the bright brassiness to wake us up to the surprising gift of life, and call us to attention in sharing life, not just on Easter but on every day we are given to live. Amen.