

Easter: Celebration and Hope in Spite of Everything

Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #203, All Creatures of the Earth and Sky (vv. 1-4); #34, Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire, Life Calls Us On (Gibbons/Shelton). Choir and string quartet: Light Beyond Shadow (Dan Forrest). Piano: 'Twas on One Sunday Morning (Trad. African American Spiritual, arr. Steven A. Ward), Alleluia (Ralph Manuel)

Readings

The first reading this morning is an excerpt from the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke. The words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth contain a series of blessings and woes, known as the Beatitudes. For centuries this has been one of most beloved passages of the New Testament.

“[Jesus] looked up at the crowd and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

...

“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.”

In this month of April our Soul Matters theme has been Joy. Here are two quotations by young women writers we have reflected on our small groups. This is by Maria Popova, a Bulgarian born teacher and writer who immigrated to the United States.ⁱ Popova writes:

In a world heavy with robust reasons for despair, joy is a stubborn courage we must not surrender, a fulcrum of personal power we must not yield to cynicism, blame, or any other costume of helplessness... The practice of joy, the courage of joy, becomes our mightiest frontier of resistance.

This reading is from Cole Arthur Riley, who was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is the author of *This Here Flesh* and *Black Liturgies*.ⁱⁱ She writes:

We must reclaim joy outside of the official “cheer” it is often reduced to. There is a joy that is defiant. A portal to survival for our ancestors. A way to say: We will not be captive to despair nor [will we] abandon our belief in beauty. Joy with teeth.

Sermon starts on page 2

Sermon

This Easter morning, I'd like to start with a summary of the traditional Easter story. More than 2,000 years ago, Jesus was born to parents from Nazareth. As Jews living under the Roman occupation of Palestine, they were subjects of the empire, without the protections or privileges of citizenship. According to the New Testament, near the age of 30, Jesus began his ministry of healing, teaching, storytelling and preaching. He recruited followers, known as disciples. By sharing food and fellowship with people from all walks of life, Jesus violated the religious and social codes of *who* could associate with *whom*.

About three years later, he was brought to trial in Jerusalem and found guilty of sedition against the Roman Empire. Jesus was forced to carry the wood on which he would be executed in the empire's practice of crucifixion. After his death on a Friday, he was laid in a tomb carved in hillside. On Sunday morning, two women went there to anoint his body and found it missing. An angelic figure appeared, telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Word of this spread fast among the people. Over the years, his followers' faith in his resurrection generated new energy in their work of healing, inclusion, and proclamation of the power of God's love. Small groups gathered for fellowship and eventually became congregations. Thanks to apostles and other followers of "the Way" of Jesusⁱⁱⁱ, the movement grew--first among Jews and then spread among Gentiles, primarily Pagans.

Now let's jump forward a couple of thousand years and several thousand miles to this continent. To most U.S. Americans who observe Easter, the holiday includes connecting with friends and relatives, feasting on special meals, enjoying music, and buying new clothing to wear. (I bought some new shoes last week. However, they are running shoes, so I don't know if that counts.) Many people attend an Easter service, including people who don't even visit a church during the rest of the year. Of course, many families with children wait for candy from the Easter Bunny, though this practice comes from earth-based stories rather than the Christian or Jewish traditions.

For centuries Easter has been a day of joy, whether in a church setting or a secular one. Indeed, the big word of the day on Easter is J-O-Y. I am a low-key person, however, so that word makes me self-conscious. I feel as if I can't live up to it. *Joy*. Of course, I do have things that I enjoy. Reading, singing, exercise, humor, and sunshine are a few of them. And I feel contentment and gratitude for my life. But *joy*? Don't get carried away! Moreover, joy seems even more distant on this Easter, when I consider the atrocities the government is now perpetrating in this country and other tragedies in in our world.

Well, I was relieved to read a new take on joy by Cole Arthur Riley, the writer of *Black Liturgies*, among other books. Riley says this: "We must reclaim joy outside [of] the official 'cheer' it is often reduced to. There is a joy that is defiant. Joy with teeth."

A joy that is defiant feels much more doable and appropriate for our current set of problems. Witnessing the national crisis of the past few months, it feels as if so much that I have relied on has been upended, stolen, and perverted. It's confusing, sickening, and frightening. This makes me think about the defeated followers of Jesus. Through the agony of his execution, *their* world was upended. They were confused, sickened, and scared.

In the years after that first Easter, the followers of Jesus were in mourning, and they were also in danger of attack. Actually, for the first three centuries of their movement, those who followed the way of Jesus were at risk of persecution. They did not enjoy the freedom to worship openly. Nevertheless, their movement spread throughout the region of the Mediterranean Sea and into North Africa. But in every land, most of its members had no political rights. They were subjects of an empire. Yet Jesus had shown them how to live under a hostile and unjust government. He had even shown them how to resist it.

The late Howard Thurman was a preacher and teacher who served as the campus chaplain at Howard University in Washington, DC. Later he was the first African American dean for religious life at Boston University. While there, he mentored Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a doctoral student. In his 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman focuses on what the teachings of Jesus have to say to people who stand “with their backs against the wall,” as Thurman puts it.^{iv} In his era, African Americans were subject to legal segregation and were victimized by racial terrorism, as well as by the poverty that such persecutions kept in place. He points out that as Roman subjects without rights, the people around Jesus also had their backs against the wall.

In Thurman’s interpretation, there are a number of ways that a subject people can choose to live under an imperial regime, ways which can include forms of resistance. One approach is to make yourself useful to the regime, to serve in some role that might bring you financial gain and some security for yourself and your family. Of course, this is not resistance, Thurman says, it is hypocrisy, surrender, and betrayal.

But there are a number of approaches to resisting oppression, which Thurman outlines. For example, resistance may take the form of overt physical violence, including weapons, used in self-defense or in rebellion. As a matter of fact, there was a series of Jewish rebellions against Roman control in Palestine, but all of them were crushed.

But there is also spiritual resistance, which Thurman says was the strategy taught by Jesus of Nazareth and exemplified by his life. Spiritual resistance involves the cultivation of your own sense of moral integrity and self-worth, no matter what you suffer or go through. It is the commitment to your own humanity no matter what happens to you. It also means holding on to the humanity of those who are oppressing you.

In the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his followers: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.” Hard instructions. Yet Thurman says this is how to preserve your own integrity. As he writes: “Anyone who permits another to determine the quality of our inner life/ gives into the hands of the other/ the keys to our destiny.” To Mohandas K. Gandhi, the father of India’s independence, this kind of resistance is called soul force. This is the basis of the tactic of nonviolent resistance. It preserves our self-worth and self-respect. By refusing to meet violence with violence, it also affirms the basic humanity of those who hurt us.

Consider that the four Gospels were written down forty to fifty years after the death of Jesus. Stories, events, and sayings of Jesus and his disciples had been passed down by word of mouth for decades. What this means is that the Gospels reflect what the early Christians found memorable, inspiring, and worthy of writing down. If the Gospel writers had found part of the Sermon on the Plain too demanding, they would have ignored it. If they didn’t want to pray for those who persecuted them, they could have left out such hard instruction. But they kept it in.

They kept alive the wisdom of Jesus which said that allowing yourself to hate your enemies would give your enemies the keys to your inner life. It would allow them to poison your soul.

The Gospel writers also retained the blessings which Jesus preached. “Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.” These are not magic forecasts. They are promises of love and justice. And it was left to the followers of Jesus to honor those promises, and to live them out.

The Gospel writers also included warnings to people of power and privilege. In the Beatitudes Jesus says: “But woe unto you who are rich, for you have already received your consolation.” In other words, he said, a movement for love and justice will rise up and unseat your privilege. That’s what he said. However, something happened in the year 312. The emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, making it the religion of the empire. He supported the construction of churches, legalized Sunday as a day of rest, and built a cathedral in Byzantium. Because of this, as Howard Thurman writes: Christianity would “become a religion of the powerful and the dominant/ [and would be] used sometimes as an instrument of oppression.” But, Thurman says, “we must not let this tempt us into believing that it was expressing the mind and heart of Jesus.” Honoring the true faith of Jesus meant making real the promise of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who are weeping now... for you will be filled; you will even laugh.”

The original Easter story took root among desolate and powerless people. Yet it was by celebrating their faith in Jesus that they found energy to go forward into an uncertain and scary future. They found hope in keeping his promises of comfort for those with sorrow, food for those who were hungry, and belonging for those who were often left out.

In spite of everything, they celebrated. I looked up the Latin root of the word “celebrate,” and I learned that it doesn’t have that much to do with feeling cheerful, or with feelings at all but with choosing how to live by your values. The root word for “celebrate” has a couple of meanings.

First, to celebrate means to practice regularly, such as celebrating a ritual. A priest will celebrate Mass or communion, for example. In other words, celebration is spiritual practice. And if you are a person who meditates, prays, does yoga or Qi Gong, writes in a journal, or so on, then you know that you don’t always feel like doing it, but it is a practice. Even if you just read a page of daily reflections or sit in silence for a time every day, it takes intention to practice it.

Next, celebrating means honoring, especially in a religious or community setting. Of course, in traditions around the world, a religious ritual might honor a deity. But in a larger sense, a community can honor the values to which it is committed. In a Unitarian Universalist congregation, for example, we honor human dignity. Especially when human dignity is under attack, it’s worthy of honoring, of lifting up, of celebrating. In this community, furthermore, we honor the call to compassion, equity, generosity and peace. We honor kindness. We celebrate these values, no matter what.

We honor these values when we see them embodied by organizations and lived out in practice by public servants, neighborhood volunteers, and congregation members. We celebrate them. Earlier in April, a number of people I know attended one of the Hands-Off rallies around the country, joining hundreds of thousands of people all on the same day. I was present on the

grounds of the California Capitol, where I saw many UUSS folks in attendance. So many people—on the steps, on the lawn, and spilling out onto the sidewalks.

The diversity of the crowd of all ages, the multitude of clever slogans on the protest signs, the hearty singing and chanting—all of it felt like a celebration. I'm sure that everybody there didn't agree on all political issues, but it seemed as if we did agree on honoring and speaking out for democracy, freedom, and human dignity. I was impressed by the kindness and good cheer of strangers. After that event, I realized that I am not alone in my concerns and my hopes. That is worth celebrating.

As an act of resistance, we can celebrate, honor, and practice our deepest values even when we are afraid, even when we feel weary and worn down. We celebrate as a way to summon the courage and hope we need in order to move into the days ahead. As Maria Popova writes: "The practice of joy, the courage of joy, becomes our greatest resistance."

To celebrate is to practice. In these times, perhaps it is necessary to celebrate even when we don't feel like it, so that we can stay in practice for better days. We practice the promise of love and justice in order to prepare ourselves for the day that will come, the day when we won't be able to keep ourselves from celebrating the real achievement of dignity, freedom, safety, and belonging for all members of the human family, for all God's children. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.themarginalian.org/> Maria Popova's weblog

ⁱⁱ <https://colearthurriley.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ For many years the followers of the example Jesus were called "followers of the Way." The Acts of the Apostles, written around AD 70 uses that term and says they were first called "Christians" in Antioch, perhaps AD 40.

^{iv} Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, 1996: Beacon Press), especially chapter 1.