

Easter & Jesus for Non-Trinitarians

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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Rev. Paul Beckel

“Easter Exultet” by James Broughton

Shake out your qualms.
Shake up your dreams.
Deepen your roots.
Extend your branches.
*Trust deep water
and head for the open,
even if your vision / shipwrecks you.*

Quit your addiction
to sneer and complain.
Open a lookout.
Dance on a brink.
Run with your wildfire.
*You are closer to glory / leaping an abyss
than upholstering a rut.*

Not dawdling.
Not doubting.
Intrepid all the way / Walk toward clarity.
*At every crossroad
Be prepared
to bump into wonder.
Only love prevails.*

En route to disaster / insist on canticles.
Lift your ineffable
out of the mundane.
*Nothing perishes; nothing survives;
everything transforms!
Honeymoon with Big Joy!*

ON EASTER, by Bonnie Phinney

Easter. It has always been sort of an enigma to me. On the one hand, the churches are all about the story of the resurrection on Easter morning "He is risen, Hallelujah!" Yet our culture tells a different story, about Easter bunnies and brightly colored eggs, Easter bonnets and chocolate. To a kid, it's a curiosity.

I was raised in a not particularly religious family in Southern California. Easter was a time to dye hard boiled eggs, get new clothes, dive into a colorfully decorated basket filled with candy and other goodies, and eagerly anticipate collecting those eggs - eggs that a bunny had magically scattered all over our yard while leaving a trail of half chewed carrots. I know we went to church,

although that wasn't an every Sunday practice. I learned early from my parents that "God" could be found in nature just as easily, if not better, than in a church. I took that to heart.

By the time I was an age when I could comprehend it, I knew the Easter story, just like I knew the other biblical stories they taught us in Sunday school. There was probably a time when I took that story to heart, although by the time I was in high school, I had already become a religious skeptic. That is not to say I wasn't awed by "things religious" - I loved Easter sunrise services, for example, especially the few I attended at the Hollywood Bowl. And I continued to be inspired by nature. But all in all, the Christian stories had fallen on deaf ears, at least the literal interpretation of their meanings. I also loved to read and began to learn about other religions and other cultures, about their myths and stories. It put the Christian stories in perspective.

When I became an "official" Unitarian Universalist 36 years ago, I had already reconciled the ambiguities of Easter that had existed in my childhood mind. It was obvious that like other Christian holidays, this one was superimposed on a much older tradition and it made perfect sense to me. Christians celebrate the death of Jesus on Good Friday and his Resurrection on Easter Sunday, usually around the vernal equinox. Historically, pagan celebrations also coincided with the arrival of spring and symbolized the arrival of light and the awakening of life around us. How easy it would have been for the early church to co-opt these celebrations and long established traditions.

Easter, the word, is actually derived from a Saxon Goddess, Oestre, the Goddess of spring and the dawn. Also the fertility goddess, Oestre had a passion for new life and her presence was felt in the flowering of plants and the birth of babies, both animal and human. The rabbit (well known for its propensity for rapid reproduction) was her sacred animal, eggs were an obvious symbol of fertility, and newborn chicks were an adorable representation of new growth. Therefore, brightly colored eggs, chicks, and bunnies were all used at festival time to express appreciation for Oestre's gifts of abundance. So, for me, it was no problem at all to celebrate Easter with our children, with Easter eggs and easter bunnies and easter baskets and all the pagan trimmings. I had no need to celebrate the Christian resurrection, a belief my rational mind couldn't fathom, but I had no problem at all celebrating the resurrection of life around me. It's everywhere you look in the spring, and every bit the miracle after a dreary winter.

But as I grew in my Unitarian Universalist beliefs, over time, my understanding of Easter, in a metaphorical sense, has also grown. I read and heard some provocative sermons which asked me to consider the concepts of death and resurrection in a new light, in a more personal way. And about 10 years or so ago, I proposed to my Covenant Group in my Colorado congregation (similar to our Chalice Circles at BUF) that we have a discussion on the topic of RESURRECTION. I was met with a great deal of resistance, but I assured my fellow group members that the discussion would be a good one. They were dubious, but I persisted.

For his disciples, Jesus's resurrection was a way of keeping alive the memory of who he was and what he stood for. Even today, we see that for many Christians the belief that Jesus truly rose from his death can be a powerful incentive to overcome sadness and loneliness, and to gain the courage to live full lives, despite the tragedies of their own losses through death or abandonment.

The resurrection story can even remind us Unitarian Universalists to keep alive the memory of the way Jesus lived his life, his teachings, and his love for others. In a similar manner, we can keep alive in our minds and hearts, those whose deaths we mourn. The memories of how they lived their lives, and their teachings, can brighten our days.

And there are other instances in everyday life that could be considered miracles, if not of resurrection, of life renewal: When wild animals and plants in mountains and forests are destroyed by raging fires, for instance, only to be replaced by new tender shoots and more abundant life. And spring itself. A yearly miracle, if ever there was one. I really understood that when I experienced my first real winter and spring in Minnesota when I was in my 20's!!

More complex and awesome perhaps are the renewals we witness in our own bodies. The ever changing and replacing of cells that make life possible for us, are in themselves miracles of resurrection. And what can we say about the resurrections of our minds and souls? Miracles, miracles indeed! When our dreams and hopes are dying, when we are sad, the understanding words and/or the touch of a friendly hand can help us to resurrect. When we are discouraged, lonely, or just really tired and our projects and chores seem like big burdens, we can be revived, our energy can be restored through the care and companionship of true friends.

But I digress. Back to my reluctant Covenant Group. Here are the questions the session plan posed for us. I offer them to you this morning, to ponder, as a different way of looking at the Easter story and the concept of resurrection.

1. What should die in you, that you might live more fully?
2. What dead things are you keeping in the tomb of your heart that preclude you from making your heart the source of joy and friendship that it could be?
3. Are you sealing your mind and heart with the heavy stones of anger, fear, self-denial, or lack of self-esteem?? What if you rolled them away?

Oh, the many ways we can imprison ourselves! The story of the Resurrection could give us the hope and the courage we need to remove the heavy tombstones from our minds and hearts that we can rise, and live again.

ON JESUS, by Rev. Paul Beckel

While you can reasonably expect calls from this pulpit for *unity* among the world's religions, the unity we envision is for unity as a human family, and neighbors sharing a precious earthly home.

You won't hear calls, here, for unity as in *conformity of religious belief*. Despite our historical name, as Unitarians, we are not officially Unitarian theologically. Nor are we officially anti-trinitarian or non-trinitarian. Rather, the beauty of our movement, as I see it, is that we are not officially and uniformly anything, theologically. And yet, miraculously, we get along reasonably well without a creed. Not wanting an official, uniform, creedal statement of belief, in fact, is one thing that unites us.

So as christians and pagans and those who avoid labels, we can celebrate Easter *together* with a light sense of curious mutual appreciation and a deep sense that in our history, in our biology, and in our future prospects, we are all connected on a magnificent journey.

So I'm bringing up the topic of non-trinitarianism, today, neither to suggest that non-trinitarianism is essential to who we are as Unitarian Universalists, nor to suggest that this is the highest and best form of Christianity. Rather, I hope that, in learning more about the diversity of non-trinitarian religious factions, all around us, and how they came to be, we can have a greater appreciation for the breadth of historical and contemporary christianity...at a time when there is all too much implication that christianity is a homogenous movement, and that there is only one way to appreciate the message of Jesus and the miracles and metaphors of resurrection.

Here, even in our small and not very diverse city and county, we have a lovely quirky range of understandings about Jesus, and among these a surprising number of non-trinitarian views. The Mormons, Quakers, Christian Scientists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are all non-trinitarian, all for different reasons, but they still think of themselves as christian. And among non-christians, Muslims, who revere Jesus as an important prophet, are also non-trinitarian.

All of the above are out of synch in one way or another with mainline, Catholic, and evangelical christianities, in either not affirming the divinity of Jesus, or in not adhering strictly to the Nicene Creed, which very precisely defines God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as coequal and coeternal, three persons of one substance.

This creed was developed in the 4th century, 325 years or so after the crucifixion of Jesus. Since then dozens of splinter groups, from the Shakers to the Swedenborgians have walked away or have been pushed to the margins of the family of christianities due to their nontrinitarian perspectives.

Some have believed that Jesus is not God. Some believed that as the Son of God Jesus was in some sense subordinate to God. Or he was a messenger from God, or the perfect human, but still a creature of God rather than absolutely equal to God.

Some critique the notion of the Trinity because it is never mentioned in Hebrew or Christian Bibles. Others simply find the whole question irrelevant, and a distraction from the message of Jesus' life.

I'm in the latter camp, and I also find the Nicene Creed, which attempts to precisely define that which is undefinable, to be little more than theological cover for the political posturing once used to consolidate power between the ancient Church and Roman Empire. And regrettably, as theology has been used ever since: a means to draw tribal boundaries.

I find, further, that the doctrine of the Trinity, which focusses so heavily on Jesus as a god, to trivialize his accomplishment and character as a person. And finally, in my mind at least, the whole mythic drama about the Creator sending his son to die for our sins only supports the insidious notions of original sin, and redemptive suffering.

The notion of a triune godhead did not originate with Christianity. Long before the time of Christ, both Hinduism and ancient Egyptian polytheisms had representations of three Gods who together make up the one high God.

But in Europe, in the period between the Nicene Creed of 325, and the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, The One Church had a pretty solid grip on the doctrine of One God in three persons. Then, during the Reformation all kinds of heresies and new sects broke out, and began to set themselves against one another. The first explicitly Unitarian expression may have been that of Michael Servetus, who published a book called, "On the Errors of the Trinity" in 1531, in which he attempted to demonstrate that the Trinity was a non-biblical construct. Pursued by the Catholic Church for this blasphemy, he ended up in Calvinist Geneva where his views were also denounced, and he was burned at the stake. It is said that, in the flames, Servetus repeatedly called upon Jesus, Son of the eternal God, for mercy. Unfortunately calling Jesus, "Son of the eternal God" was a capital offense. But Servetus refused to use the theologically correct terminology: Jesus, Eternal Son of God."

Though Servetus objected to the notion of the Trinity, he was not by today's definition Unitarian. But we still think of him as an important early influence because he did object to the notion of original sin, and to the idea that Jesus saved humanity by dying for our sins. And in standing up to religious intolerance, Servetus gave others courage to think, to publish, and even institutionalize alternative religious views.

Last week you heard here about how, in the 1600s, King John Sigismund made room for some degree of religious pluralism in Transylvania. Since then there has been a lot of back and forth in the world of religious freedom. For example, the English Parliament, in 1697, passed the Blasphemy Act, which provided for three years in jail for several different forms of blasphemy, including denial of the Trinity. Happily, only about 120 years later, an exception was made for Unitarians. Happier still, in the 1960s, the Blasphemy Act was eliminated altogether.

Our own Unitarian theological heritage arose, intriguingly, not from a vigorous embrace of either unitarian or anti-trinitarian theology. It was simply that the term "Unitarian" was being hurled as a term of ridicule against the liberal Congregationalists by the orthodox Congregationalists along the American Atlantic coast in the early 1800s. Essentially the critique at the time was that the liberals did not give sufficient weight to the divinity of Jesus. So eventually a large number of congregations split from the Congregationalists under an umbrella they decided to call "Unitarian" simply for lack of a better term.

Along the way they gave up on the notion that Jesus' life purpose was to die for anyone's sins, as if punishment was the solution to wrongdoing, or that suffering and torture could be redemptive...or that judgment was the essence of divine love.

In the two centuries since then our lack of a strong central defining theology has led to a marvelous blossoming of religious pluralism among us, and a general tendency to not really care whether or not Jesus was god or human or even a real person in history...but to care a great deal about his message of radical inclusion.

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Today we have an interesting assortment of nontrinitarian cousins.

To Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus is not god, and not to be worshipped. He is mediator and messiah.

To Muslim and Bahais, the trinity is inconsistent with monotheism. Jesus is a great prophet, a manifestation of God, a part of God's progressive revelation.

To Christian Scientists, Christ is "immaterial." By this they don't mean "irrelevant." To the Christian Scientists immaterial means just that the physical body is an illusion—and Jesus' accomplishment is that he was the first person to grasp and to manifest this truth.

The Unity School of Christianity kinda beats around the bush about the nature of Jesus, not unlike the UUs. One phrase of theirs I like is this: "We see Jesus as the great example rather than the great exception."

The Quakers? They don't say much.

And Christian humanists might say something like: Jesus is no more or less god than anyone else.

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So who is Jesus?

This question of identity can be understood from multiple perspectives:

There is identity we're given by our birth

identity given by our experience

identity named for us by others

and identity we choose.

Within these same categories, who are you? And who are you in relation to Jesus?

Consider again

Your identity given at birth

Your identity given by experience

Your identity as named by others

And the identity you choose...

More than anything, though, our identity is a function of what we *do*, and this is how I personally understand Jesus: not as a particular kind of being, but as a model of gentle strength, and radical nonviolence...someone who persistently upset the conventional wisdom of his time and ours, reminding us that sacredness and renewal are not about getting all the definitions right, but in how we care for one another.

SENDING SONG *O Young & Fearless Prophet* #276

SHARING OUR GIFTS

BENEDICTION #534