

Easter. Bah Humbug!

Clay Nelson © 5 April 2015

Last year, in my former life, I would have greeted you this morning with the ancient Easter Acclamation: “Alleluia. Christ is risen.” My Anglican congregation would have responded enthusiastically, “He is risen indeed. Alleluia”

I suspect if I were to say to you this morning, “Alleluia. Christ is Risen,” your response might more likely be “Yeah, right!” or more simply “Bah! Humbug.” So, I don’t think I’ll risk it.

This Easter I find myself trying to give a very different kind of sermon from those I gave at St Matthew-in-the-City. There I had to emphasise that Easter wasn’t about a dead man walking. Jesus was a man, and like any man crucified on a cross, he died. The end. There was no physical bodily resurrection that first Easter. If that was my only point this morning most of you would think, “Duh!” You might find it mildly interesting that someone coming from my background agrees with you, but that’s where the sermon would end.

My challenge this morning is to make a case for why the Christian stories about Easter still have value today, even for Unitarians. It is not going to be easy. While our hymnal has a number of songs acknowledging Christmas, there are very few about Easter and they are mostly about the coming of Spring, which isn’t very helpful in the Southern Hemisphere. That says heaps about the lack of importance Unitarians give to this most important of holidays for Christians who think Easter is about life after death. I am an agnostic about life after death, and spend zero time thinking about it. If I had my druthers there would be no life after death. I just want to rest in peace. What I do think about is what Easter is really about: life after birth.

The resurrection stories can offer us important insights about life after birth. But first, they must be understood as stories. They are not historical accounts. Like the nativity stories in Luke and Matthew, they are metaphorical narratives. Ultimately they do not tell us about Jesus, but about the experience of his followers following his death. Again, like the birth narratives, they are subversive. They tell the Romans with all their military and economic power that they are powerless in the face of fearless love. They tell us the biggest impediment to being fully alive is our fear of death. Get over it.

For me, the most powerful metaphor in the resurrection narratives is the empty tomb. The oldest Easter account included in the New Testament is in Mark. It was written about forty years after Jesus’ death. In its original form it ends with the women coming to the tomb. Finding it empty, Mark ends his Gospel with these words, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” If you look up Mark in a Bible you will find eleven more verses that were added after these words maybe a hundred years later by someone who found Mark’s ending unsatisfying. For them Easter wasn’t Easter without at least one story of Jesus physically appearing to his disciples. I disagree. Easter is about an empty tomb.

To find support for my position I went to my favourite library, Google, and did a search for “empty tomb.” The first place I found it was in a Wikipedia article by an Australian New Testament scholar, Greg Jenks, who I know from my Progressive Christian circles. It goes like this:

It occurs to me that it is in the finding, not the seeking that religions go awry. No one turns in a family member for the capital crime of converting if they still have questions. No one who denies a fellow pilgrim a voice because of her different gender is still looking. No one ostracizes a six-year old at school because her mother doesn't want her to attend religious assemblies at a public school unless they are blessed with the arrogance of certainty. No one blows himself or herself up for Allah if they are in doubt.

As Christians prepare for Easter, it occurs to me that what is remarkable about this holiest of days is that it celebrates the God that was not there. They came looking, but the tomb was empty.

At this time of year I long to turn the TV on and see this paraphrase of a controversial Australian tourism ad:

*The cross has been taken down.
We've rolled away the stone.
The tomb is vacant.
So, where the bloody hell are you?*

The article finished with this important point:

Empty tombs foster faith--not certainty. Empty tombs do not mark the end of the chase, only the beginning. An empty tomb invites compassion born of empathy for those still looking. An empty tomb proclaims God is out of the box and not to be possessed. An empty tomb suggests that God is elsewhere. It is Easter. Hunt God as well as eggs. Eggs you may find, but pray for your sake and the sake of the world, that God will continue to elude you.

This sounded promising. I thought it might be useful in a Unitarian Easter sermon, but it was vaguely familiar. I checked out the footnote to see who wrote it... It seems I did... in 2006.

Then it all came back to me. I wrote this as a reflection piece after participating in an interfaith panel discussion that followed the viewing of a documentary entitled *Chasing God* at the Academy Theatre. What you might find of historical interest is that during the discussion I apparently let slip my Unitarian views. Some of you were in the audience that night and, afterwards, approached me to ask if I might be open to speaking here on occasion. I was and I did, numerous times over the years.

Nine years later, I'm happy to say I'm still chasing God, although I find using that term for transcendent mystery increasingly difficult. It is what stirs my blood and drags me out of bed in the morning. It is a thrilling chase where I occasionally catch glimpses of the divine just ahead around the next bend or is it just the morning mist

playing tricks on my eyes? Each Easter morning, in spite of my love of the hunt, I am relieved that the tomb is still empty.

However, an empty tomb presents a danger. Like nature, religion abhors a vacuum. Over the millennia lots of meanings have been offered to make sense of Easter. Ever since Mary found no one there, the church has been intent on filling the tomb back up with a god suitable to its purposes.

Let me share a story that makes the point.

A group of friends of various religious persuasions were gathered at a Ponsonby cafe discussing the true meaning of Easter over their flat whites and long blacks when the Baptist said: "I believe we place too much emphasis on hot cross buns, chocolate bunnies, and coloured Easter eggs instead of the spiritual aspects, which is the real meaning of Easter. That's what I believe," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Presbyterian. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Anglican. --And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is that Christ died on the Cross for our sins," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Anglican. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Presbyterian. --And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is the triumph of Jesus over the Grave," said the Presbyterian. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Anglican. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Methodist. --And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is not only what each of you have said, but also that all people who believe in the sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus are cleansed of original sin through baptism and are restored to the favour of God and may share in His eternal Life," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Anglican. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Presbyterian. --And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter, in addition to what has already been said, symbolizes that the bodies of all people will be resurrected and joined to their souls to share their final fate," said the Anglican. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Presbyterian. "Me too," said the Catholic. --And the Unitarian was silent.

The group then turned to their Unitarian friend, whom they all recognized as a little strange, and said, "Your silence is a mystery to us. Just what do you believe as a Unitarian is the real meaning of Easter?"

The Unitarian said: "I believe the real meaning of Easter is the appreciation of life's renewing cycles and, that for all things there is a season. I believe the real meaning of Easter is the acknowledgment, with its accompanying sadness, of a very human Jesus who was forced to die on the Cross because of his vision of a just and compassionate world where all are treated fairly and respected. The only joy in that is his vision did not die with him. But most important of all, I believe the real meaning of Easter is the Celebration of Thanksgiving for the presence of the sacred in each and every living

person and thing; for the presence of the sacred in the tui's song; for the presence of the sacred in the colourful flowers of the season which sway and the changing leaves preparing to fall which rustle in autumn's wind. This is what I believe is the real meaning of Easter," said the Unitarian.

"Me too," sang the tui. "Me too," waved the flowers. "Me too," rustled the leaves. "Me too," sighed the wind. -- And all the rest were silent.

As Unitarians I think we could respond to an Easter Acclamation that begins: Alleluia. The tomb is empty. To which we could respond: We are fully alive. Alleluia.