



Ignore Easter? Tempting...

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When I was in seminary, every seminarian was assigned a parish to do field work in for two years. My second Easter, I was given the opportunity to preach on Easter Sunday. A few months later a couple in the congregation came to see me. They brought me a novel the wife had written. In a former life they had been Idaho sheep farmers. The book is about the lonely life of a shepherd who cares for his flock.

They brought me the book because they told me my Easter sermon had saved their marriage. Mystified, I asked what I could have possibly said that had made such a huge difference in their lives. They told me. I was even more mystified. I couldn't remember saying it. I went back and checked the text of my sermon. Nope, I had never said what they heard. Not even anything similar.

Preaching on Easter is a challenge for Unitarian ministers, even for those of us who are progressive Christians. Many of us would prefer to ignore Easter, if we had our druthers, but I resist doing so for one reason. My hope is you too will hear something I never said that might make a difference in your lives. I have kept the book for over 35 years to remind me that it is not what I say from this pulpit that matters, but what you hear.

So why am I tempted to ignore Easter? Because, in planning a Unitarian Easter, I can't meet all the expectations. Never mind that all the music, hymns, stories, meditations celebrate Northern Hemisphere spring. The disconnect to our entering autumn is palpable. I've looked, apparently resurrection doesn't happen when the days are getting shorter and the leaves are changing colour.

But aside from that major impediment there are other diametrically opposed expectations of those who attend a Unitarian Easter service. Some come to hear familiar, traditional, Easter music. Well, good luck with that in a Unitarian church. The hymnal has a few songs celebrating Easter in the Northern Hemisphere, but they are not familiar and no one here knows the tunes. That suits others who come not to hear familiar, traditional, Easter music.

Some come to be reminded of the pagan symbols of the season, without a lot of talk about Jesus and resurrection. Others come to be reminded of Jesus and his resurrection, without a lot of talk about the pagan symbols of the season.

You get my drift. It's no wonder I'm tempted to ignore Easter. But I think there is a bigger reason why I can't win than the impossibility of reconciling the diverse theological approaches our theologically diverse congregation brings to worship.

It is that Easter celebrates a supernatural event in the resurrection while our tradition

emphasises the human works and teachings of Jesus. Unitarians traditionally make sense of Jesus theologically by discarding the supernatural aspects of his life and lifting him up as a profound moral teacher and a dedicated advocate for a world made fair and unified by love and respect for all. For many Unitarians, it is Jesus' life before death that matters, not his life after death. We are inspired by Jesus' care for the poor and concern for the widow, orphan, and prisoner. His peaceful resistance to the brutality of the Roman Empire moves us. We celebrate the beloved community that gathered around him, an *ekklesia* that bridged the divisions of class, race, gender and ethnicity to fully welcome the literal and metaphorical lepers of society. To us, Jesus is the dark-skinned socialist who embraced healthcare for all, meaningful work at a just wage, an end to class privilege, caring for our children and beating swords into ploughshares.

That is the Jesus whom we can embrace: Jesus as prophet; Jesus as teacher; Jesus as the enlightened figure who showed us a way to be fully human, fully alive. But, the supernatural Jesus who walks on water, feeds 5000 with bits of bread and fish and rises from the dead is a step too far for our 21st century minds to go and Easter is all about that Jesus. No wonder we are tempted to ignore Easter.

But if we let our scepticism about the supernatural stop us from celebrating Easter, we lose an opportunity. It is an opportunity that has more to do with faith than with belief. It is how are we going to respond when life disappoints us, devastates us, and fails to meet our expectations.

The Easter story doesn't begin with an empty tomb on the third day. It begins a week earlier when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to shouts of hallelujah and waving palms. The disciples are pretty excited. It looks like their high expectations for Jesus are going to be met; that he will perform a miracle to end all miracles, recapture Jerusalem, and ascend to an earthly throne.

As the week goes on the disciples become increasingly impatient, competitive, and even despondent. They squabble about which one of them Jesus loves most. They jockey, clambering for Jesus' attention and affection. In the Garden of Gethsemane they ignore Jesus' instructions to keep vigil and fall asleep instead. It is as if a collective melancholic despondency has settled over them. One of them fearfully denies knowing Jesus three times, to his shame. Another betrays him out of a zealot's disappointment that things are not happening fast enough. He might be thinking, "We're supposed to be cleansing Jerusalem with the force of God on our side and instead you have us sitting around praying."

It is this growing frustration and sense of disappointment that we witness in the disciples that led Marilyn Sewell to write, "But the true rising from the dead, the true awakening in this story, is what happens to the disciples. They expect Jesus to be crowned king, but he is crucified like a common criminal. He is not God, and God does not save him from his fate—big surprise for the disciples. These events shook their world—totally destroyed their dreams of overturning the Roman oppressors and establishing their own kingdom."

After the crucifixion, the disciples woke up to a very different reality. They were chastened, sobered. But gradually, they found themselves strangely in love—filled

with love. They were not in love with pride, as before, not in love with ego, but in love with God, or the Godness, the goodness, within.

What Easter offers Unitarians is an opportunity to reflect on these questions: What happens to us, to our own spirits, to our relationships, to our sense of community, when events shake our world and disappoint our dreams? Do we practise denial? Do we engage in petty feuds? Do we practise destructive betrayal?

Or, do we do something else? Do we turn not away but towards one another? Do we find ourselves strangely in love? Do we minister to the disappointment of our brothers and sisters? Can we be an Easter blessing to one another? This blessing is a blend. It is the ability to let go of our own ego needs and to take the time to understand the needs of someone else.

Or, as Daniel Budd in my opening words puts it, “We’re not sure what happened. But, we know what it’s like to feel sorrow and loss, despair and grief. We know the waves of tears and the thoughts of the past which flow through us, which begin to fill the emptiness with stories and memories, begin to shore us up again with a different presence which will live with us for all of our lives...

“We know that there is a difficult hope, a faith, that through the living of whatever sorrow and grief we feel (and will continue to feel on occasion) there is also a growing sense of grace and gratitude, of joy and thankfulness, in the mysterious and abiding astonishment of human being.”

Never mind what the Easter story says, what do you hear? Can you ignore it?