



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

April Fools Arise

Clay Nelson © 1 April 2018

In one of my last Easter Day sermons at St Matthew's I opened with how difficult I found preaching on the Day of Resurrection in a Christian context:

Look out! Here comes the preacher walking the Easter sermon tightrope!

Can he balance the life-giving message of joy and hope that the ancient story of resurrection suggests, with the progressive theology and openness St Matthew's embodies?

Can he make it across safely to the other side without falling into either the dreaded, dogmatic pit of spirit killing, rigid orthodoxy, or the confusing fog of bland generalities that can mean just about anything?

We'll know in about 12 minutes.

If I thought Easter sermons would be any easier in a Unitarian context, I was a fool. There is still a tightrope to walk, only it takes eight minutes longer to do so. With Christians I had to challenge a literal understanding of the Easter story. It wasn't about a dead man walking who died for our sins. It was dangerous ground for the preacher to tread in a hierarchical institution where twice delegations of my colleagues went to the bishop to demand I be tried for heresy. But is it any less dangerous to challenge Unitarians not to dismiss the idea of resurrection as so much rubbish? I guess I'll find out at morning tea.

To paraphrase Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "A preacher who does not preach the resurrection is a fool." But it could also be argued that preaching resurrection to Unitarians is a foolish undertaking. Reason, science and our widely held scepticism in a personal god that intervenes in human affairs blocks our ability to suspend our disbelief. It doesn't help that many Unitarians are refugees from toxic forms of Christianity that required belief in a historical and literal resurrection in order to be seen as worthy in the community's eyes. It might be fun to think about reviving the dead, but we are more likely to enjoy a movie with zombies than celebrate the post-Easter Jesus walking through walls to show off his wounds.

If we must celebrate Easter at all we would prefer to do so as a rite of spring, which has its own difficulties in the southern hemisphere. How do we celebrate spring in the autumn? You might be wondering why our service today has no Easter hymns from our Unitarian hymnal. They all refer to spring as do all the pagan elements used to symbolise Easter. They all speak of the new life we experience after the short, cold days of winter begin to wane. It is hard to embrace an autumnal Easter with any conviction.

So, if I am denied preaching Easter as a rite of spring here in the southern hemisphere, and if debunking a literal resurrection is the theological equivalent of shooting fish in a Unitarian

barrel, what should I preach? I've decided to get back on the tightrope and suggest that embracing resurrection is not an April Fools' joke. It is essential to our humanity.

To make my case let me share a more likely understanding of how the Easter story came to be.

We don't know exactly what happened after Jesus was executed. We only have Paul's account written about 20 years after it happened and the four Gospel accounts, the earliest of which was written about 40 years after Jesus died. They vary in some significant ways. Paul doesn't give us the story of the resurrection, he just testifies that the Risen Christ appears to individuals and groups over time. In the original version of Mark there are no resurrection appearances at all, only an empty tomb. The witnesses vary, as does the location. Did the Risen Christ appear in Galilee or Jerusalem? Did he appear in bodily form or in a more mystical way? The earliest tradition suggests the latter. When did it happen? Mark says he was raised in three days, which would have been Monday. Luke and Matthew revise that, saying he was raised on the third day, which would have been Sunday, the day early followers would eventually come to celebrate as the day of resurrection. Yet in John, after appearing to Mary Magdalene, Jesus didn't show himself to ten of the disciples until a week later, and to Thomas who proclaimed him "My Lord and My God" until a week after that.

Since no one can prove me wrong, here is my theory about the first Easter. I believe that Jesus' ragged little band of followers were so shocked by his death, the last thing they expected, they took off for the Galilean hills, terrified. They returned sheepishly to their homes and resumed their former lives, perhaps with friends and family sniggering at them for being such suckers for another false messiah.

But once the shock wore off they struggled to make sense of their experience. Being Jewish, they did this by scouring the Hebrew scriptures where they came to see Jesus more in the mould of Isaiah's suffering servant than a King David returning to conquer the Romans.

They remembered rabbinical teachings that had been around for a century that spoke of a suffering Messiah named Simon who would die a bloody and violent death, but whom the angel Gabriel said God would resurrect in three days that he might liberate Israel.

They also lived in a Greco-Roman world that had many folk tales and myths about gods that died and were resurrected: Osiris in Egypt, Dionysius in Greece, Attis in Asia Minor, Adonis in Syria, Bacchus in Italy and Mithras in Persia, to name just a few. An interesting point about these gods is that when they were resurrected they came back disguised but bore marks that revealed their identity, not unlike the nail holes and spear wound Jesus would show Thomas.

Based on my experience of how we humans process major shifts in our lives, I agree with those scholars who think that it took six months to a year for his key disciples to experience Easter. I also think the story of the Road to Emmaus, which, by the way, is not a real place, explains how they experienced Easter. You may remember that two disciples not mentioned previously realised they had encountered the risen Christ after a meal where the stranger took, blessed, broke and shared bread with them. It was in loving fellowship around a meal that many might have experienced their first Easter, with the realisation that hate had not killed love. Not even Rome, with all its legions, could do it. The love and compassion they experienced in the person of Jesus had not died. It lived on in them. That gave them hope

and courage to go on. That is what resurrection meant for them.

My view from the tightrope is that Easter is not an occasion to celebrate something that happened once long ago. It is to be celebrated moment to moment in our daily lives. It is not a fairy tale. It is in the DNA of life itself. If Christians reserve resurrection only for the Son of God, they miss the point. If Unitarians dismiss it as irrelevant, we miss the point and the hope it offers. Ironically, Christians and Unitarians both see resurrection as a Christian experience when, in truth, it is a human experience reflected in many religions.

Robert Morris speaks about the commonplace and frequently unnoticed ways that people rise above their loneliness and fear as ordinary resurrections. He points out that the origin of resurrection is the Greek word *anastasis*, which, he notes, means standing up again, and as he put it unpretentiously: We all lie down. We all rise up. We do this every day. The same word is used in scripture for resurrection. He observes: “the resurrection does not wait for Easter.” But Easter is here. The Saxon goddess Ostara, famous for transforming her owl into a bunny who lays golden eggs, has done her work to fill our children with wonder and delight. So, what do we want before we leave here this morning besides the chocolate eggs and hot cross buns we will offer at morning tea?

Madelene L’Engle tells of one evening reading to her grandchildren at bedtime. Her grandchild Lena turned to her and asked, “Is everything all right?” she said, “Yes, of course, everything is all right.” Lena asked again, “Gran, is everything really all right? I mean really?” L’Engle says she looked at the little child in her white nightgown and realised that she was asking the cosmic question, the question that is out beyond the safety of this home full of light and love and warmth: “Is everything really all right?”

We live in a world where so much is not all right it can be hard to find any hope, even here in New Zealand where a lot more is right than in most of the world. Just one example. A central issue of the last election that may explain best the change in government was child poverty. While the figures vary, maybe as many as 250,000 of our children in New Zealand are growing up in poverty. That means they are not getting proper nourishment, health care, and in too many cases, education. Where is their hope? If their parents are on a benefit it is considerably less than the minimum wage, which is already well below a living wage. Where is their hope? Can we tell them this Easter everything is all right? Really all right?

All too often what the poor hear is, “It’s your fault.” Even from those who are touched by their plight, they hear, “I’m sorry, a living wage is not sustainable. We can’t afford it.” Seriously, how are our children at fault for the circumstances of their birth? How are the fruits of poverty – lost potential and productivity, higher crime, increased healthcare costs – sustainable? How are we not at fault when we remain quiet in the face of higher and higher income inequality that benefits only those at the very top? When we accept goods and services from companies, churches and government entities that don’t pay their employees enough to support their families, who is at fault for child poverty?

All too often those of us who do not have to go to school on empty stomachs look at poverty and see only statistics, not flesh and blood. For us the poor are faceless. They will remain trapped in the cycle of poverty until we have a national will to look them in the eye and say no more. Everything will be all right. Easter is here.

Peter Rollins, author of *The Orthodox Heretic*, has this to say about resurrection:

“Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ....I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system. However, there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees. When I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.”

In the face of not everything being all right I have decided to be an April Fool as I live in the hope of an empty tomb. I will preach resurrection, even to Unitarians. Easter proclaims grace is and has always been everywhere. The task is to make it so. We need only arise, to stand up again.