



Can a Unitarian be resurrected?

Clay Nelson © 21 April 2019

I may have told this story on Easter before, but the Easter story has been recounted a couple of thousand times. So, I have precedence.

My daughter had little choice when she was young about being active in church. She went to a church kindy. She went to an Episcopal School for girls her first two years in primary while I finished seminary. She went to Sunday School. She sang in the choir and earned awards as her skills improved. She was an acolyte when girls were first allowed to serve at the altar. She was active in the church youth group. As she was showered with love, affection and attention by the congregations I served, she didn't seem to mind her life as a PK (a preacher's kid).

But to hear her now, it was an ordeal amounting to child abuse. While at university she forsook church involvement entirely and became quite critical of religion, especially that of the Christian flavour. But sometimes karma is sweet.

One day her daughter, who had never been to church before, came home from school and announced that she would like to go to church on Easter. Her mother said she would take her but to get the full story they would have to go to on Good Friday as well.

After the service, she looked at her mother quizzically and asked her how come she knew all the hymns. I assume my daughter had to acknowledge her secret life as a PK. Yes, I confess to taking some delight in my daughter's finally being busted after years of giving her children "Spring" baskets instead of Easter baskets and never having explained what her grandfather does for a living. But I also took secret comfort in her remembering you couldn't have Easter without Good Friday. Obviously, something had stuck.

If my daughter did decide to look favourably upon religion again she would probably find being a Unitarian comfortable. At least they have a lot in common.

Both she and Unitarians spend time impugning the Easter story for incorporating pagan spring fertility rites and they are both right to challenge its authenticity. That's why planning a southern hemisphere Easter service is so bloody difficult. There is not a single song in the Unitarian hymn book that celebrates Easter's autumnal beauty. So, unless we suspend our disbelief and pretend we live in the northern hemisphere, we have no traditional Easter music available to us this morning.

The attack on the pagan Easter bunny is a backdoor snipe at the lack of historicity to the event. There is little actual evidence that Jesus even lived, never mind being born, killed and resurrected. Josephus, in his lengthy history of the Jews, gives him only a brief mention. That's it. It is reasonable to think there would be more. There is more physical evidence that Pontius Pilate lived than that Jesus did. Archaeologists discovered a foundation stone in the Roman port city of Caesarea with Pilate's name on it.

What we are left with is a letter from Paul that mentions his having died and being raised again and four differing accounts in the Gospels written 30 or more years after the event supposedly happened. Any rational person would have more than enough reason to question that a man died on a cross and then came to life again a few days later. As a result, many Unitarians don't recognise Easter at all except to enjoy a long holiday weekend, nor see it connecting in any meaningful way to their lives.

In particular I blame institutional religion. What was meant to be a metaphorical story giving hope was turned into a literal event. Then, when the church had the power to do so, it made it a requirement to believe in Easter historically, making Jesus less a man and more a god. This gave a human institution divine authority to judge and condemn in the name of God. A story that was told to free us from fear was used to pander to our fears, robbing the story of its mystery. The sins of the institution commissioned to protect the story from being forgotten resulted in the story being rejected, by Unitarians who need little encouragement to ignore, deny or demean their Christian heritage. You'd think we all grew up PKs. This makes resurrecting a Unitarian a challenge, but a worthy one to undertake.

I was recently reminded of how often this Unitarian has been resurrected. After the Christchurch horror, a good friend and former colleague in ministry who has known me many years and through many chapters in my life, was moved to contact me. As it had been years since we were last in touch, I filled him in briefly as to where I am now and the path that led here. His response was, "One of the many things I admire you for, Clay, is that you go through the fires of hell and not only squelch the flames, but thrive. Bravo! Stepping down as an Anglican may have been painful at the time, but I would find it more than comfortable to be in that position these days. I have long admired Unitarians, who, perhaps more than any I have known, embrace 'all sorts and conditions' of people. We are erstwhile parishioners again at St. James, La Jolla [where many years ago he was the vicar], but I find the heavy emphasis on belief and doctrine increasingly wearying."

I guess it is my own fires of hell that egg me on to try to resurrect Unitarians, less the belief and doctrine. Because whether or not you find Easter fanciful, Good Friday is all too real. In fact, Easter makes no sense at all if not for Good Friday. My daughter had that right, perhaps because she is now old enough to have experienced a few of her own.

Violence and death continue to have a firm grip on our world. The wars begun years ago in Afghanistan and Iraq have not ended but rather are continuing in those lands plus also in Pakistan, Syria, Libya and Yemen and recently in Kenya. Add to that we have the ongoing violence and terror against people of colour and immigrants we so recently experienced.

Feeling hopeless — for repressed people in other lands or here in our own country — can cause people to lash out in violent ways. Feeling hopeless can even cause people to crash airplanes or take their lives in a more solitary way.

The resurrection story as it is celebrated is no longer primarily about new life 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. It is about finding life in each and every age amidst that which was or seems dead or hopeless! When you hear of something bad happening we wonder: "Why is life so difficult for so many?" "Why can't we be kinder to one another?" "Why is there so much selfishness in the world?" "How can we feel better about humanity?"

That is not the message of the resurrection metaphor. Rather, the message is that even in the midst of that which is dead, even in the face of death, our own or that of someone we love, there can be the promise of life continuing. And the message of the resurrection is that regardless of the challenges or disappointments we face as individuals or as a congregation there is hope.

I'm not the only one trying to resurrect Unitarians. Retired Unitarian minister, Dick Gilbert, once wrote:

A tomb is no place to stay,
Be it a cave in the Judean hills
Or the dark cave of the spirit.
A tomb is no place to stay
When the fresh grass rolls away the stone of winter cold,
And valiant flowers burst their way to warmth and light.
A tomb is no place to stay
When each morning announces our reprieve,
And we know we are granted yet another day of living.
A tomb is no place to stay
When life laughs a welcome
To hearts that have been away too long.

I want to conclude with a story I know I've told before. It reminds us that Unitarians are very good at telling the Easter Story in spite of our troubled history with resurrection.

A group of friends of various religious denominations were seated in fellowship discussing the true meaning of Easter one Sunday when the Baptist said: "I believe we place too much emphasis on 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 Lutheran. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Pentecostal. –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 Pentecostal. "Me too," said the Lutheran. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Lutheran. –And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is the triumph of Jesus over the Grave," said the Lutheran. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Pentecostal. "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 many share in His eternal Life," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Pentecostal. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Lutheran. –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 Pentecostal. "Me too," said the Baptist. "Me too," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Lutheran. "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 liberal religious views and beliefs. 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 birds that sing; for the presence of the sacred in the flowers which sway and the grasses which rustle in the gentle breezes of spring. This is what I believe is the real meaning of Easter,” said the Unitarian.

“Me too,” sang the birds. “Me too,” waved the flowers. “Me too,” rustled the grasses. “Me too,” sighed the wind. — And all the rest were silent.