



A Unitarian Easter

Clay Nelson © 12th April 2020

One of the blessings of now being a UU minister, having moved on from Anglicanism, is I don't have to begin an Easter talk by explaining that the events of Passover and Easter are not history. They are stories, albeit powerful ones. They are not literally true. The blood of the lamb did not protect the Hebrew people from the plague killing Egypt's first born. The bodily resurrection of Jesus did not take place. That means I can skip right to why the stories have been told for millennia. I can jump in with both feet as to why Unitarians should still tell them, even those of us who are dyed-in-the-wool humanists who have exchanged divinity for reason. Are we open to the possibility that these stories can draw us in and transform us anyway? Are these stories just old, dusty accounts from the past or might they still have some contemporary relevance if we can just shed, even if only for today, our disbelief?

In brief, the Passover story at its core is about the bitter tears of enslavement, and yet, how hard we find it to give up our slave mentality. When faced with difficulties we long for the good old days. "We may have been slaves but at least we had enough to eat", the Hebrew people moaned. Moses didn't wander for forty years in the wilderness because he didn't have GPS. He did so because it took two generations for the Hebrews to let go of the past and enter into the uncertainty of liberation.

The Easter moment takes the story further. It was not by accident that the story, in three out of four Gospels, begins with Jesus celebrating Passover with his disciples as preparation for his death. He is telling them and us to let go of the power over us we have given to our oppressors in the past. Let go of the power over us we have given to death in the past. We need not be their slaves. Those were not the good ol' days. Those days lie ahead. We need only to embrace the unconquerable power of love to speak truth to power and live without fear of our mortality. Live out that love as a humble, but not humbled, servant to our neighbour, the stranger, to the very planet we all inhabit. Wash people's feet, even those feet covered with the filth and slime of hate, ignorance and selfishness that trample the poor and marginalised.

You don't have to be either Jewish or Christian to find these stories compelling. They speak to our common humanity, both our frailties and strengths. We keep telling them so our frailties don't overwhelm our capacity to be all we are capable of being. Transformation is not a once and for all time event. It is a process requiring the telling and retelling of Passover and Easter stories or their like over a lifetime. Because we don't

just get it right away. It takes time for us to become a character in the story, making it our own. Let me tell a less familiar story that tells how hard it is. It is true in every sense

I hope you have had the chance or will get the chance to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Since the fourth century it has been considered by Christians of all stripes to be the location of Jesus' execution and burial. When I visited I was astounded by what I encountered. The Church is occupied by a number of rival religious denominations, each having their own chapel. When I was there a number of them were holding mass, each striving to shout over the other. It was hardly a holy cacophony. Spiritual peace was not on offer.

Over the many centuries, numerous conflicts have arisen between those of opposing beliefs sheltering in place in the Sepulchre's bubble, right up to present. In 2002 a Coptic monk moved his chair from its agreed place into the shade. This was interpreted as a hostile act by Ethiopian Christians and eleven people were hospitalised.

In another incident in 2004, during Orthodox celebrations of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a door to the Franciscan chapel was left open. This was taken as a sign of disrespect by the Orthodox and a fistfight broke out.

Well, one of the unexpected consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it has brought peace to the Holy Sepulchre. It has been closed. The last time that happened was in 1349 during an outbreak of the Black Plague.

That's interesting but, what is even more interesting is who locked the doors. The keymaster of Holy Sepulchre is Muslim. The Nusaybah clan alongside with the Joudeh Al-Goudia family are the key holders to the church. The Sunni Muslim family being the key master of the church is an established tradition dating all the way back to the 7th century:

One of the great ancestors of the Nussaiba family was Ubada Ibn Al-Samet who settled in Jerusalem in the 7th century in the wake of the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, and who was appointed as a governor by the Caliph Umar. The keys of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were placed in the custody of the family and is so until today. The hope is having a Muslim keyholder will help avoid clashes between the rival Christian sects seeking control of the church. Most of us know the word "Islam" is derived from the Arabic word for peace. This Muslim's job is keeping the peace amongst Christians. Aside from appreciating the irony, perhaps during this lockdown Easter, we can seek ways to offer hope, be an unexpected instrument of peace and source of transforming love. During this time of turbulence, it essential that we wash hands and wash feet!

Happy Unitarian Easter!