



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## The Emptiness of Easter

Clay Nelson © 4 April 2021

There is no getting around it. Our rationalist faith doesn't "get" Easter. We get Christmas. Jesus was born. We get Good Friday. Jesus died. We don't get Easter. If we think about it at all, we struggle with the idea of resurrection. Our first reaction is to dismiss what we don't understand or can't relate to. Even if we know the stories about Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, what Christians celebrate as Holy Week, they can feel old, dusty and irrelevant to our lives. Too much suspension of disbelief is required to take them any more seriously than fairy tales. As a result, many Unitarians find Easter as empty of meaning as the tomb. Why bother going to the effort to roll back the stone? There is nothing to see ... or is there?

My challenge this morning is not to convince you that *the resurrection* happened, but that resurrection happens. I want you to get Easter, because I care about you. Getting Easter will only enhance your life. You don't have to be Christian to benefit. Resurrection doesn't care about what you believe or don't believe. It is available to everyone, and in fact can occur unbidden, no matter what your faith perspective. If I had more time this morning, I am certain I could make the case that resurrection undergirds all seven of our UU principles, if we but roll back the stone.

Part of the problem is that the Gospel resurrection stories suggest that the resurrection is only about Jesus. Most of us here can agree that Jesus would not have known about the Easter stories. He was dead and buried after all. I can imagine that, even if church dogma was sufficient for his bodily resurrection, he would roll his eyes at the suggestion that the stories were about him, even if they were literally true. He might ask, if he was bodily resurrected why did all the fanciful resurrection appearance stories say that even his closest friends didn't recognise him? Perhaps he looked like a zombie? (Yes, *The Walking Dead* I spoke of last week are still on my mind and will be for a while. I'm only half way through the ten seasons.)

If you took the trouble to read the four Gospels, the earliest of which was written forty years after the crucifixion, or Paul's account in [1 Corinthians \(15:3-8\)](#) written only twenty years afterwards, you wouldn't get an historical account but a theological reflection born in the imagination. That gives us the chance 2000 years later to do our own creative theological reflection.

The biblical accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection suggest that it was done and dusted in just three days. If we stop to think about it, that is ridiculous. Jesus' followers would've needed a lot longer to work out their grief, despair, confusion and disappointment. We know that many of his followers thought Jesus was going to deliver them from Roman oppression. His execution was the last thing they expected. They were scared, thinking they would be the next ones crossed off Rome's list of Jewish troublemakers. They literally headed for hills. When things died down a little they returned to their former lives. They

probably had to endure a lot of mocking by family and friends for having been sucked in by another false Messiah. That doesn't mean they forgot their hopes and dreams or denied a vague feeling that everything had changed. They would take comfort meeting up with their former comrades and try to make sense of what happened, asking what did they get wrong?

Again, the Gospel stories give us a clue. In all of the recorded resurrection appearances, Jesus finds his followers when gathered in community. Within community they found strength through love and commitment. They came to understand that death was not to be feared. Speaking truth to power was important. Healthy relationships are healing relationships. Everyone is worthy of respect and honour. Love doesn't die.

My take is that it took Jesus' followers a long time to roll back the stone where their former lives were buried. When they finally did, the tomb was empty. It wasn't Jesus who was resurrected, it was them.

In an Easter sermon, Mark Worth tells the story of Jennifer. Jennifer had an incredibly difficult childhood. Her father left home when she was in the second grade. Jennifer's mother was later diagnosed with a mental illness that causes both mood problems and a loss of contact with reality. When Jennifer was seven or eight years old she became her mother's primary care-giver.

Jennifer developed various coping mechanisms to deal with her complicated home life, but one day her mother was just so difficult that nothing seemed to work. Jennifer, not knowing what else to do, went outside and sat on the front steps of her apartment and cried. As she was sitting there, crying, a man came up to her and said, "Are you okay?"

She politely lied, yes, she was okay. As she looked up at the man, the sun was behind him, giving the impression that he had a halo. She thought, "An angel has come to help me."

He sat down with her and held her hand. When he sat down she could see that he was just a regular human being. Yet somehow her initial impression, that he was an angel, stayed with her. He said, "I know your mother." No more than that. And he listened to her story.

Many times since then she has remembered when the man sat and held her hand and listened. The memory has been a source of strength to her. Now she is an intelligent, well-adjusted young woman with an impressive resumé, and a passion to help build a better world. When I met her a few years ago, she was a grad student at a top university.

Jennifer's story is a story about resurrection. Her childhood could have been the kind of childhood that left her entombed. It might have crushed her spirit; it could have meant a kind of death, but somehow it didn't. She managed to find the resources and the relationships that sustained her life. She said that at crucial moments in her life, "angels" - like the man who held her hand and listened to her story - came along to roll the stone away.

For me, Easter is a time to remember that rolling back stones is the action part of my faith. Easter is also a time to give thanks for those angels who have done

the same for me, time and again. Each year when I look into the tomb and find it empty, I know resurrection happens and will continue to do so.

**Meditation / Conversation starter:**

Recall a time resurrection happened in your life.