



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Easter on trial

Clay Nelson © 17 April 2022

Sherlock Holmes, the master of deductive reasoning, tells us in [*The Sign of the Four*](#): “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

His approach minutely analyses a clue, making huge claims about the information it must contain. From a stocking found in the river he arrives at the height, weight, social class and personal history of the victim.

Dr Watson is an undeclared Unitarian. Being a scientist, he methodically collects the clues that Holmes finds and does the boring tests and legwork to make the case hang together. He is unwilling to accept the conclusion until the weight of evidence supports it. Dr Watson favours inductive reasoning.

This explains why Unitarians are suspicious of Easter. They will not accept the idea of resurrection without a preponderance of evidence. So far, they have not reached a conclusion but it does explain why there are only four less-than-impressive Easter songs in our hymnal and why I acknowledged last week that when I’m asked how Unitarians handle Easter my answer is “very carefully”.

Over forty years ago, before he was my mentor or had fully reached his radically extreme views about Christianity, [Bishop John Shelby Spong published *The Easter Moment*](#). Applying deductive reasoning, his thesis was that the Easter Moment was like the wind. “*You can feel its cooling or warming breath, you can measure its impact, but the wind itself cannot be seen.*”

He argues that It is important that we understand the effects of the Easter Moment. Look at people and traditions before Easter and these same people and traditions after Easter. Incredible changes will be obvious. “*One cannot prove in this manner that the Resurrection of Jesus happened, but one can prove that something happened — something big and powerful, for it left an indelible mark upon the history of the world. To use a double negative, the Easter Moment cannot be nothing. It has to be something.*”

Deductive reasoning can only take us so far after we reject the premise that the Easter story is historical, but we can still explore what might have happened and ask, “What does that mean for us?” Finding meaning in what the modern mind rejects, or finds meaningless, is no easy task.

Spong attempts this by putting Easter on trial. He calls witnesses who were impacted by the Moment. I cannot read back the full transcript in our limited time, but I can share the experience of some key witnesses and review the evidence. Leaving you the jury to draw your own conclusions.

The first called to the stand is Simon, son of Jonah. Nicknames are our attempt to identify people by some special characteristic. Jesus nicknamed Simon Peter. Like a rock he was tough, aggressive, loud, and bombastic. He was a ne'er-do-well fisherman who always wanted to be someone important. But he was caught on a kind of inescapable wheel of fortune. There was no great wealth for people in the fishing trade in first century Galilee. The fisherman lived from day to day, from catch to catch. It was hard to get ahead. This may explain the picture the New Testament paints of Peter as a deeply insecure man who in an almost childlike way craved recognition and basked in the sunshine of attention.

People who have to dominate are never strong people. We dominate to cover our fear, our insecurity, to prevent our weakness from being discovered. Parents who have to control their children, prime ministers who cannot tolerate a hint of disloyalty in their cabinets, bishops who cannot hear or allow dissent in the clergy, bosses who have to regulate every moment of their employees' time, husbands who cannot allow their wives to become competent and individual persons with lives of their own — these display weakness, not strength. The sign of weakness is to rage and shout whenever the strong image of domination is called into question. All this was true of Peter before the Easter moment when he denied knowing Jesus three times.

After the Easter Moment something has happened to Peter. Something so big, so powerful that his life is totally turned around. His personality is reoriented. His needs for power, status, and pretending have disappeared. Something has ignited the potential that was in Peter and exploded him into a new life, a new being. The Peter we meet after Easter has great humility. He has a quality of fearlessness that is unbelievable. And he has a sureness so deep that he can lay aside his insecurities and prejudices.

Peter is changed dramatically, significantly, totally. Peter before Easter and Peter after Easter are discernibly different people. Clearly, something has happened to Peter. Something has brought about the change. Something has touched the deepest recesses of Peter's life and called forth a new being. That something was involved in whatever the Easter Moment was.

The next to testify are the other eleven disciples. Very little is known about them but time after time Jesus appeared thwarted and frustrated by his disciples. They appeared to lack sensitivity, insight, humility, and understanding. Constantly he looked to them for an appropriate response. He seldom found it.

Except for the alleged "beloved disciple", identity unknown, they did not attend his execution. They had already left town when it was time to bury their teacher. They fled like the cowards they were to go into hiding.

Before the Easter Moment there was little reason to hope for much from the group known as the twelve. Their behaviour was scandalous. But something happened. They were reconstituted by that experience. They emerged out of hiding. They were galvanised into action. They were energised by some enormous force. They left their sanctuaries. They lost their cowardly fear. Nothing ever frightened them again. They returned to Jerusalem. They took to the streets. They proclaimed their story. "Jesus lives!" "Death cannot contain him!" They took on the world. They prevailed. They endured ridicule, arrest, torture, beatings, and even death. But they never deviated from their story. They never wavered. Cowards were turned into heroes. Men in hiding for fear became fearless martyrs. Death frightened them no more. It held no further power over them.

Before resting my case, I call an expert witness regarding the power of the Jewish Sabbath. I consider this testimony the most compelling of the arguments for the Easter Moment.

One of the most important worship traditions of the Jewish people is the observance of the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath. This was more than just a custom by the time of the life of Jesus — it was part of the Jewish identity. Its power had a deep emotional hold upon the lives of the people. This power was primarily a result of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE.

The Sabbath is a day of rest. Rest, according to Deuteronomy, is a right to be demanded, not a privilege to be extended. Do not forget, said the Deuteronomic writer, that you were slaves in Egypt subject to exploitation, so every seventh day every creature has the right to rest from labour.

In every way possible the Sabbath day observance was heightened by the exiled people in Babylon. It, alongside the practice of circumcision, was how the conquered nation resisted, even in captivity, their conqueror. The observance of this day was rigidly codified, and these rules were written into civil law as well as religious observance. The Sabbath was a deeply emotional, religious, national, patriotic mark of Jewish identity. It had an enormous hold upon the people. It was among the most sacred and best observed of Jewish traditions.

No one who knows anything about tradition, religious custom, and the resistance to change of emotionally held, pious practices can overestimate the power of the Sabbath. When anything or anyone arises to minimise or to challenge the power of that tradition, the response will be less than rational. As a seminarian I was warned that, when serving a new church, I must not move the furniture for a year. In other words, don't exert influence until you have some. Changing the liturgy before then invites an angry, emotional response from many devout worshippers.

The Sabbath day was deep-seated, touching all of the nerve ends of the Jewish people. All of the disciples and all of the women who followed Jesus were deeply related to this worship pattern and tradition. Yet something happened in the lives of these people, something profound, life-changing, and emotional. This something is identified by Paul with the first day of the week. This identification gave birth to a new holy day for worship. Christian Sunday and Jewish Sabbath are not the same. They have different meanings, different origins, different characters. The first day of the Christian week is the day of the Resurrection, the day God acted. The Jewish Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, the day God rested. Christians observe the first day of the week as a festive celebration. On the other hand, the Jewish Sabbath is observed with solemnity and by refraining from labour.

There is little doubt that a new holy day was created from the Easter Moment, a day that rivalled and in time replaced the most sacred worship tradition of those Jews who followed Jesus. That is an event of momentous power. The energy it takes to develop a new holy day, a new worship tradition, is

enormous. Where did that energy come from? Here is an effect that can be measured, an historic phenomenon that can be studied. It exists in history and time, but it points to an originating moment that is beyond time or history. Feel its power. Listen to its witness. Weigh its evidence. The witness may step down.

In the judge's instructions to us the jury, we are told to consider in our deliberations the possibility that the Easter Moment was not a single event in history or is even specifically Christian. Consider the possibility that it happens repeatedly. While as invisible as the wind, it can be measured by its ability to transform, change the world, bring new life, overcome fear, defeat death. Before reaching a conclusion, apply deductive reasoning to consider how you may have been shaped into a new being by it. Are you more alive? Can you speak your truth to power? Are you kinder? Less judgmental? More accepting? More humble? Less concerned with status? More or less unafraid to be you, lead where it will, cost what it may.

You are now excused to weigh the evidence and reach a conclusion as to what is the improbable Easter Moment?

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Have you experienced an Easter Moment?

What happened?

How were you changed?