



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

# Resurrection 2026

Rachel Mackintosh © 5 April 2026

## How do we continue to love now?

In the Monty Python film, *The Life of Brian*, set in the time of Jesus, Brian's mother confesses to Brian that his father was not Jewish, but was, in fact, a Roman. She reminisces: "Promised me the known world, 'e did."

This is funny.

Although it is generally fatal to a joke to explain it, I now risk killing the joke by pointing out that it is funny because it plays on the catchcry of disappointed lovers, "... promised me the world". But it also calls us to contemplate our own known world.

*The Life of Brian* is about Brian, not about Jesus, although Brian does almost get the gold, frankincense and myrrh in a brief moment of mistaken identity, because he and Jesus are born at the same time in the same neighbourhood in the Jewish homeland, and so even wise men can get confused. So the known world of Brian is also the known world of Jesus.

In this context, the Easter story occurs — in a world of Imperial Roman occupation.

Marcus Borg, biblical scholar and academic, describes the features of this world — the known world:

Rome rules the Jewish homeland through native collaboration from the élite class. Herod Antipas in Galilee and a high priest appointed by Rome in Jerusalem are the senior collaborators. The high priest and other temple authorities are responsible for satisfying both Rome and their Jewish subjects. They have a stake in how Galilean Jews behave — an economic stake in whether they pay tithes to the temple and a political stake in whether they are restive and prone to rebellion.

The system created and ruled by the powerful and wealthy élite serves the élite's financial interests and is economically oppressive to the rest of the population. The conditions in the peasant class are worsening. Herod's family spend lavishly on their regal lifestyle and also on massive building projects, all of which require a larger and larger extraction of peasant production. Rome's client rulers also need to extract wealth from peasants to pay the annual tribute to Rome.

The economic consequences for the peasant class are severe. Though life has always been hard, a family that has land can normally produce enough for its own sustenance. But more and more peasant families are losing their land and entering a more desperate kind of poverty. To be landless means living on the edge of destitution, and often over the edge.

Jewish responses to the Roman occupation cover a wide spectrum.

Some practise accommodation; the temple authorities and the wealthy implement Roman rule, while striving to satisfy their Jewish subjects enough to keep them politically quiet.

Accommodation is not simply an upper-class phenomenon, though. Many in the rest of the population also acquiesce, but for a different reason. Their accommodation is resignation. They shrug that "this is the way things are," a status quo enforced by imperial power and the threat of imperial violence.

At the other end of the spectrum is the way of violent resistance, and the period is marked by periodic outbreaks of armed resistance. The significant number of Jews sufficiently desperate means that violence is never far beneath the surface.

And in this world, non-binary as all worlds are, yet another response to Roman occupation is *non-violent* resistance.

Paths of passive non-violent resistance can be taken simply by remaining fiercely loyal to Jewish cultural practices.

Paths of active non-violent resistance include mass demonstrations, and smaller symbolic acts, of which there are many, organised and disciplined.

On this path of non-violent resistance, a historical figure called Jesus becomes an influential teacher. Way more influential than Brian. Jesus' teaching involves speaking of love and urging his followers to love, above all else. This teaching, in a known world where the violent might of Rome is supposed to prevail, above all else, is public criticism.

Public criticism, then as now, is a form of resistance.

Marcus Borg, who has provided my source for this description of the political scene at the time of the Easter story, was a member of a scholarly group called the Jesus Seminar.

The Jesus Seminar has used their scholarship in a search for the historical Jesus. They conclude that Jesus did not predict his own resurrection, nor claim to be the Messiah. This conclusion is not difficult for a Unitarian community to accept.

In fact, knowing that Jesus didn't claim things that offend our rational minds may open the hearts of this community to contemplate what the

historical Jesus, and the life and death of Jesus, and even stories of the resurrection, can teach us today.

Jesus' teaching and his public criticism leads to his death. His active non-violent resistance is a threat to the power of Empire.

Let's consider just one example of Jesus' resistance. During what Christians now call Holy Week — the week just gone — Jesus overturns the tables of the money-lenders in the Temple in Jerusalem. Even those with scant Christian background may have heard this story.

It is a story that has been widely misinterpreted. In the sanitised takes on the story that, in the intervening centuries, have given comfort to the many governing regimes who have ruled in the name of a twisted Christianity, the story is about separating commercial activity from worship.

Not so in the known world of the time.

In the world of the Jewish homeland, the story is not about money-lending. When Jesus says that the Temple has become a “den of robbers”, he is quoting Jewish scripture, where the words have their own meaning, and he is thus indicting the collaborationist élite, who are enforcing the oppressive might of the Roman occupiers. Those listening — particularly the collaborating élite — understand this perfectly.

This is the context of our Easter story. Jesus is mocking the power of Empire.

And so, he is put to death by crucifixion.

And today is Easter Sunday, the day of the resurrection. Again, even those with scant Christian background may have heard that, on the

third day after the crucifixion, Jesus rises from the dead. This is the best known version of the resurrection.

For a Unitarian community who has just opened its heart to a Jesus who didn't claim to be the Messiah, how do we keep our hearts open to the resurrection?

Let's say that the resurrection is not a bodily thing that happens today, although today is a perfectly good day to celebrate resurrection.

If we are still prepared to contemplate resurrection, the question arises: what is resurrected after the death of the active non-violent resistance teacher who fights Rome by talking of love?

I turn now to words spoken in this pulpit some years ago by Clay Nelson, to explain the resurrection:

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 ... explains *how* they experienced Easter ... 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. [Only after that moment did they recognise the stranger as Christ.] 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 [had] 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.

That love lives on may inspire us and give *us* hope and courage to go on. We may be able to get on board with *this* notion of the resurrection: resurrection as the continuation of love after death.

Today, we are also considering the known world.

If continued love is our resurrection, we can be in loving fellowship around a meal and there we, too, can experience Easter. And beyond the meal, the food and community sustenance that we share this morning, what do we need to do with our love now, in our known world?

Jesus' love existed as resistance to the Romans.

What is our modern Roman occupying force? Who are those who accommodate? Who are those who resist?

Is Trump the modern Caesar? Is Putin? Is international capital, sweeping all before its path, establishing itself and calling it peace — or at least stability — the new Roman Empire? Is the New Zealand Government the modern Herod, the modern temple authority? Are international corporations and local CEOs the enforcers, as local food production is decreed uneconomic, Wattie's closes its factories, people are thrown out of employment, and we import frozen vegetables from elsewhere? Does might triumph over love when pay equity is swept away at the stroke of a pen and the vital work of caring for the most vulnerable among us, work of love, is devalued in the name of economic necessity? Are these developments the modern equivalent of the peasants thrown off their land into a more desperate kind of poverty, living on the edge of destitution, and often over the edge?

Who are those who accommodate, shrugging that “this is the way things are”?

Who are those who resist? Who are those who experience the resurrection as the triumph of love over violence?

We Unitarians may follow the path of passive non-violent resistance as we adhere to our living tradition, and hang together in community.

We Unitarians may follow the path of active non-violent resistance as we oppose Move On orders for the homeless, as we support the Merge Café, as we attend No Tyrants protests, as we stand in support of the people of Gaza, against an egomaniacal war on Iran, as we stand with our Rainbow whānau in Pride, as we march for pay equity, as we teach and learn and live the ways and the language of love and inclusion.

This is our known world.

How does love live on? Through us, through our participation in the resurrection, through our conviction that resistance didn't die on the cross. It continued. It continues in us.

Amen.

### **Meditation / Discussion groups:-**

- How do you continue to love now?