

When the Dead Will Not Stay Down

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Angela Herrera

First Unitarian Church

**Reading appended at end of sermon*

So what is the deal with Easter at a Unitarian Universalist church? I mean, we aren't exactly a bunch of Jesus people, are we. Most of us probably wouldn't identify that way, anyway. Jesus is not the focus of very many of these Sunday services. But then Easter rolls around and... bam! Jesus.

Certainly, part of it is the cultural tradition of celebrating Easter-- much of which is more pagan-related than anything: rabbits, eggs, symbols of spring. Even the name, Easter, is pagan in origin. It is based on the name of the pre-Christian indigenous European goddess, Eostre.

However, this *is* technically a Protestant church. We belong to a denomination that used to identify as Christian, but no longer does. There are Christian UUs, for sure. But the church as a whole, over time, has become more than Christian. We are atheists, pagans, agnostics... some of us have syncretistic spiritualities—meaning they are made up of different influences that combine to create something new. We are Unitarian Universalists.

In other words, we are a Protestant congregation whose relationship with Christianity is: "It's complicated."

What this means is that the Jesus stories are our stories, too. This faith *is* because of those who came before us, who were inspired by the teachings of Jesus to grow in love.

Now because of how the stories shaped *this* tradition, it's confounding, really, some of the ways his name is used to cause harm in this world.

The gospels—the four books of the bible that tell the story of Jesus—do contain some contradictions. This morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark is a perfect example. In the section [our lay leader] read, verses 1-8, the women do not tell anyone what has happened. They are too shocked. In the oldest, and possibly most original, versions of this gospel, that actually the end of the story. They don't tell anyone, and that's it. Full stop. Versions that were written a little later in ancient times contained the section Bob read, verses 9-18. In this alternate ending, Mary Magdalene tells Jesus's "former companions," who do not believe her anyway, and then Jesus begins making appearances. Two very different endings, in the same gospel.

Within these gospels that have been handed down to us, Jesus even seems to contradict himself.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” But in the gospel of Matthew, when asked what the greatest commandment is, he says that it’s love, seemingly without regard for differences.

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful,” and “Blessed are the peacemakers.” But a little later, in Matthew 10, he says, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

He communes with tax collectors and people who were thought to be cursed, teaching by his gentle example. But he also storms into the temple, overturning tables and flinging open the cages of doves and pigeons, and causing all manner of chaos as he rails against those who put profit over love and justice. Then he invites people in to be healed, people who would have been at the margins of that society.

What all these contradictions remind me of are parables from the Buddhist canon, about the teachings and actions of the Buddha. Those, too, contain contradictions. The difference is that no one seems to believe those parables are meant to be taken literally. They are filled with vivid imagery and contradictions, large and startling images, and they show up in multiple versions, which is evidence that they are to be read as metaphor and story. Their meaning is moral and poetic.

Many of us were introduced to the Christian scriptures with a “pre-understanding,” an assumption that they are supposed to be the literal word of God. But when you approach them with a beginner’s mind, with curiosity rather than pre-understanding, the scriptures themselves tell us that their meaning is more than what is on the surface. It is in the realm of myth. What do I mean by myth? I think the Greek statesman Solon put it well in the sixth century B.C.E. He said, myth is not something which never happened, but something that happens over and over and over again.

How does this approach shape our understanding of the gospels today?

We can take, as our entry point, a part of the story the misunderstanding of which has led to a lot of harm. In the gospels, Jesus is very critical of Jerusalem and the temple. But his point was not that they were the center of Judaism. It was that they had become a center of the domination system of the Roman Empire. He’s upset that the people there are collaborating with the Roman empire. The people he is upset with are picking and choosing among religious laws, elevating those that elevate people in power, and ignoring those that would help the marginalized.

He isn’t upset at his own religion, Judaism, he is upset at the domination system of his society and everyone who conspires with it. What were the qualities of this domination system? It was hierarchical and patriarchal, and based on an economics of exploitation. The biggest economic activity was agricultural production. But two-thirds of the wealth created by that—by farmers and workers—ended up in the hands of urban elites. Half of it went to the top 1-2%.ⁱ

This domination system did not take care of its most vulnerable members. Those who were poor, or considered outsiders, were crushed by it, as under its heel. And this domination system was based on a religion of legitimation, in which those with power claimed their system reflected the will of God.

Jesus didn't oppose anyone for who they were, he opposed them for what they did. The Jesus who speaks in the gospels was upset about domination, about dehumanization. That is, in fact, the main theme of the gospel stories about him. If we miss this, then we miss the whole point.

"A myth is not something which never happened, but something that happens over and over and over again."

Today, also, a domination system seeks to dehumanize and kill, while protecting the power and wealth of a few. We can all see it. It distresses us, disturbs us. Obscene economic inequality. Anti-trans laws, proliferating. Anti-gay laws. Police violence. The criminalization of reproductive healthcare. The exclusion of refugees and the bureaucratic roadblocks and criminalization of migrants. Homelessness. Racism. Mass incarceration and for-profit prisons.

These things kill. Exclusion and hopelessness kill. Poverty kills. Not having access to abortion when you desperately need one kills. Some of these things, like anti-trans laws and forced childbirth—even in cases of rape or incest— are done specifically in Jesus' name. Others are quietly tolerated by those who profess to follow him. It is blasphemy. It is religious malpractice. It is a perversion. It is turning the story of Jesus into a religion of death. To those who do these things I say, "Repent! And believe in *the gospel*."

The domination system Jesus opposed soon killed him, too. He is crucified—a punishment reserved for those who committed sedition, the crime of rebelling against the state. His body is wrapped and laid to rest in a tomb, a low cave-like space, the entrance blocked with a giant boulder. But the scriptures say, he reappears. He comes back.

His body goes missing from the tomb, yet the version of him that people encounter is not exactly the old him. Even those who are closest to him do not recognize him. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene mistakes him for a gardener. In the gospel of Luke, when he joins two of his followers walking on the road, they tell him all about their teacher Jesus who was killed—oblivious to the fact that he is the one who is with them. He seems to walk through walls, entering locked rooms full of his disciples. It is only when he says their names, or breaks bread with them, that they recognize his presence among them. And so, this is not quite a happily ever after story.

But it's a story about how the domination system tried to kill something that can never be vanquished.

A person can be killed, but what their life meant lives on.

You can murder humans, but not human rights. Those you will have to confront again. Healthcare may be denied, but you can't shut down the will and the right to thrive. You can "don't say gay" but you can't pray the gay away, it's going to be right there in your family, in your neighborhood, and maybe even in yourself. You can hoard wealth, amass it and shamelessly profit from the labor of others and from their meager earnings, but you cannot kill the righteous anger that creates, and you cannot erase the fact that every human life is sacred, these truths will keep rising up again and again in different forms.

In Mark 16 verses 17-18 Jesus speaks vividly and poetically when he says that those who understand what he has taught will "throw out demons ... they will speak in new tongues... they will take snakes in their hands... they will drink poison and not be hurt... they will lay hands on the sick and make them well."

He is describing courageous people, survivors, healers.

What are the "demons" in the world today? They are the forces that diminish lives, dehumanize and exclude. The new tongues are evolutions of language, new words for inclusion and to dream of a radically different future. Snakes and poison: that which would intimidate or harm us, which we cannot avoid but must develop the ability to survive. Laying on hands is proximity. It is drawing close to one another, knowing that all that we need is already here, among us in this world right now, if we would only use it.

A religion of death will never lead to lives of peace, not for anyone.

But a religion of life will rise again and again if those of us who practice it remember the dead and remember what cannot be killed.

The Christian theologian and Jesus historian Marcus Borg was also struck by the scale of poetry and metaphor in the scriptures. It's startling, radical. Meant to jolt us out of the trances of hopelessness and helplessness that come over us like a slumber. To make us awaken, arise, rise up ourselves. Referring to Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Borg interpreted, "The risen Christ journeys with us whether we know that or not, realize that or not."

Which is to say, no despair is final. A greater love, truth, comfort, wisdom, and peace journey with you, with us, whether we recognize it or not. These things are always available to you, always by your side, and always right here among us.

Easter Reading
Mark 16: 1-18

Translation: The Message, by Eugene Peterson

Reader 1:

¹⁻³ When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, “Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?”

⁴⁻⁵ Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished.

⁶⁻⁷ He said, “Don’t be afraid. I know you’re looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He’s been raised up; he’s here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You’ll see him there, exactly as he said.”

⁸ They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

Reader 2:

⁹⁻¹¹ [After rising from the dead, Jesus appeared early on Sunday morning to Mary Magdalene, whom he had delivered from seven demons. She went to his former companions, now weeping and carrying on, and told them. When they heard her report that she had seen him alive and well, they didn’t believe her.

¹²⁻¹³ Later he appeared, but in a different form, to two of them out walking in the countryside. They went back and told the rest, but they weren’t believed either.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Still later, as the Eleven were eating supper, he appeared and took them to task most severely for their stubborn unbelief, refusing to believe those who had seen him raised up. Then he said, “Go into the world. Go everywhere and announce the Message of God’s good news to one and all. Whoever believes and is baptized is saved; whoever refuses to believe is damned.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ “These are some of the signs that will accompany believers: They will throw out demons in my name, they will speak in new tongues, they will take snakes in their hands, they will drink poison and not be hurt, they will lay hands on the sick and make them well.”

ⁱ Borg, Marcus and John Dominic Crossan. The Meaning of Jesus, p73.