

Three Unitarians die and soon find themselves at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter tells them that they can enter heaven if they can answer one simple question.

St. Peter asks the first Unitarian, “WHAT IS EASTER?”

The first Unitarian replies, “Easter is a commercial, secular holiday, inextricably bound to the easter industrial complex: the basket industry, candy industry, greeting card industry, big pork, the bunny industry....”

“That’s enough,” replies St. Peter, “wrong answer.” And he proceeds to ask the second Unitarian the same question, “WHAT IS EASTER?”

The second Unitarian replies, “It’s a pagan holiday named after the goddess, Ostara. It celebrates fertility, symbolized by rabbits because...”

“Enough!” says St. Peter. He shakes his head in disgust, goes to the third Unitarian and asks, “WHAT IS EASTER?”

The third Unitarian smiles and looks St. Pete in the eye.

“I know what Easter is. Easter is the Christian holiday that typically coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and the disciples were eating a Passover meal later referred to by Christians as ‘the Last Supper,’ and He was later deceived and turned over to the Romans by Judas, one of the disciples. The Romans took Him to Pontius Pilate, made Him wear a crown of thorns, and He was hung on a cross. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder. Every year the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out, and if He sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter.”ⁱ

I can’t take all the blame for that joke. It has been around a while. There are many versions of it. And it’s funny... because it’s kind of true. Not the Punxsutawney Jesus part. But the part where UUs aren’t entirely sure what this day is about, especially for us, UUs.

Easter is commercial. It is secular. It is about Ostara, secretly, because most people have forgotten that part. It is about Spring with Spring’s renewal and her circular time, in which there is death and there is new life, over and over again, in cycles that are very mysterious to us but that we ourselves are part of and governed by. And this holiday is about a story that went sideways a long time ago, a story about a group of people who devoted themselves to a certain teacher, and a way of life, to a vision of the future, and when it all violently fell apart they had to figure out what to do, how to carry on, how to hope again. And out of the many creative ways, a new story emerged about the teacher, and improbably it caught on. It caught like wildfire—we are tired of those now but it’s an apt analogy.

The story caught on, a religion caught on, and it went in directions the teacher would never have imagined, becoming so many Christianities, and some Christianities that then broadened their focus and became more than Christianity, post-Christian, no-longer Christian, like this

church. And some of those Christianities became elaborate institutions that tried to stop the influence of time from changing them, and some of them became vivid expressions of their contemporary cultural context, like the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel! If you believe, God will reward you! The prosperity gospel says God rewards the righteous with riches—not just spiritual riches but material riches. Big houses, fancy cars, private jets. Giant churches like modern cathedrals. It is, in short, the idea that good things happen to good people.

Kate Bowler is a professor of the history of Christianity at Duke Divinity School. And she's a religious scholar who has done a lot of research on the prosperity gospel. In her twenties, Bowler traveled the country interviewing mega church pastors with "spectacular hair," and their followers. She interviewed so many, her family got tired of it, of how whenever they went on a vacation or a trip if there was a megachurch there, she'd ask them to drop her off. "If there was a river running through the sanctuary, an eagle flying freely in the auditorium, or an enormous spinning golden globe, I was there," she says.ⁱⁱ She wrote a book called *Blessed*, based on her research.

On the one hand, that kind of religion- the prosperity gospel- is just so *American*. It is self-affirming for people in one of the richest, most powerful nations on earth, one that has taken more than its share of resources, to believe that wealth is a sign of righteousness, not vice. And, it inspires those who are not wealthy to focus on faith, rather than the spiritual and moral corruption of the capitalism that has done...all of the things it has done.

On the other hand, the prosperity gospel provides hope. Hope that if we are good enough, God will reward us. That there is an order and a justness to this world. If life has handed us lemons- heath lemons, wealth lemons, stealth lemons (the kind that sneak up on you like bedbugs on a vacation) if life has handed us lemons it can all turn around, by the hand of god, if we get our minds right, if we have the right kind of faith.

Who doesn't want that kind of hope? Who doesn't want good things to happen to good people? I do. You do. Kate Bowler does. Sometimes good things *do* happen to good people. Other times, we run right smack into the fact that some things are beyond our control, not what we would want, and not fair.

Not long after she had written that book called *Blessed*, when she was 35 years old, after months of having a mysterious stomachache, Kate Bowler received a phone call at work from her doctors office. A physician's assistant told her she had stage 4 cancer and needed to get to the hospital as soon as possible. "But I have a son," was the only thing she could think to say.

Many of us have experienced moments like that. Times when the ground falls out from beneath you. Suddenly, your life is divided in two. There is a before and there is an after.

We experience these things collectively, too. Lately, they have piled up.

It has been about eight years since Bowler got that call. After hearing at first that she had maybe only a year left, and then after a lot of surgeries (abdominal surgeries- she says she is on her 8th belly button now), after many brushes with death, she's doing better. But she still has to get regular scans. Because the future is uncertain, she lives closer to crisis than most people are aware of being, closer to the edge. Things could change again at any time, and she knows that,

has intimate knowledge of it. She says learning to live this way is like learning to live in a tiny house on the edge of a huge cliff.ⁱⁱⁱ “You’re really checking the weather a lot” she says.

She wrote another book. This one was called “Everything Happens for a Reason: and other lies I’ve loved.” Later, her friend, the journalist Wajahat Ali, who also lives on the edge of a cliff and checks the weather a lot because his four-year-old daughter had stage 4 cancer, interviewed her as part of a podcast series called “The Future of Hope.” It not one of those conversations that puts a bow on things. She wasn’t there to talk about stories with happy endings, and neither was Ali. They both live with too much uncertainty for that. On the day of the interview, Bowler was feeling especially brokenhearted. Cancer sucks, the world around her contains many far worse things, and sometimes it all feels like too much. But life isn’t only those things. “What is life?” Ali asked her. She replied:

It's these ridiculous, gorgeous, terrible binaries, right, that we have to put up side-by-side. The feeling of seeing a baby being born, and then the feeling of holding someone's hand when they pass...what we call the numinous: the drawing up close to the realness of life. ...I recently got to hold little phosphorescent moon jellies in my hand on a [kayak] at night and see nature light up like underwater glitter. And you think...

she stammered...

like, dear God, thank you for this absurd wonder and the privilege of being in this body and loving the people I love and getting a shot at doing it again. And then, also, structural inequality and crushing medical debt and — and cancer. And having it all up close together, that seems to me to be the big challenge of all this, [it's] widening our little aperture so we can see the reality of both without missing one or the other.

A few nights ago, I led a training for our pastoral care team. We were talking about resilience, and what helps people develop it during times of crisis or hardship. Based on research, the American Psychological Association developed a list. It includes connecting with other people. Accepting that change is part of living. Taking care of yourself. Nurturing a positive view of yourself. Leaning into opportunities for growth. And “maintaining a hopeful outlook.” But what does hope look like when we are looking at “the reality of both without missing one or the other?” When things have not turned out as we wanted? How about when they are probably not going to?

Hope does not depend on probability. It isn’t about having good odds, or betting on a slim chance. It is possible to have hope even if there is zero chance that things are going to go the way you would have liked. It’s not a leap of faith. It isn’t denial. A hope you can count on is the opposite of denial, actually. If we are in denial of reality, and our hope is based on ignoring the facts, that’s what is called “false hope,” friends.

Hope is seeing what is, and deciding how you are going to show up to that. How you’re going to participate in it. Who you’re going to love. Who you are going to let love you back, finally, without trying to be so damn self-sufficient all the time. What you’re going to give your precious attention to.

Hope is looking at what we do have control over—which isn't much in the grand scheme of things but it's something, it's really something—and being the version of yourself that means the most to you, the one you are glad you get to be, for however long and in whatever circumstances you get.

And hope is not just a private experience, though it is that. Hope is intimate, but it's also what we do together, it is being how we want to be, in whatever circumstances and for however long we get. Like yesterday, at the transgender day of visibility open mic that was held right here in this sanctuary. We made this bouquet together, and one of our beloveds who spoke talked about how everyone needs a place to belong. I think it's what we most need, every one of us, in this world of binaries (like the ones Bowler describes) and nonbinaries, like the bouquet of people that make a congregation, a community, a sacred space.

Hope is immediate. It's firsthand. Hope is what we do and how we *are* together. And hope is catching. It grows, it spreads. But you can't always predict how. Tarana Burke worked for a decade trying to build the #metoo movement before finally, in her words, it "miraculously" took off. She says, "Hope is not a chia pet."^{iv} You don't water it once and watch it grow right on schedule. It grows in unexpected directions and at unpredictable times, and we aren't in control of that part, but it is one of the qualities of hope.

Burke herself had to find hope in a situation she couldn't fix. She was a survivor of sexual abuse, surrounded by other survivors, especially black women and girls, like her. There was so much abuse. She couldn't change that. But in her mid-thirties, she had already been an activist and organizer for two decades, working on issues like youth development, housing inequality, racial discrimination, and economic injustice. She was someone who brought people together. That's how she showed up. So, among other things, she started the #metoo movement, with the goal of empowerment through empathy. Survivors would find each other, speak with each other via the hashtag, and know they weren't alone. Strength would build on strength. Hope was an action she could take, a verb. And it was emergent, something that formed as relationships formed.^v

Later, when #metoo went viral (with the hashtag appearing 17 million times on Twitter alone) it brought whole groups of people into awareness of something they had in common, from domestic workers to Hollywood actors. Ai-jen Poo, the co-founder and leader of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and a friend of Tarana Burke's says, "Hope is like domestic work. It is the work that makes all other work possible."^{vi}

Someone- I can't remember who- defined hope as "the stubborn determination to make things work." That's another way to frame it. Take it from the Jewish UU Senior Minister who assigned herself to preach to a bunch of atheists on Easter.

I'm going to close with a few more words from our theologian for today, Kate Bowler. She says, "I see that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible. Gorgeous and tragic. I can't reconcile the contradiction. Except that I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out. Life is so beautiful. And life is so hard."^{vii}

And: "In the darkness, even there, there will be beauty and there will be love. And every now and then, it will feel like more than enough."

ⁱ This joke is adapted from a version I saw online that had no attribution. There are many versions of it out there, but mine is the best.

ⁱⁱ https://www.ted.com/talks/kate_bowler_everything_happens_for_a_reason_and_other_lies_i_ve_loved/transcript?language=en

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://onbeing.org/programs/kate-bowler-and-wajahat-ali-the-future-of-hope/>

^{iv} <https://onbeing.org/programs/ai-jen-poo-and-tarana-burke-the-future-of-hope-5/>

^v From the conversation (above) with Ai-jen Poo, and from <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/tarana-burke>

^{vi} <https://onbeing.org/programs/ai-jen-poo-and-tarana-burke-the-future-of-hope-5/>

^{vii} (In the TED talk above)