

EASTER FOR ADULTS ONLY

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Easter is not about bunnies or chickens or colored eggs. Those really are part of the *ancient* rites of spring – the fertility symbols. And while the theme of Easter may be reminiscent of spring, the green shoots rising from the darkness of winter, that isn't what it is either – although this is a winter which made all of us feel joyful at the coming of spring. I have never been so glad to see daffodils bloom as I was this year to come to church and see them in our Garden.

But UU's, especially if they have strong feelings of ambivalence about Christianity, are ambivalent about Easter, too. We like the joy of it, but we don't quite know what to do with the story. Most non-Christian UU ministers, either because we share that feeling or because we are aware of the feelings of so many in the congregation, complain about Easter and how to celebrate it. I think bunnies and daffodils are a way of avoiding some hard issues, of embracing the upbeat mood without the difficult struggle that comes before Easter.

You can't have Easter without Good Friday. I have always wanted, as a UU, to honestly and forthrightly confront the Passion narrative and see if this story at the heart of Christianity, which has transfixed millions of people for two thousand years, has something to do with *my* life and the lives of people I love. This view of Easter has gotten me in some trouble in the past. In fact, the first time I left Unitarianism it was over that Easter story. At nine years old in a small UU congregation in Oregon, when I saw that my church school teachers were not respectful of the Easter narrative, I convinced my parents to let me become a Sunday school dropout. It wasn't that I expected my teachers to believe the narrative happened. It wasn't even that I expected them to understand that it might have meaning for them whether it happened or not. I just felt they were being disrespectful of the story that was at the heart of the faith of most people they knew, and that, I was sure, was not the respect and tolerance that they were always preaching to us. And so, with all the righteousness that a bright nine-year-old can muster, I thought my R.E. teachers' mistake proved them false in all things.

So I come to you this morning to talk about this with a little trepidation, hoping that you will remember that what I talk about here this morning, as indeed any morning, is not something you are required to resonate with or believe in. I hope it will say something to you, but it may not. I offer it, as always, as my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences – in this instance as it relates to the story central to one of the world's great religions.

The reason I titled my sermon "Easter for Adults Only" is that I think that Easter is not for children. Bunnies are, yes. Brightly colored eggs, yes. The Pagan trappings of spring, yes. But most of the Passion narrative is a narrative that most of our children and grandchildren, at least most of the ones who live in happy, healthy, peaceful, lucky, homes, are too young to understand. Christmas is for the young. Easter is for those who have lived long enough to see the hard parts of life. Because the Passion story is, for the most part not a happy story. It is about the hard parts of life.

A young man rides into Jerusalem surrounded by throngs of admirers, but even as he rides he knows the end is near. His twelve closest companions, the men of his heart, arrange a Passover dinner, a dinner the young man knows will be his last. He knows that, despite the throngs and admiration of only a few days before, he will die a painful death. He will die deserted and alone. And so it is. One

of his companions sells him out to his enemies. The others can't even stay awake when he asks for their company. His most loyal friend denies he even knows him. And he is condemned to die. The crowds have turned against him, and he dies so alone that he cries out that even God has forsaken him. And then he dies. His spirit leaves his body. . .

But that is not the end of the story. There are four different endings told. In each version the young man is buried. Some one or some ones who love him go to his tomb to care for his body, but they don't find him in the tomb. *The tomb is empty*. He then appears to various people, including first the Mary's, and then his companions and disciples. He tells them that he is with them and instructs them to carry on his work in the world.

This is a story about suffering, betrayal, the meaning of death, and the hope that can be found in the midst of these things and beyond them. There *are* children in the world who have had the hard life experiences to know a little about these things. Today some small child sees his father being killed, his mother brutalized. As tanks roll into some city, they will leave orphans in their wake. Certainly we need only open the newspaper this morning to know that many children live with profound suffering, terrible betrayal, and see the death of those they love best. But for our own children and grandchildren we hope that life will spare them from understanding the full story of Easter just yet, and that when understanding does come, it will come in a way they can bear.

Nine years ago during the Easter season, and in the years since, the story has taken on new meaning for me. In 2001, not long before Easter, I went back to Oregon to visit my mother for what I knew would be the last time. My mother had survived cancer for nine years with many reprieves, but we knew that there were no more reprieves left.

When I arrived, it was clear to me that her time was indeed very short. I had seen enough death to know that it was unlikely that she would be with us much longer. She was too weak to get out of bed and was eating little. She lay in her bed in the room that had once been mine and my sister's. The room is on the second story of the house. Almost a third of the wall on the west side of the room is a picture window which looks out onto the garden in the back of the yard. In the distance you can see the mountains. In the garden, where my father had planted them, hundreds of red and yellow tulips bloomed. As I sat with her on the bed, rubbing her feet and massaging her back, I could see beyond her the riotous colors of spring. She lay there, near death. She had almost no flesh left, no hair on her head. She was as tiny and frail as a child, she was nearing the end. Yet right beyond her, out the window, was the incredible beauty of hundreds of flowers, of new life beginning. And it was nearly Easter.

It was a quiet time together. Our physical closeness was more intense than any we had had since I was a child. I felt almost as if we were back in time together, back when I was very small and she used to take me on her lap and stroke my hair – only now *I* was holding *her*. Maybe it was the season, but I had an image in my mind of the pieta. I wanted to do everything for her, but there was nothing to be done now except to hold her and to massage her now tiny body.

I will always carry that picture in my mind, my Mother perched on the edge of death and the earth bursting forth with color and new life.

She was very much with us up until the very last day, and she was spared much pain. Her last day she was no longer awake, and in the middle of the afternoon her breathing stopped. She slipped away so quietly that we were uncertain as to whether or not she was gone. I only knew for certain that death had taken her when I held her again and realized that her body was empty of whatever it was that had been my mother. The life and spirit were gone. It had been a gentle death, not the cruel one that we had feared.

Having lived more than half a century, this was certainly not the first time I had met death. Friends, relatives, members of my congregation, my former husband, had died before. I had wept before. Still, for me, this was different. This was the first time that someone who was a part of me and daily in my thoughts was gone. It may sound odd to say, but what I was not prepared for was that she was not just gone, but that she was gone forever. There was a poem I saw in the paper that said it, a poem written by the poet to his dead wife: "I thought the worst thing that could happen is that you would die. And then you stayed dead."

For me the empty tomb in the Passion story is not about the body, it is about the emptiness – completely gone. Someone who was very much alive and a part of your very soul has disappeared and you cannot fathom where. And, like most people do, I would momentarily forget she was gone. I would hear a book review on NPR and for just an instant think how much she would like that book – before remembering. Or I would search for a poem and think to call her to ask where I could find it, before realizing that her phone number would no longer bring me her cheerful "Hello, Darlin'" All the family stories, all the memories, if we hadn't kept them ourselves, were gone with her.

In the last year of her life, in the evenings before I went to bed at night, I would meditate on her for a while. Just before sleep I would bring her into my mind to keep her with me. Even as I couldn't be there with her in body, I would be with her in spirit. But in the months after she died I found that I could no longer call her presence to my mind.

I have known people, including people who really never expected it, who have told of feeling the presence of a loved one after their death. I have known of some who have even seen a loved one or heard their voice. A friend of mine told me about a very matter of fact, no nonsense, Humanist Unitarian widow who quite hesitantly confessed to seeing her husband standing at the foot of her bed shortly after his death. It was an experience that would otherwise have been comforting, but it worried her because it wasn't something she believed in or expected. I later learned that this is not an uncommon experience.

However, other than some very vivid dreams, nothing like that happened to my family. Quite the opposite; the world seemed very empty.

And then, many months later, something happened. It is a difficult thing to describe. We didn't stop grieving, but somehow we became especially aware of the part of mother that lived on – in her writings, in our rich memories, of course – but more than that. We became aware she was in us, that she was a part of us and we knew that her spirit had mingled with ours and would always be there with us. It seemed to happen almost at the same time for my brother and sister. My Quaker sister used language from the Bible. My brother was more matter of fact in expressing it. But each of us, at almost the same time, seemed to feel her come back to us. We were no longer so focused on the empty tomb. She lived on with us, in us, through us. And now, at night before sleep, I could call her

presence to me once again. I've joked to a friend that I may be becoming the only UU Confucianist, calling up the spirits of dead ancestors. Actually lots of people do this, talk to or commune with a lost loved one, whether we think they exist elsewhere or exist within us.

That was my experience. And even though some might think it blasphemous to compare, some of the experiences and symbols recounted in the Easter story now rang true to me. As Black Elk is supposed to have said: "This they tell, and whether it happened so or not I do not know; but if you think about it you can see that it is true." I had long understood most of the Easter story. Most of us don't reach middle age without encounters with betrayal, false friends, loneliness, and suffering. I knew about Good Friday.

And although I had certainly known joy and hope in my life, I knew that the story was about a hope and joy that arises beyond suffering and death. And now I have glimpsed that.

I have seen how a life that was filled with love and good works can transcend its time, how a spirit may leave and a body may die, and yet that spirit remains in people touched and transformed. The brighter the spirit in life, the more lights it lights and leaves behind to brighten the world even as it is extinguished.

This, or something like it, showed me what the original tellers of the Passion story were trying to tell people about Jesus. They were trying to tell how, despite the terrible suffering and death of this young man, the meaning and message of his life was not shattered by its ending. Instead those who had loved him and whom he had loved, those who had been deeply and forever changed by him, became now his body on the earth, teaching his teachings and doing his works. His spirit lived in them. In one version Jesus tells them to "feed my sheep." In another he tells him to spread his message. In yet another he says that he remains with them always.

Later generations would speak of Sacrifice. Atonement. Bodily resurrection. Those were all theological constructs invented long after the story was set down. But in the time of Jesus, when people told stories of Gods and men, they weren't writing histories. Religious stories were mythic. They are like poetry, using image and metaphor to express what is inexpressible, expressing truth not through historical account, but through story and metaphor. And the gospel writers were right. There was something in the life Jesus led and the stories he taught that was so powerful that it not only transcended his immediate death, it transcended the lives of those who knew him, echoing – sometimes faintly – through generations.

I don't call myself Christian because I don't think that Jesus was unique or that *his* story is the only story. But each year as Easter comes around again that story speaks to me in a new way about life and death and the spirit that transcends. For the first time it did seem that the *whole* story spoke to me. And yet, perhaps because I am a Unitarian Universalist, it still raises questions for me. Yes, I now know about a transcendent soul. I had someone as a part of my life whose life transcended her death. But will I, can I, grow such a soul? Can I be the kind of person whose life will have enough meaning in this world that it will outlast me? Our UU faith has always been a faith that our souls can grow, that each soul is important. The question Easter reminds me to ask myself is whether I have been growing a soul large enough to bring a little more light and love to the world.