

HOW TO BETRAY EASTER

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, April 16, 2006
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“Let not Easter come to earth, O God, and not to our spirits.”
The Rev. A. Powell Davies

There are many ways to betray Easter. One is to make it all about long, long ago. Yet this week I’ve felt in danger of doing just that myself. If you write a book called *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*, as I did, you’re going to get questions at this season. And that’s fine! But this year there I have been fielding more than usual, due to an ancient text called *The Gospel of Judas*.

That such a text was written is not new news. It has been known for a long time. Around the year 180, it was denounced as heresy by the church father Irenaeus of Lyon – who was key to the process that formed a New Testament with only the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A process completed 150 years later when the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the imperial religion, with one canon and one set of must-be-believed creedal assertions about Jesus; thus betraying much of the religion of Jesus!

But it’s also not about texts. A copy of this one surfaced 30 years ago, in Egypt. There’s no doubt about its authenticity. It’s a real reflection of how some early Christians told the Jesus story, when still allowed to offer own their personal interpretations. Yet in this version, painstakingly reconstructed and now translated, the reviled villain in the Passion story, Judas Iscariot, is a devoted disciple, who was simply doing Jesus’ bidding when he betrayed him. It describes conversations between Jesus and Judas during the week before Passover in which Jesus tells Judas “secrets no other person has ever seen.”

The other apostles pray to a lesser God, Jesus says in this text. And he reveals to Judas the “mysteries of the kingdom” of the true God. He asks Judas to help him return to that kingdom. But to do so, Judas must help him abandon to his mortal flesh: "You will sacrifice the man that clothes me," this Jesus tells Judas, while acknowledging that Judas "will be cursed by the other generations."

All week long I've been asked what *I* think – by guests at my sister-in-law's Seder table, as we celebrated Passover; by long-time Unitarian Universalists; and by a reporter from *The Christian Science Monitor*, for a story that they ran on Good Friday.

Plenty of preachers are probably judging *The Gospel of Judas* negatively today: as a betrayal of Christian orthodoxy, or as irrelevant to Easter. But I'm not so certain.

As I said at the Seder table on Wednesday night, take the long, tragic history of Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. The figure of Judas has been central in that. But this gospel doesn't judge Judas. Quite to the contrary -- it depicts him as doing what he had been assured simply had to unfold.

In the painful process called 'the parting of the ways' between the synagogue and the early church, the early followers of Jesus claimed that in him the Messiah had come. To which traditional Jews responded, "The Messiah has come? Look around you, friend! Things aren't better. The Romans, in fact, have destroyed Jerusalem and our Temple. When you Gentiles who now follow Jesus claim the right we Jews have alone enjoyed among the citizens of the empire, to be exempt from worshipping the emperor as a god, then you bring persecution down on us, too! Out with you!"

Meanwhile some early Christians responded by telling the Jesus story as though the Romans, who had crucified him, were less to blame than Judas who betrayed him and Jews who failed to accept him as what his disciples, after his death, had said that he was. Not that he ever went around claiming himself to be 'the way, the truth, and the light.' No real Galilean rabbi could have made such claims and had his contemporaries listen. Only the rather anti-Jewish gospel of John depicts him as making *himself* the message. And here, my friends, lies another betrayal:

It's not about HIM: wasn't then, shouldn't be now! It's about his real message! Those who try to make it about what literally happened to his body, or about which beliefs about him are orthodox, run the danger of betraying what he most cared about. The message that we're all sisters and brothers, children of God; that the Kingdom or Commonwealth of God, with all its joy and peace, is among us even now, at least in part, whenever we love our neighbors as ourselves, and love the Source and resource of our shared existence with all our minds and hearts and souls. When we cease bowing down to the false gods of wealth and security and empire and religious orthodoxy.

It was a radical message. It was then and still is now: a message that doesn't die. Its roots far more ancient than Jesus: for another way to betray Easter is to forget about how this Galilean rabbi was doing an extended *midrash* on the Exodus story of liberation. So that when he brought it to Jerusalem at Passover time, it caused such a stir that the imperial authorities felt they had no choice but to seize him to kill him and silence him. And at first they succeeded. After his death, even close disciples, like Peter, denied they'd ever known him. Most of them scattered. But then something began to happen.

Perhaps it began first among women -- like those who went to the tomb to anoint his body. No matter what Mark says, they clearly did NOT stay fearful, silent finding the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. They went to tell Peter and the others. Personally, I doubt that it took just three days; it took quite a while. But in the interim, his friends began to notice that wherever two or three of them gathered together, repeating his message, it was as though he himself was among them again, that the body of the faithful was now his resurrected body; known among them in the breaking of bread, with Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner alike; men and women, slave and free, in a fellowship of equals.

Some questioned how far this radical message applied: only to fellow Jews? plus those who adopted Jewish customs? Or was it even more universal? As his ministry had been, extending to Samaritans, to Syro-Phoenician women; rooted in the universalism of the Passover message, that "when strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall do them no wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be as the native among you, and you shall love them as you love yourselves; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." [Lev. 19:33-34] Words I could wish were repeated more often today as our pious politicians debate about immigration reform!

Even Roman centurions, occupiers, could become part of this spiritual kingdom. But not even all the disciples ever understood that. They had debated about who he was. John the Baptist returned? Elijah come at last? Another prophet? God's anointed, Christ? But today there are still many who proclaim Jesus the Christ, and yet betray his message. For not all who cry, "Lord, Lord!" enter into the commonwealth of God; perhaps not even most; for most want to exercise spiritual lordship there, over others. More betrayal!

Some were always impatient with his message about turning the other cheek, forgiving one's enemies, and spreading the good news of the kingdom by example rather

than by taking up arms against the Romans. One disciple, Judas, was called “Iscariot” – evidently because he had earlier been one of the *Sicarii*, the dagger-wielding partisans who assassinated the occupying Romans not with car bombs, as in Iraq, but with knives. Even Peter resorted to pre-emptive violence, drawing a sword in the garden, striking a servant of the High Priest, cutting off his ear; earning a rebuke from Jesus for betraying the goodness, righteousness, love, and non-violent justice-seeking of his good example. As many have done since. Many continuing the argument among his so-called disciples that Jesus also rebuked – about who would rule over the others, or who could claim to have received special knowledge, *gnosis*, from the Master’s lips.

Personally, I think that what is important for all people to realize is that all such claims are still another form of betrayal. What is significant about the Easter story, like all of the Bible, isn’t that it is literally true, but that the spirit of its story is eternally true. That it comes to us not as rule-based morality that we are to follow, but as passionate spirituality that is to help us to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk more humbly.

Some of the most fervent self-proclaimed Christians today, I am convinced, are among the greatest betrayers of Jesus. Fellow UU author Dan Wakefield testifies to this in a new book, *The Hijacking of Jesus: How the Religious Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Prejudice and Hate*. My good friend, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, who died this past week, felt much the same way. He often complained that too many so-called Christians use the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamppost – more for support than for any real illumination.

He also complained, however, that too many liberals get tired and disillusioned too easily. That without an Easter faith that sees beyond defeats, we can fail to grasp that while faith may be a signpost, love alone is the hitching post. And that the mediating virtue is hope – hope which criticizes what is, even while hopelessness rationalizes it. Hope which resists, while hopelessness adapts.

He would often remind those who joined him in the struggles for racial justice, economic justice, sexual justice, and for peace, that the scriptures say that it was for the joy that was set before him that Jesus endured the passion, saying that we needed to live more passionately, because that road leads to the springs of gladness. To the joy and self-

fulfillment that comes from giving our lives to meaning, becoming spiritually invulnerable even in the midst of our very mortal and human vulnerabilities.

After 9/11, Coffin said, America betrayed its own claim to an Easter faith and squandered its claim on the sympathies of the world when it fell victim to its own sense of victim-hood, ignored the counsel of its friends, and took on a stance of self-righteous and even pre-emptive crusading. But let us not give up hope!

For there are many ways, my friends, to betray Easter; let's put them all aside. Easter is not just a matter of long ago and far away. It is a matter of here and now as well. "Let not Easter come to the earth and not to our spirits." It's not even just about Jesus – or what happened to his body. It never was. It was about all those who heard his message; who had seen an example of living with faith, hope, and love, even to the end. Not those who blamed, or claimed to have special spiritual knowledge from him, or the sole authority to interpret his message to others; but rather that saving remnant, in every generation, who can't leave the ancient liberation message of Passover out of Easter; who keep alive the spirit he embodied, saying, with Paul, "Not I, but the Christ that dwells within me." Who live passionate lives, speaking truth to power and facing down the self-righteous, because of the joy that comes from letting the spirit rise within the heart with passion.

No, friends, as Bill Coffin once said at an Easter service, Easter is not about closing the show with a tune like "Thanks for the Memories." It is about re-opening the heart, again and again, with a non-literal understanding of the resurrection experience. Experiencing the redemptive spirit not as a memory, but as living, reviving presence; and singing joyfully as we keep Easter indeed. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 268

Jesus Christ Is Risen Today

Charles Wesley

Benediction

And now may the spirit that was in Jesus
And in all those, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten,
Who lived and died as true servants of the Spirit of life and love,
May that spirit rise in you also,
Enabling us to live out the Passover of liberation,
To live with passion and give all your days to the cause of peace and joy.
Now go in that spirit. Alleluia! Amen!

