

# AN EASTER OF THE SOUL

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham,  
Unitarian Universalist  
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Two weeks ago I preached from this pulpit a sermon called “Preparing for Passover.” Someone new to the place shook my hand at the door, saying to me, “I’m coming back -- I can’t wait to hear how you interpret Easter!” So if you’re here today, this one’s for you! You immediately put me in mind of the story of the three little girls discussing Easter.

“I don’t really understand Easter,” said the first one. “What *I* know is the Passover story. We go to grandma’s house and have a Seder that tells the whole thing. But the only time my mama talks about Easter is when she cleans out the old clothes from my closet and then takes me to buy new ones at the Easter sales.”

“Oh, Easter is fun!” said the second little girl. “At our house, we all wake up early and then go hunting around the house for the Easter eggs that the Easter bunny has hidden. And whoever finds the gold one gets to break the ears off a big chocolate bunny in the Easter basket. And then I put on my Easter dress and we go to Mass, just like other Sundays, except on Easter there are lilies everywhere, and lots more people.”

But the third one said, “I think you’re both missing something. I’m in the Sunday School at the Unitarian church. And *we* learned there that Easter is about a Rabbi named Jesus, who went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Seder with all his friends. But what he had been teaching made some people think that he’d be the one to help them get rid of the Romans who were ruling over them. So they arrested him, and on Friday put him to death on a cross, then buried him a cold, stone tomb. And Easter is, uh, the third day, and, he comes out – and, uh, if he sees his shadow then there’s six more weeks of winter!”

Usually when I tell that one I say that our church school is pretty good, but not perfect. This week, however, I’ve said, “Enough with snow and winter! Maybe she was right!”

The Easter story, I know, can be difficult for folks like us, gathered here this morning. Because too many of us seem to think that we have to take it literally, or not at all. Fundamentalists may focus on what happened to a body once, and long ago. As for me, what I am interested in something different. Call it, if you will, “an Easter of the soul.”

A few weeks ago I was with a fundamentalist minister. He was all upset about news reports of a new film called *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, by *Titanic* director James Cameron. It seems that a burial cave was found near Jerusalem containing six stone coffins marked Mary, Matthew, Jeshua bar Joseph, Mariamene, Jofa, and Judah bar Jeshua. The film interprets these as coffins of Jesus, his mother, his brother Joseph, his wife Mary Magdalene, and their son, Judah, along with the evangelist, Matthew. So much for the resurrection! Now most credible archeologists don't think these common names are any more than a coincidence, but never mind. My fundamentalist friend saw yet another conspiracy aimed against his literalistic faith.

I was tempted to point out that not even the gospels are nearly as literal as he wants to be. That they start with the tomb simply being empty. With Jesus then appearing to disciples in various guises, much the way the bereaved often report seeing loved ones after death. He forgets that even for St. Paul the resurrection was a *vision* – one deeply connected to a radical hope, a Jewish faith, that death, exile and seemingly utter destruction can never put an end to Divine Love, to the Sacred Story. But never mind! But I didn't argue. Some people just don't get non-literal meanings, even if they're some of the most important.

Take my very introduction of the term, “soul.” Please, don't take that too literally, either. I don't know about yours, but mine is a metaphor. It often seems to come and go. Here's what Malvina Reynolds, Unitarian songwriter and social activist said on the subject:

“You have been directed to look inside yourself for the meaning of life, for your soul. You may find nothing there. Because the soul is not inherent. The soul is something we accumulate in the course of living. Living means love. Living includes work and conflict.

How can you love if you do not face and resist the forces of destruction? Such a course requires courage. . . [But] you are not alone. You are nothing alone. Living together, working together, communicating, has made us what we are – a meaning. . . . The soul is not an inner pearl. It is a patina created as an individual functions in a community. Not knowing, people called it *God*, for it was not in the unique self nor in the world, so they could not explain it. The soul is a function of communal being.”

No wonder the Buddha, having discerned the impermanence of all things, taught that whether the soul exists or does not exist; whether God – the Soul of the whole – exists or does not exist, may not be the real point. The real point is how we each learn to respond to the beauty & tragedy of life. Will it be with self-protection, attachment, delusions? or with deepening wisdom, compassion, and courage?

There are, thank God, in every generation some great souls. Hindus call them *mahatmas*. Jews call them *tzaddiks*. Occasionally we may even catch a glimpse of one, reminding us, as A. Powell Davies once put, that “life is just a chance to grow a soul.” To grow that part of us that is capable of living fully, or connecting, loving (and therefore grieving). Even Jesus wept. But also capable of resolving even our deepest griefs into gratitude again; of rejoicing and giving praise for the fragile, unmerited beauty of life; of making enduring meaning from fragile stuff; of passing on some of that on, in the form of growing love and wisdom.

Sometimes it’s uncanny how we’re led to do that, or how it happens. As uncanny as what happened to the disciples after Jesus died. When they decided that wherever two or three of them were gathered, wherever they broke the bread and blessed the wine in his name, the great soul that they had known in him could be in them also. “No one has seen God at any time,” wrote one early Christian. “But if we love one another, then God lives in us, and God’s love grows in us.” Amen, I say!

A one-time intern of mine, Marilyn Sewell, is probably preaching this morning to over 1000 people at First Unitarian in Portland, OR -- one of our largest churches. Last year she sent me a book of sermons dedicated to me, called *Threatened with Resurrection*.

The title stunned me. You see, one spring, some years ago, when she was still in college, my daughter Mary was studying in Mexico. Toward Easter time, she and her group went to Guatemala. There they met with a woman named Julia Esquivel, a poet and liberation theologian. Julia spoke about the long history of military rule, oppression, injustice toward the poor indigenous, Mayan population, and about how she herself had been forced into exile for over a decade. She said that she had discovered that her faith was deeper and older than the so-called Christianity of the Conquistadors. It's rooted in the Source of all Life, opening our ears to the cries of poor, hungry children, opening our eyes to their beauty and to a call to make the abundant beauty of creation theirs as well. Then she read from her own poems, translated into English as *The Certainty of Spring* and, yes, *Threatened with Resurrection*.

In the title poem of the latter volume she ironically compares the military rulers of her own country, and the imperial economic interests that they serve, with the Roman legions that must have tried to frighten the disciples of Jesus. She sees them as trying to gain the whole world, while losing their souls. "They have threatened us with resurrection because they do not know life, poor things!" But her Easter faith is that of one who is no literalist, or orthodox believer, but rather one grounded in the faith of those who struggle for justice in every age, who refuse to give in to cynicism, despair, even if it costs them everything. Who will not abandon the dream, the promise, of abundance for all. Who instead learn "how marvelous it is/ to live threatened with resurrection! To dream awake, to keep watch asleep, to live while dying, and to know ourselves already/ resurrected." Why? Because the people united, can never be divided. Because the souls of love and courage can never be kept entombed. Because *la luta continua*, and the struggle continues.

When Julia finished her reading, Mary noticed that Julia was wearing a piece of jewelry that looked familiar. A necklace with a flaming chalice pendant. Was she seeing things? She approached the poet. “I have the same necklace,” she said, bringing it out to be seen. “You are *unitaria universalista*?” asked Julia. “*Si*,” replied Mary. Julia then told who she had become one while teaching at a seminary in Vancouver, BC. Because her community of faith needed a base beyond bishops and evangelists who had been too often complicit with injustice; one that would allow her to interpret the Bible stories as liberationists do, in the light of real lives, here and now, and with respect and reverence for the even older, earth-centered faith of the poor people like the Maya.

Via Mary, I met one of the great souls I have met in my life, and invited her the next year to go with Gwen and me to the Middle East, to represent some of the often under-represented women of faith, of Latin America, and of indigenous faith, at the World Assembly of Religions for Peace, in Amman, Jordan. Not long ago, when I learned that Julia herself is now quite ill, I found myself reading what Marilyn wrote at the end of one of her Easter sermons in the book she also called *Threatened with Resurrection*.

“When we think that evil seems to have the upper hand, when peace in our world and in our own hearts seems elusive, when we seem stuck with our old [worn and soulless] selves, when death seems to get the last word, what calls us by name, out of the tomb, out of the tragedy and pain of our lives, is the Love that made the moon and the stars, saying ‘You are precious. You are worthy.’ Give up your shame, skepticism and endless doubt.” Experience here and now an Easter of the soul. Let it say,

“I thank You God for most this amazing/ day . . . (i who have died am alive again today, /  
now the ears of my ears awake and/ now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

For Love – the love that moved stars and planets and gave us the beauty of all Creation – hasn’t died. “It says, ‘I am with you. I always have been. Lift up your eyes. After the long winter, the Light has come. So rise now! This day, and every day of our lives. Though threatened with resurrection, to a Passover of praise, to an Easter of the soul!

Amen, and amen.

