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Easter 3/27/16: Saving Paradise

Much of Christianity focuses on salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection, yet Christians through the ages have seen the heart of their faith as a story of liberation and celebration of life. Let us come together and celebrate the life-giving forces we encounter. We will have a special collection for our Ministers' Discretionary Fund, which supports congregants in times of need, and there will be an Easter egg hung for our children after worship – please contact Rayla if you would like to help with it!

Sermon

Here's the question that sums up Easter for me: Do Easter eggs come from the Easter bunny? Or: Why do we have both Easter EGGS and the Easter BUNNY when bunnies don't lay eggs?

Easter is one big holy nest of contradiction and things that just don't quite add up. I struggle with the Christian story of Easter even as I delight in the traditions of Easter eggs and music and joy.

When I sang "Lo the Earth Awakes Again" for the first time, I knew I'd found a home in Unitarian Universalism. It's such a soaring, uplifting hymn.....that when I read it as an opening reading at a meeting last week, the handful gathered couldn't help but burst into song on the Alleluias! I love singing this familiar song with words that make sense to me. And yet, the words that I grew up with still pop into my head:

*Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!
Suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!*

The contradiction of Easter is right there: I love singing the song even as these words really bother me. "*Suffer to redeem our loss. – Alleluia!*" I cannot celebrate suffering! Even that that might bring salvation. Suffering as redemptive is a central claim of most contemporary Christianity: Jesus died to save us. God sent Jesus and he was crucified to atone for the sins of all humanity. This just doesn't work for me, and makes it hard for me to celebrate Easter. Luckily, I'm not the only one. (Are you with me?)

My teachers Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock offer another way. They, too, are troubled by this idea of redemptive suffering, and have dedicated their scholarship, as progressive Christians, to opening up space within contemporary Christianity for a different way of thinking– a space that existed in early Christianity, as I'll explain later.

They write, "The actual historical event of Jesus' crucifixion was neither sweet nor saving. In Jesus' time, the Roman [empire] occupied all of Palestine. [...] The Romans

suppressed resistance by terrorizing the local population. Crucifixion was their most brutal form of capital punishment.[akin to a lynching] It took place in full public view, to teach a lesson through terror. To say that Jesus' executioners did what was historically necessary for salvation is to say that state terrorism is a good thing, that torture and murder are the will of God."ⁱⁱⁱ

This theology, called "substitutionary atonement, uses Jesus's death as the supreme model of self-sacrificing love, placing victims of violence in harm's way and absolving perpetrators of their responsibility for unethical behavior."ⁱⁱⁱ

I don't believe that Jesus died to save us, or that his death has redeeming value. There is much to be learned from Jesus' life, but I don't believe that ANY death has redeeming value. (Lessons learned, perhaps, but not redemption for others)

The good news is that this isn't the only interpretation of Christianity! The bad news is that this concept is embedded in American culture.

My colleague Molly Housh Gordon writes about how this idea of self-sacrificing love and the redeeming qualities of violence, permeate our society, regardless of our stated beliefs and theologies. She says:

"On a personal level, it often manifests as shame – that niggling suspicion that we deserve or have earned our suffering through some deep failure.

On a larger scale, well, we crucify people all the time. We name them "other," deem them without worth, and murder their voice or body.

And, as Parker points out, along with countless feminist and liberationist theologians... when sacrifices are made,... it is rarely the rich and powerful who are sacrificed. More often, it is the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable whose lives are forfeit[ed].

We see this on our street corners when we sacrifice our teens to the Gods of drugs and money. We see this in our state budgets when we sacrifice health care for our most vulnerable citizens to the Gods of personal political gain [or wealth]. We see this in our own lives when our tender vulnerabilities are exploited."^{iv}

I have a visceral reaction to these ideas of self-sacrificing love and redemptive violence, in part because I see the harm that this theology causes all around us.

And it seems impossible to untangle Jesus' sacrifice on the cross from its impact on our culture. The message that "Jesus died to save us" is at the core of not only the Easter story, but Christianity writ large.

Thankfully, this is not the only Christianity. Though Crucifixion-centered Christianity is dominant today, this has not always been the case. Parker & Brock went searching for the dead body of Jesus in old churches in the Mediterranean, he was nowhere to be found!

What they eventually uncovered in their travels and research is that for the first thousand years of Christianity, the violent story of Jesus' crucifixion and subsequent resurrection –the way we think of the Easter story today, was not a focus for early Christians.

Brock and Parker's book "Saving Paradise," from which I borrow the title of this sermon, is about "How Christianity traded love of this world for Crucifixion and Empire." They travelled throughout Europe looking at early Christian imagery in churches and chapels. The images tell an amazing story.

Look for a moment at the photo on your OOS. What do you notice? [*The photo was the cover image of Saving Paradise*]

It's beautiful! It's verdant and bright and abundant. There is no crucified Jesus at the center, but abundant life.

Brock & Parker write:

"Paradise... was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries. Christian paradise was something other than "heaven" or the afterlife. In the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God.

Images of paradise in Rome and Ravenna captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world, as if they were lit by a power from within.

Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the world's luminosity. The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered...experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful."^v

Paradise for the early Christians was tangible and real – felt in community worship, in seeking out all this is life-affirming and sacred.

As they absorbed this other version of Christianity – early Christianity, "Crucifixion-centered Christianity seemed increasingly strange." They realized that this paradise-centered Christianity was replaced with Crucifixion-centered salvation in order to serve the powers of Empire.

"The needs of empire—and theologies that justified and then sanctified violence and war [as manifested in the Crusades, forced conversions, and war]—transformed Christianity and alienated Western Christians from a world they had once perceived as paradise."^{vi}

What a huge loss for humanity....and at the same time, a way to make sense of the violence and war that so many experienced in Europe at the turn of the millennium (1000 and onward).

Fast forward again to this, 3rd millennium of Christianity: Parker, Brock, and others are reclaiming Christianity from this violence-centered story. “Paradise is not wholly lost.” They say, “we must stand again at the open doors of paradise and bless this world as sacred soil, as holy ground, and as a home that all must learn to inhabit together.”^{vii}

We, today, face the same decisive question that early Christians faced: “whether human beings align [our]selves with the Spirit of life, the power of God, or use [our] power to collaborate with destructive principalities & powers.”(49)

This is still the question. In these days when some are using their power to foment violence, round up “Other” – the Muslim, young Black man or Syrian grandmother, what will we choose? And how will we fortify ourselves with love and beauty in the face of such abuses of power?

Let us help one another choose to step out of the comfort of our homes and align ourselves with the Spirit of Life.

This week, the new director of Standing on the Side of Love campaign, Caitlin Breedlove, sent out this message about the choice we face today:

If we awaken a Dragon, we need courage to face a Dragon.

Two terms of a Black President. Gay Marriage. Deeply humanizing gains in the struggle for Immigrant Rights. A new force in our country bravely declaring (in word and deed) that Black Lives Matter. In so many ways, communities experiencing...violence have been speaking out, pushing back, and loving ourselves out loud.

This is causing a Dragon of cultural backlash in the United States against these communities. The ‘Trump Effect’ is not about Donald Trump or this election alone anymore. From those of us who are having our sacred Black Lives Matter banners desecrated at our churches [Like ours – they have been stolen 8 times and counting] to those of us engaging in non-violent civil disobedience who are having our lives threatened: we see rage, resentment and suffering shaped into actions that could make us very afraid.

That is where our faith comes in... We know that our works of collective love are more powerful than our individual fear. Our faith wakes us up in the morning, reminding us that we are called to act in this time. We see Standing on the Side of Love as an expanding campaign that can be a balm of fortification. Fortification for our social justice movements. Fortification for our activists and faith leaders who are tired, afraid, alone and spiritually depleted in the face of such a Dragon. Fortification for what this time requires of us.^{viii}

On this Easter Sunday, Let us fortify ourselves. Let us fortify our communities with a love that is strong and irresistible enough to crumble the structures of hate and domination.

On this Easter Sunday, when I and so many of you are struggling with the Easter story and mainstream ideas of Jesus' resurrection.

On this Easter Sunday, when I wonder if we UUs should even be celebrating Easter (though I can't imagine skipping the egg hunts).

Let us keep wrestling with the meaning of this story for us as Unitarian Universalists today.

There is much to learn from the stories of Jesus living and loving in a time of Empire.

There is much to learn from how his followers lamented, lived, and loved after his death.

There is more beauty and more vibrant possibility of reclaiming paradise than we often allow ourselves to believe.

And I know this: We, like Jesus' followers in the days and weeks following his death, are more resilient, courageous, and strong than even we know.

I see this courage in undocumented immigrants fighting for dignity at great personal risk. I see this resilience in transgender folks devising strategies to keep themselves safe in the face of new laws that make it illegal for them to use public bathrooms. I see this strength in the thousands of people across the country rising up to say NO to hate, NO to transphobia, NO to racism, NO to xenophobia, and YES to life. YES to loving community that gathers together, honoring differences and believing that a world of safety, respect, love, and support is possible.

Let us join them. Humbly, let us listen to those on the margins who are facing their fears and leading these struggles.

Let us seek out their voices and listen. Let us expand our sense of what is possible by reclaiming paradise together.

Let us, indeed, ask "What would Jesus do?"

For he would harness the Love and power of community to walk with others who seek to deny empire and oppression.

He would encourage his followers onwards, leading by example in building loving communities dedicated to healing the sick, confronting injustice, and appreciating life.^{ix}

May we strive to do the same.

May we be gentle with ourselves as we wrestle with the contradictions of Easter.
May we renew ourselves with joyous song, laughter, community, & love
May we remember that paradise is here and now – indeed, life is thriving all around us.
So may it be.

ⁱ Proverbs of Ashes, Parker & Brock. 48-9

ⁱⁱ “Crucifixion was Rome’s most horrifying and humiliating form of capital punishment... The Romans used it to discourage people from joining dissident movement, escaping slavery or military service...Roman soldiers erected crosses in public places...to terrorize subject peoples.” – “more akin to lynching than formal execution.” Saving Paradise, 50.

ⁱⁱⁱ “This Present Paradise,” Parker & Brock, UU World, Summer 2008,

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/early-christians-emphasized-paradise-not-crucifixion>

^{iv} “Love Will Not Be Sacrificed,” Easter sermon by Rev. Molly Housh Gordon, April 2014.

http://uuchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2014-04-20_Love_Will_Not_Be_Sacrificed.pdf

^v “This Present Paradise,”

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Standing on the Side of Love email from Caitlin Breedlove, 3/25/16

^{ix} “Saving Paradise,” Parker & Brock, 29