

## Through Death to Resurrection

4/04/10 Sermon, Brockport UU Fellowship

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**Reading:** A passage from the Bible, the Gospel of Mark, chapter 16 [New Revised Standard Version]

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus]. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## Sermon

Seven years ago, at about this time of the year, I was working full-time at the University of Rochester and going to seminary, studying to become a Presbyterian minister. But I never made it to ordination as a Presbyterian—I became a Unitarian Universalist minister instead—and a big part of the reason for that was Easter, or to be more specific, the cross. I had returned to the Presbyterian fold in 1998, after many years away from church, and I had struggled all along with whether or not I believed enough of the right things. “That’s OK,” I was told; “We welcome people with questions here.” And so for a while I was comfortable, but I was always aware that if there was a litmus test for right belief, I would fail. And then in 2003, during Lent, I was driving home from work one day when I saw a group of people carrying a cross in front of the Kodak building on State Street. Now mind you, I was a seminarian, looking forward to being a woman of the cloth, but when I saw that cross I didn’t like it. I suddenly realized that I could not be a Christian minister because I could not represent the cross. I couldn’t stand for the cross in the world.

I went home and told my partner, Marie, what had happened. I was somewhat excited because I knew that this was life-changing for me. I didn’t know where my path would lead me, but I knew it would be different from what I had thought. Marie asked me what it was about the cross that bothered me, and I couldn’t answer her. It was too fraught, for me, with what I was *supposed* to believe, and with what I thought *she* wanted me to believe, too. I don’t think I was ever able to answer that question, until now.

You know how teenagers, growing up, sometimes need to put some distance between themselves and their parents? They need to break away, to really establish that they're a separate, different person. They're not the same as their mother or father. If you tell them that they have their mother's walk, or their father's eyes, they may feel as though that somehow discounts their individuality. It's not until some years have passed that they can begin to appreciate the ways in which they are like their parents. They need to establish the difference first, and get comfortable with that. It was like that for me with Christianity. I needed to establish my difference and separation from it before I could begin to appreciate it again. And the cross has taken a while for me to appreciate.

And really, the same could be said for Unitarian Universalism as a whole. We have been growing up for about 200 years now, as a faith tradition that descended from Christianity but is separate from it. Many of us have come to Unitarian Universalism from Christianity. Some of us still consider ourselves to be Christian, and others of us, and perhaps we as a movement, have been busy establishing how we are different, and we don't often talk about how much there is to appreciate in our Christian heritage.

And, beyond that, the cross is complicated. Over the many centuries during which the Roman Catholic church was establishing itself, and especially throughout the Inquisition, the cross was a symbol of conquest. For Jews and others who were considered enemies of the church, it became a symbol of torture. And then the theology of the cross within the church is complicated, too. For many people, the cross is a symbol of the death of Jesus as atonement for the sins of the world. This is called substitutionary atonement. The idea is that human beings are sinful, and God is perfect, and the two cannot be reconciled. A human being cannot do enough to atone for being sinful. Some larger, more perfect sacrifice is required. Therefore God sent Jesus, a perfect human being because he was both god and man, to be that sacrifice, and to die on the cross, paying the debt for all, so that God and humanity might be at one.

This position is held and defended by many Christians, but not all, and it is also challenged by many, including much of mainstream biblical scholarship. Two of today's most respected Jesus scholars are Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, and a few years ago they wrote a book together called *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* [2006]. I love the way they tell the story, and so I thought I would tell it to you. For Easter Sunday, then, the day of resurrection, the day on which the followers of Jesus found his tomb to be empty, here is the story of Jesus and his passion for what he called the kingdom of God, and his death and resurrection—the story of the cross. And too, a story about the amazing creativity of life.

I'm going to begin with Palm Sunday, which was celebrated last week, and I'm going to follow the account in the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written. On that Sunday, Jesus and his disciples were nearing Jerusalem, the sacred center of the Jewish world, where thousands of pilgrims were converging to celebrate the holy feast of Passover. Entering Jerusalem that day were two very different processions. From the west, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate was entering the city at the head of a long column of cavalry, horses, and foot soldiers. Pilate was the representative of the Emperor Tiberius, ruler of Rome and Son of God, since he descended from Caesar Augustus, who was the son of the god Apollo. Tiberius was called "lord" and

“savior,” which is why that language became associated with Jesus, who represented a different order of things. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

From the east, Jesus, a peasant from the village of Nazareth, and his followers, mostly from the peasant class, were also entering Jerusalem. Jesus, a good Jew who knew his scriptures, planned a counter-procession, sort of a bit of street theater. You have to know that there is a long tradition in Judaism of expecting a Messiah, a leader sent by their God who would banish war, banish oppression, and be a king of peace. Using symbolism from the prophet Zechariah, who said that a humble king would come to Jerusalem riding on a colt, Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to fetch a colt, and he rode into Jerusalem surrounded by a happy crowd who called out, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” [Mark 11].

Now there’s one other thing you have to know, and that is that a peasant’s life was a hard life, and not only because it was a life of physical labor. The whole system was oppressive. Agricultural workers, who made up 80-90% of the population, were exploited by an elite 5% who owned and controlled most of the land, the production of crops, the distribution systems, and so on. Taxes imposed by Rome were very high, and on top of that, the Temple in Jerusalem, which had become part of the whole political and economic system, imposed even more taxes [Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 1998]. It’s what is called a domination system—the many are ruled by the few, and much of the society’s wealth goes to the rich and powerful, and it is all justified as the way things are supposed to be, as if it were God’s will.

And so the stage was set for a confrontation between the kingdom of Caesar and Jesus’s alternative vision of the kingdom of God, a realm or system of justice in which everyone has what they need—their daily bread—and no-one has to remain in debt to anyone. And further, something that Jesus repeated over and over in the Gospel of Mark: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” [Mark 9:35]. Those who exalt themselves will be brought down, and those who humble themselves, those who serve, will be exalted, will be filled. A total reversal of the domination system.

On Sunday night, Jesus visited the temple, and perhaps began formulating his plans for the next day, because on Monday he returned to the temple and, according to Mark, “began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves” [Mark 11]. For those who know the story, this is sometimes referred to as the “cleansing” of the Temple, but its purpose went farther than cleansing. Jesus was symbolically destroying the temple, not as a rejection of the selling of sacrificial animals, but as a rejection of the temple’s part in the whole domination system. The temple had become a “den of robbers” because the high priest worked closely with the Romans. The whole Jewish priestly class had been corrupted, and they used the temple as their refuge, hiding themselves behind religious language. Jesus was saying that the Temple was not of God and deserved to be shut down.

On Tuesday, Jesus engaged in a battle of words with the religious authorities. The authorities were in a difficult position. They had to keep the peace, or they would be out of their jobs. Jesus was causing more and more of a disturbance, and yet the crowds loved him, so the authorities were reluctant to arrest him. Instead, they tried to make him look foolish. One example. They asked him “Teacher, . . . is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” [Mark 12]. Taxation was

hugely unpopular, both because it was a heavy economic burden and because it was a constant reminder that the Jewish homeland was occupied by foreign forces. If Jesus said no, he would be denying Roman authority. If he said yes he would be betraying his people, and the crowd would be very disappointed in him. It might provide the opening the authorities needed to get rid of him. But the answer that Jesus gave was masterful. “Bring me a denarius,” he said, “and let me see it.” And when they produced one, he asked “Whose head is this?” on the coin, and they answered that it was the emperor’s. So Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And the amazing thing about this answer is that a denarius, a Roman coin equal to about a day’s wage, was a coin that many Jews would not carry, because Jewish law prohibited graven images. The fact that these religious authorities carried these coins, showing the emperor along with an inscription identifying him as the Son of God, immediately exposed them as collaborators.

As you can imagine, the temple authorities became increasingly impatient with Jesus. The confrontation was coming to a head, and Jesus knew it. On Thursday night, he celebrated a final meal, the Passover meal, with his disciples, after which he was betrayed by Judas to a group of temple soldiers or police, abandoned by his disciples, arrested in the dark of night, and finally interrogated and condemned to death by the high priest. On Friday, Jesus was tried before Pilate, the Roman governor, and executed in the manner reserved for those who subverted Roman law and order—crucifixion. A rebel against Rome, eliminated. Except that, somehow, he was not eliminated.

Today, Easter Sunday, is the anniversary of the day on which his followers found his tomb to be empty. In Mark we are told that the stone had been rolled back and a young man dressed in a white robe was sitting there. In Matthew we are told that the young man is an angel, and in Luke, there were two angels. The gospels don’t always agree on the details, but the details don’t have to agree. None of the gospel writers are writing history. They are telling their stories—stories of how their lives were changed.

In Mark, the story ends with the women fleeing in terror and amazement. They said nothing about what they had seen, for they were afraid [Mark 16]. In this, the earliest gospel, there are no stories of the risen Jesus appearing to anyone. The other gospel writers, Matthew, Luke, and John, do have such stories, but interestingly, they are all different. And so we may conclude that they are not factual stories, yet they *are* true. They tell us that the followers of Jesus continued to experience his presence, they continued to experience the power of his ideas, and they continued to work out what it all meant. They understood that God had somehow said “yes” to Jesus and “no” to the powers who killed him. That Jesus, and all that he stood for, was not to be found in the land of the dead, but in the land of the living.

At the time that Mark was written, the cross had two basic meanings. It was a symbol of execution by the empire, and it had also become a symbol for the “way” of following Jesus by dying to an old life in order to enter into a new life. It was a symbol of personal transformation. I think it is fascinating that in Buddhism we find an emphasis on emptiness, and the point of emptying is to return to daily life from a new place. The Sufis, from the heart of Islam, say that we must die before we die. And here at the heart of Christianity is this idea of freedom within death. Resurrection. The amazing creativity of life. It’s not *just* that spring follows winter,

though thankfully it does. It's that through death there is resurrection. Two thousand years later, we are still trying to work out what it all means. But one thing I know for sure: resurrection is not a fact about Jesus that requires belief, it is something that happens, something that life does, and something that *we* do. Because life is more creative than systems of domination, whether in the time of Rome or in the time of 21<sup>st</sup>-century America. Life is more creative than oppression. Life is more creative than death.

And so I leave you this morning with mystery, for the link between death and resurrection is truly beyond words, and I leave you with a challenge, for we are all called to participate in the work of justice, and I leave you with joy, because the domination systems of this world do not have the final word, and because life at its most resourceful, its most creative, moves through death to resurrection. Amen.