

First Unitarian Church

April 12, 2020

A couple of months ago, when the novel coronavirus was still news from a distant shore, Bob, Jane, Susan and I sat down to imagine the services for today. We are a creative team. But I have to say, I would *never* have guessed that what was going to happen on Easter is that puppets would teleport into my living room. I did not see that coming.

This is a new kind of wilderness.

Now, there are *some* churches defiantly holding Easter services in person. They join the historical throngs of people who have done what they want because “God has a plan.” Right about now, God may be wondering why a bunch of messengers in the form of epidemiologists aren’t convincing enough that the plan to avoid gatherings *is* the plan. At least, for now.

It is hard to accept being away from our church, though, and away from those things that are so meaningful to us. What is meaningful is not just a sanctuary or a particular altar or a set of symbols. It is the gathering, too.

But here I am going to make a bold claim: I think no one is better prepared for this time than the Unitarian Universalists.

For generations, UUs have been practicing our spirituality at all the altars of the world. Not just the ones in our churches. We do it by being open and curious about the world’s diverse traditions. By honoring many paths to truth. And we do it by being attentive to the natural world—even if “nature” is nothing fancier than a morning dove on a powerline.

I think of the Peter Mayer song, Everything is Holy Now. He sings:

This morning, outside I stood
And saw a little red-winged bird
Shining like a burning bush
Singing like a scripture verse

Church has spilled out of our sanctuary, and it is in your kitchen, and my living room, and it is in a choir that blends its voices using the invisible threads of the internet, and church is in Jane’s backyard, right in the middle of the city.

We have created a service that brings those things together, and links spring, Passover, and Easter. UUs were made for such a time as this.

On the other hand, this approach might also be a theological duck and swerve. It is just like UUs to soften the focus on Easter, moving some attention off of the Christian stuff by mixing

it up with Judaism and Paganism—and even a dash of Buddhism! All this diversity is a perfect foil to sidestep the uncomfortably, sometimes aggressively, theologized story of Jesus' resurrection.

To be fair, many UUs have good reasons for avoiding it. Some of us have had Christian dogma used against us—it may even have cost us our relationships with our parents or other people we love. And yet, I don't want to just hand these old, multisided stories over to people who use them in harmful ways. I think if we give them up, we lose a valuable piece of our spiritual inheritance.

We still have need of warnings about pharaohs. And the story of Jesus, including the resurrection, is a living story. Whether the story is historically accurate or whether it is true in other ways, the story is still unfolding.

What I mean is that when Jesus doesn't stay dead, the story indicates that it is going to continue. Which it did. The text might as well conclude with, "and now dear reader, because you have heard it, you are part of the story too." We are in a chapter much further along. Because it is living, the story is meant to be re-told and re-understood in each generation, in each context.

In February, the Rev. Meg Riley visited our congregation to preach about the prison ministry. In an essay she wrote several years ago, Meg describes an experience that helped lead her to her work now. It was an internship she did in the early 1990's at the Church of the United Community in Roxbury, Massachusetts.ⁱ Many in the congregation had been in jail, or were in recovery, or both. Many had "the virus," which is what AIDS was called back then. Most had experienced homelessness. There was a lot of violence. And poverty "blanketed the community," she says.

Perpetuating all of that were policies that disproportionately hurt poor people and people of color; like the way people in a place like Roxbury are more likely to go to jail than someone in a wealthy area, even if they commit the same crime. The effect was a community experience of prolonged suffering and death, sanctioned by the state. In other words, a kind of crucifixion. Do you follow?

The minister of that church named these things, and he preached a theology of liberation. Meg writes:

The resurrection... was in the gathered community, in the power of oppressed people coming together and claiming their lives as holy. Jesus could not be killed because his community would not allow it.

They came together and claimed their lives as holy. As a community, they would not let it be otherwise. Just as Jesus could not be killed, because his community would not allow it. That's re-telling, re-hearing the Easter story in a living context.

As a student minister, Meg was afraid that she would be irrelevant in that congregation, which was so different from the theologies she had learned all her life. Those had been formed in contexts of privilege. Instead, she ultimately found her own liberation in solidarity with this community she served. And when she visited us a couple of months ago, she was still engaged in that kind of meaningful work.

Today, we experience *this* Easter in a new context. We are in the peak days of the first “curve” of deaths from a new virus. As of yesterday afternoon, it has taken the lives of more than 20,000 Americans, and tens of thousands more around the globe. The harm, again, falls disproportionately on people of color and on people who are poor. And that is only the count of confirmed deaths from Covid-19. The loss is profound.

So this is an Easter in which, like the disciples in the ancient story, we grieve as we look for hope. I know many of us are carrying that grief around in our chests and throats every day. You can feel it. But this is also an Easter to have faith that death does not have the final word in our relationships with each other. It is an Easter to remember that out of chaos and loss, hope *will* arise. It is an Easter to remember that our story is still unfinished. That when all seems to be lost, our perspective is incomplete.

And it is an Easter to remember that our liberation is bound up with each other. Nothing could have made our interconnectedness more evident than this pandemic.

We were made for such a time as this. From our many altars, we will see it through together. May this circle continue to widen, and the love of community continue to deepen, as we do.

Blessings to you.

ⁱ <https://www.questformeaning.org/uploads/files/March%202013%20Final.pdf>