

READING TAKEN FROM ARTICLE BY JANE RZEPKA, SENIOR
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“At the outset, I want to confess a big area of cluelessness, or maybe naivete, about the way Easter, Passover, and the coming of spring manifest in Unitarian Universalism. All my life I have heard that it's a challenging time for us, a confusing time, a time where we kind of dither around wondering what we're doing and why.

As far as I know, however, the news is good—has always been good—for Unitarian Universalists. UUs have, in fact, straightforward points of view regarding the spring holidays. This is not a time to wring our hands, throw up our hands, or sit on our hands.

* You can go with the myth-miracle-mystery approach, where the stories associated with the season provide deep, quiet, spiritual meaning.

* You can take a more blatantly festive attitude, bringing forth the marshmallow Peeps, the Passover coloring books, the nasturtium seeds and messy bags of garden soil.

* If you'd rather, the holidays can feature family and friends, with Easter dinner as a highlight, or a Passover Seder, or the first spring picnic of the year.

* And, of course, without risking your good standing as a Unitarian Universalist even a smidgeon, you don't have to do anything at all!

How you relate to the spring holidays as a Unitarian Universalist is a matter of personal theology, personal taste, and personal circumstance.

Some Unitarian Universalists experience the territory as vast, perilous, unknowable. They worry that there are mistakes to be made—too much Jesus somehow or not enough, too many daffodils maybe at the expense of the Easter lilies, too much irreverence or then again, too much reverence. They're bound to get caught singing "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" when they absolutely meant to go with "Lo, the Day of Days Is Here," and they are inclined to confuse the solstice with the equinox. If they are having a Seder they worry that the Haggadah is too traditional or too hip, and in either case, they just know they're going to misspell it.

Perhaps worst of all, word has it that this time of year is the spiritual apex for so many—resurrection, either literal or metaphorical, or the deeply meaningful celebration of freedom, or the enlivening season of rebirth. There's so much to the season, and some of us get a little concerned that the whole thing may get away from us before the spiritual impact hits, or maybe we know from experience that this just isn't going to be our season. We simply aren't up to all the symbolism, reflection, and spiritual complexity.”

EASTER FOR THE UNORTHODOX: WHEN SPIRITUALITY GOES OUTSIDE THE BOX

Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church

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It's Easter and once again we Unitarian Universalists wrestle with its story. As Jane Rzepka says in the reading today, it's a challenging time.

Personally for most of my early adult life, I ignored Easter. I'd enjoyed Easter baskets and chocolate eggs when I was a child but skipped the baskets when I was older in favor of the candies. Most of my friends in graduate school at Penn State focused on parties at Easter. Many were Jewish. Others called themselves early stage recovering Catholics. They did go to Easter Mass just in case, however.

I recall one particular time at Penn State when the Campus Crusade for Christ was visiting campus. Easter was an especially important time for them and swarms of earnest, polite men in ties wandered around campus. I was asked a number of times if I'd been saved yet. My response each time with lessening degrees of politeness was a variation of – "No."

One final time I was accosted in the student union while on break from my part time job driving a bus. The youthful man came up to me and asked the same question, "have you been saved yet?" I'd had it. I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Yes, I have!" He grew quite excited and asked me who had saved me. I said, "it wasn't a who, it was a what." The smile turned to puzzlement and he asked, "what, what?" I replied, "a book!" I think he felt we were back on track and so he smiled and said, "What book?" probably thinking I'd say the Bible. I looked at him and replied, "why, the Passover Plot." His face fell and he walked away.

I'll be the first to admit I was pretty mean in those days when it came to religious conversations.

For those of you who don't know that book, the "Passover Plot" was very popular in the early '70's. It argued that Jesus was given a sedative drug in the vinegar water that was given to him to drink while he was on the cross. The theory was that this put him into a coma and then he came back to consciousness in the tomb.

That's certainly one option for us as Unitarian Universalists to believe today. We can decide that Easter was a conspiracy.

As Jane Rzepka reminds us, there are other options, too. I'd like to briefly look at them in reverse order. I will then suggest one more that I think might be an important way to reframe the theology of Easter.

One Easter alternative Jane Rzepka suggests is **“without risking your good standing as a Unitarian Universalist even a smidgen, you don't have to do anything at all!”** This alternative appeals to many of us. Sunday is for relaxation, quiet, time with family and friends, and taking a break. We could put our feet up, eat some handy Easter eggs, and listen to the fiction of Fox News. That certainly would be restful for many of us.

But perhaps we want to honor the Easter holiday a bit more fully.

The second alternative is to make Easter a time for special times with others: **“If you'd rather, the holidays can feature family and friends, with Easter dinner as a highlight, or a Passover Seder, or the first spring picnic of the year.”**

A ritual feast such as Easter dinner or that important celebration of spring with an outdoor picnic is a renewal of our ties with other people and with the world around us. It takes us beyond our daily routines and invites us to reconnect with people in our lives.

The third alternative is a bit of a catchall. She says that we, **“can take a more blatantly festive attitude, bringing forth the marshmallow Peeps, the Passover coloring books, the nasturtium seeds and messy bags of garden soil.”** The picnic or the Easter dinner might be equal measure of cooking, preparation, and dishes. This alternative invites us to Easter as a festival. Easter baskets as surprises or marshmallow Peeps on the chairs are all fun. And there's joy tasting the fine chocolate that is 70% dark before you prepare gloves and shovels to begin planting the garden.

This alternative is more lighthearted than others are because it can be fun and there's no particular structure to it.

These first three alternatives might be called “Easter-lite.” We can choose to ignore the holiday completely, use it as a handy occasion to have meals with family and friends, or we can make it a festival occasion.

The fourth option Jane Rzepka suggests to us is more to the heart of our Unitarian Universalist dilemma. She says that we **“can go with the myth-miracle-mystery approach, where the stories associated with the season provide deep, quiet, spiritual meaning.”**

This alternative allows us the option to look at the story of Easter and the empty tomb as a metaphor. I've done that in my Easter sermons for years. I've invited us to see the tomb as the place we take refuge when life is hard. It can be the place of isolation in addiction or grief before we return to the world of humanity. The uncovering of the tomb can symbolize the coming of spring and remind us to appreciate it. Remember how wonderful it was two days ago on Friday compared to that unpleasant time without power in December – that's life renewed. The children this morning were

given plant bulbs to plant and care for in coming months. Are the bulbs becoming shoots becoming flowers a miracle? Perhaps they are. They are a reality of nature and a marvel of beauty in our eyes.

All of these four options are perfectly appropriate for us as religious seekers. But you might reasonably be thinking, “so what’s the point of coming to an Easter service at a Unitarian Universalist church?” Festivals, Peeps, picnics, and stories don’t require that we come to church.

This brings me to a fifth option. Most Unitarian Universalists tiptoe around the troublesome question of the Resurrection of Jesus. This fifth option is to honor the Resurrection story but in an entirely different way from the one we know. Christian belief is that the Resurrection is an essential element to the assurance that Christ, the Anointed One, will return in a Second Coming. The Second Coming for many Christians is a sign of end times. You are probably familiar with eschatology. It’s a Greek derived word meaning “a belief or doctrine concerning the ultimate or final times.”

This belief in the final times was very popular after Jesus’ death. There was widespread belief among the early Christian community that the end times were arriving soon. That would usher in a long period of peace and the Kingdom of Heaven. The more fundamental Christian community believes this event will happen after the appearance of the Anti-Christ and much battle and bloodshed. This cosmology grew in part out of Zoroastrian religion approximately the same time period as Jesus lived.

Let me stop here and mention another faith. There’s a longstanding belief in Buddhist tradition that there have been a number of historical Buddhas as individuals. The Buddha during his teaching 2,500 years ago said that there would be a future Buddha whose main teaching would be compassion and lovingkindness. Some of you are familiar with the work of the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. His work and support of social justice has made him a revered teacher throughout the western world. In a book he wrote several years ago, “Living Buddha, Living Christ” he suggests that this future Buddha will not be an individual at all. Rather, the fully Awakened one will be the community of compassionate people.

So let’s imagine the same idea to be true for Christianity. Let’s suppose that the Christian belief in the Second Coming of the Messiah is actually the awakening or the evolution of a truly compassionate community that lives the compassionate teachings of Jesus. Rather than having an individual born again or coming down from a Heaven above, the Second Coming is an intentional caring for the world born out of wisdom and open-mindedness.

The empty tomb story of Jesus can still be a source of great mystery and awe. It can remind us that mystery and hope surround us but it is a beginning of a new story - not the realized eschatology that says the end of the world is near and so we'd better get our act together.

If it's possible the future Buddha of compassion and the Second Coming of a compassionate Christ are community rather than individuals, what religious faith might be able to bridge such a radical notion?

What religious faith might affirm again and again that an essential part of compassion is the inherent worth and dignity of every person and not just those with the right religious label?

What religious faith would show how to bind together the different strands of religious faiths into a web that shows the interdependence of all things and none left out?

What religious faith would be open minded and open hearted to see the truths in all religions and the love they share at their core?

We can honor the mystery of Easter in many ways – festival, feast, companionship, and celebrating spring, just to name a few.

If we want to take one step farther we can take the Resurrection story not as the beginning of End times but as the beginning of a new chapter of human compassion.

I'd like to close with two reminders of how we Unitarian Universalists can bridge that divide between religions with shared compassion. Last night I attended a Seder service at Kol Ami Congregation located at the Bear Creek United Methodist Church. I saw the pastor of the United Methodist group there and he offered to send me an email he'd sent to his congregation on Thursday. This, in part, is what Pastor David Orendorff said in that email:

"It is Holy Week. I said that at the Northshore Interfaith Religious Leaders meeting this week and [at his turn to check in] Alex Holt said, "Every week is holy week for us." Alex is the Unitarian/Buddhist pastor of the Unitarian Universalist congregation on the Woodinville-Duvall Road. He is right, of course, every week is holy week. In truth, all time and all space...is holy. There is no time that is not sacred time and no space that is not sacred space..."

The second example is the hard work that Alaine Davis, our marvelous leader of the Advocates for Social Justice Committee, and folks from the Northshore United Church Of Christ did this week. They discovered that on April 21 there were going to be two Earth Day events about Al Gore's movie "An Inconvenient Truth". People from both congregations met yesterday to plan a combined single event that will combine our work, our passion and our determination to minister to the

world. And what a joy that can be as other religions fight all too often claiming that a God is on their side or that they alone are right.

So let us celebrate Easter with our friends in joy.

Let us see the resurrection of Jesus as a rebirth of wider, deeper and more challenging compassion and love.

The tomb was empty but only because love was too large to be held against its will.

If the love from Jesus and the Buddha and others is strong enough to become our love, let us take it up and show its light to an all too frightened world.