

**Love and Death:
A Religious Naturalist Easter**

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Dr. Ursula Goodenough
April 9, 2023 – Easter Sunday

Sermon Reading:

1 Corinthians 15: 1- 56 (excerpts)

1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain.

3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even

found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ — whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

29 Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? 30 And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? 31 I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you — a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. 32 If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised,

"Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die."

33 Do not be deceived:

"Bad company ruins good morals."

34 Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

With what kind of body?

35 But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" 36 Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. 37 And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. 38 But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. 39 Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. 40 There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. 41 There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

42 So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. 47 The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

50 What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will

sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55 "Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

The Sermon:

Here we are at Easter time and at a crucial time in the history of this church, where we have announced the candidate to lead this church through its next several years, and I have my old friend Ursula Goodenough as my pulpit guest. Many UU ministers don't want to come to terms with the central claims of the Easter story, preferring to dwell on the signs of spring bursting forth all around us. That is OK for some, but both Unitarianism and Universalism arose out of liberal Christianity and I think we honor that connection by discussing it.

Ursula is best known as a cell biologist, but she is also a participant in a relatively new movement called Religious Naturalism, which instead of starting from ancient texts starts from the picture of the world told by science and tries to understand religious principles in such a world.

What I want to do this morning, is to lay out the claims for Jesus's physical resurrection in Christian scripture and then ask Ursula a series of questions designed to get out the differences of a religious naturalist approach to this most central issue on conventional religion. It was Ursula who suggested that she not see the questions in advance, but she is aided by the fact that she has been on a tour promoting the reissuance of her classic book *The Sacred*

Depths of Nature and is used to being interviewed by podcasters across the country.

So first the Christian perspective and then we'll move to the Religion Natrualist view.

Easter is a very Christian holiday based upon what many if not most Christians would say was the central point of Christianity: Jesus died to atone for the sins of humanity and was resurrected on the third day, and ascended into heaven. At many street demonstrations if you see a group wanting to identify themselves as Christians, they will often have a placard saying simply "John 3:16" that Bibilical verse states a central theological proposition, "for God So loved the World that he gave his own son, so that everyone who believed in him would not perish but have eternal life." This is part of the Gospel of John, which most scholars believe to be the last-written of the four gospels, composed sometime between the year 90 and 100 of the first century.

I am interested in how old the claim is that Jesus death was to atone for the sins of humanity. This is why I read excerpts from Chapter 15 of Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, for Paul was the first Christian writer. 1 Cortinthians was probably written between the years 53 and 55 of the common era.

Resurrection, let's face it, is a pretty tough sell. We all have experienced the death of animals and people we loved. We learn early on that death is a one-way street. As Hamlet said, "death is the undiscovered country from whose bourne no trveler returns." But here the Christian church offers eternal life, a permanent evasion of one's individual death, to anyone who has faith that Jesus was resurrected. In the early Christian church, such beliefs sustained the Christian martyrs as they faced the lions with smiles on their faces.

The emphasis on bodily resurrection and belief in bodily resurrection is one of the reasons I am no longer an Episcopalian, not because I can't say those creeds without crosing my fingers, but because what makes Jesus special for me is what he taught, not how or why he died.

If you are interested in the early defense of resurrection, I invite you to read the whole of chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, where St. Paul lays out the case for life after death.

A few weeks ago I gave a sermon for International Women's Day on the question of whether Eve in the Garden of Eden was, rather than the first sinner, the first scientist. I talked then about the punishments God imposed on the first human couple because of their disobedience, and the most permanent and consequential punishment was that they would be mortal, that is, that they and all their offspring would suffer death.

The way that the Garden of Eden story is told, there is room to argue that the original design of the world God was bringing into being is that humans and perhaps other animals, would be immortal. For one of the Garden's trees named in the story is the Tree of Life, after their transgression, Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden because God did not want to risk their eating the fruit of that tree and becoming immortal.

We liberals consider the Garden of Eden story negatively because of what Christian theology has made of it, for it was this story which formed the basis for the doctrine of Original Sin. The person who really developed this doctrine fully was Saint Augustine, but St. Paul was the first to hit upon it in his essay on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul focuses on Christ as the New Adam, and proclaims "as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." He had made a similar assertion in his earlier Epistle to the Romans.

The Garden of Eden story is an origin myth, and it is the origin myth of the Jewish People, but the Jews did not develop the idea that almost everyone descended from the first couple is going to Hell. It was Paul and Augustine and other Christian thinkers who did that. And this Christian idea is all wrapped up in a underlying hostility towards sex among many of these early Christian thinkers. Why should the disobedience of the first couple to God's command about the fruit condemn all later human generations to Hell. The answer seems to be because that dirty word sex is involved in the conception and birth of all humans after Adam and Eve.

So we have gone through the a quick overview of the Easter proposition set out by the orthodox branches of Christianity: anyone who believes that Jesus was resurrected on the third day may have eternal life. Now let us invite our religious naturalist to give an RN perspective on all this. What does Mother Nature say? Choose any one or more questions to answer. Feel free to revise any question which may be poorly worded.

1. What is emergence and how does it explain the behavior of certain systems that might otherwise suggest a supernatural origin?
2. How do the grey cells in our brains contain such marvelous worlds of imagination, creativity and insight?
3. What is the difference between the cells of the soma and those fo the germ line?
4. What is the purpose of human life from a biological point of view?
5. Has there ever been a living being which is immortal, which will not die in the normal course fo events?
6. Do the similarities of near death experiences of individual people – the tunnel, moving towards a white light – prove or suggest anything about whether there is life after death?
7. Do all animals and plants reproduce by sexual means? If not, what is the evolutionary difference between organisms which reproduce sexually and those that reproduce asexually?
8. So is it fair to say there is a tradeoff between death and multicellularity? An organism can be immortal but not evolve, any organism which evolves will experience death as a normal part of the life cycle.
9. So I have talked about the Easter arrangement offered by orthodox Christian thinkers: believe in Christ’s resurrection and you will have eternal life. And sex is the ultimate reason why this gloomy fate extends to the whole human race. Is it fair to say that Mother Nature offers us a slightly different proposition: if you want to be able to evolve as a species, you need to embrace multicellular reproduction, which is going to involve – sex?