

"An Open Question"

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First Church in Boston

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To many, celebrating Easter as Unitarian Universalists is complicated. Indeed, you may be feeling some ambivalence. Perhaps you've already felt uncomfortable by the opening hymn, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," or by the passage from Mark 16 in the Christian Bible that I just read. Or perhaps you're here today *because* it's Easter and you're wondering why some find this ancient, powerful story complicated at all?! As long-time member Darcey Fuguet reminded us in her testimonial a couple weeks ago, it was not long ago that First Church was a Christian-leaning Unitarian congregation.

Indeed, the statue of John Winthrop outside our front door demands that we do not forget that this congregation was founded by Puritan Christians. And yet, our understanding of religion has transformed over the centuries. We'll celebrate this change next Sunday when we host a special service to mark the 200th Anniversary of the founding of the American Unitarian Association. In that moment, emerging models of scientific inquiry as well as the progressive enthusiasms of a new nation shifted our 19th century ancestors' understanding of the Bible and Jesus. They boldly challenged centuries old interpretations of the Bible—rejecting the Trinitarian understanding of Jesus as one of three persons of God. Jesus remained a sacred teacher and revered guide but no longer held the status as belonging to *the* God-head. Rather, Jesus, like each of us, held the spark of the Divine within—albeit burning more brightly and clearly in him.

It's good to remember that from the beginning Christianity has had many different voices and traditions. And over the centuries, Christian traditions have continued to change, including the history of this church. As a Unitarian Universalist congregation today, we value religious pluralism, recognizing the many ways people understand the Divine and express their faith in something *more*. We try to make space for ongoing questions, for spiritual journeys of shifting understanding, and for respecting the roots which so often shape us and linger in us and in our institutions.

As some of you know, I grew up in West Michigan where a large number of Dutch immigrants in the latter half of the 19th century reshaped the local culture. Along with tulips and wooden shoes, they brought their Reformed faith. The (capital R) Reformed tradition is the arm of the Protestant Reformation shaped by Christian theologian John Calvin—the same strain that shaped Puritan theology. In other words, I basically grew up Puritan. I definitely grew up Calvinist. Growing up Calvinist meant a very high view of God's power and a very low view of human nature. In Calvinism, any hope for a rebirth out of the muck of a sin-stained soul relied solely on the grace of God. In such a view, Jesus, the perfect

son of God, was the necessary sacrificial lamb to pay a blood debt for human sin. Increasingly, this did not sit well with me. In time, my theology changed.

Rarely do I hear people say that they *converted* to Unitarian Universalism. More often, I hear stories of people describing their discovery of UUism as a kind of spiritual surprise. (And, of course, some of you have been Unitarian or Universalist for life!) In my own life, my Christianity became more and more liberal. I then became Unitarian Universalist to make even more space for a wider religious understanding. This journey took years of doubting, questioning, and seeking. While I never experienced a sudden *conversion*, along the way my religious understanding definitely transformed into something new.

Our first reading today describes an allegorical view of Easter by describing a “luminous egg” that at first appears to be the very definition of Divinity. But the egg shatters open and a phoenix bird emerges, flying away. The reading then describes two responses to this startling transformation. The first group remains focused on the broken shards of eggshell, trying to make new meaning from the fragments of their initial understanding of the Divine. However, the second group looks to the sky, stretches their own spiritual wings, and flies into the unknown. Faced with an uncertain journey, they nonetheless “joyfully sing” the words of Julian of Norwich, “All will be well and all manner of things will be well.”

When my own conservative Christian faith began to crack, I was terrified. My childhood faith had not only shaped my understanding of how to live and what it meant to be “good”, but it also defined my closest relationships with my parents, church friends, and much of the surrounding Dutch Reformed culture of West Michigan. Years later I would come to know that liberal Christianity *and* even Unitarian Universalism were present in my hometown of Grand Rapids, but as a struggling teenager any thought of questioning the faith in which I had been raised felt not only spiritually but also socially isolating. Perhaps you have experienced a similar fear of isolation in your own life journey as your faith changed, or your sexual identity, or your political leanings?

Such ruptures in our understanding of how the world works, of the God of our understanding, can be very scary. Sometimes we may look at the broken shards and lose heart. Like in the *Wizard of Oz*, when the curtain is pulled back to reveal that the great and mighty Oz is but a man pulling levers. Our faith collapses in the revelation.

For the followers of Jesus, I imagine this is how they felt watching the violent, public murder of their beloved leader. The state had won. The religious status quo had silenced the opposition. What hope for change is there now? The egg lies shattered.

Here is where the power of story matters most. What story do we tell now? Is the story of Jesus a tragedy? Is this a story about the death of an upstart, wannabe prophet to warn us

against dreaming of more? Is it a story cautioning us to accept and respect the status quo, the powers that can kill us and those we love?

Of course, this is not the story that is told of Jesus in the Christian tradition. Rather, the Christian Bible tells the story of Jesus' resurrection. The four gospels tell stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples, teaching them, encouraging them, and giving them reason to continue the work he began. Well, that is, most of the gospels say this. In fact, according to scholars, the earliest versions of the gospel of Mark stop where I did in this morning's second reading. Three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome go to Jesus' tomb only to find it empty. No body. Rather a young man tells them, "He is risen!" and directs them to tell the disciples of Jesus that he is "going ahead of you into Galilee."

And so, the women dutifully leave the tomb and do as they are told, right? They actually don't! Fear, not joy gripped them, and they fled, remaining silent.

Can you imagine if you had just spent hours binge-watching a Netflix series about a dramatic story of a renegade revolutionary teacher who inspired thousands only to have the last episode end like *this*? If he was just dead, you might wipe away a tear and consider the series to be tragic. Or, if it were the version of the story where Jesus has a number of post-death scenes ending with a triumphant return to heaven, you might feel pretty hopeful about the future of this new movement. But here in the book of Mark, there is no clear ending. There is an empty tomb, a message that Jesus is still out there somewhere, and three terrified women who do not dare to say a word. A cliffhanger.

Responding to Mark's abrupt ending, Episcopal priest, author, and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor explains that the original Greek text is even more confounding than the translations. In the Greek, the text ends mid-sentence reading, "*they were scared, you see, for . . .*" For what? Perhaps, as Taylor suggests, "*They were scared, you see, for as wrecked as they were by Jesus' death, they knew how to behave in the face of death.*" OR:

"They were scared you see, for even though they had caught Jesus' vision and decided to follow him, they were still stuck with this guilty relief they felt when they realized how many things they didn't have to believe, do, or hope anymore. At least with death you can stop trying so hard." (168, *Always a Guest*)

This abrupt ending leaves open the question of what next. As Taylor writes,

"By ending his gospel right there, right in the middle of a sentence, [Mark] also left us free to decide how its ends. What will we make of the resurrection? How will we practice it ourselves?" (169, *Always a Guest*)

When the story ends with an open question, the audience is left to answer the question for themselves: what now?

In texting with my friend Katherine Bain, a Christian Bible scholar, she points out, “if the women hadn’t told, how would we know?!” In other words, at some point they seem to have overcome their fear and told others what they had experienced at the tomb. And what we know from history is that the story and teachings of Jesus did not die. Rather, to this day billions identify as followers of Jesus and read of his story in the Christian Bible. Whatever you may or may not believe about Jesus’ bodily resurrection, it is clear that his teachings were resurrected and reborn in the mouths and actions of his followers. Jesus’ vision of loving one’s neighbor, extending compassion to one’s enemies, and practicing radical hospitality lived on in the faithful, if imperfect, living of generations of Christians to this day.

In this moment of war, political turmoil, economic disruption, bigoted use of power, and more, there are many open questions we face. Faced with much that is dismal, the Easter story is one of many stories of rebirth and renewal that teach us to have faith in new beginnings.

Another story that gives us hope is that of the phoenix bird rising. Sometimes the ashes or the shattered egg is not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of another one. Likewise, the story of First Church did not end when it became liberal Christian and then Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist. Rather, the story continued through transforming understandings of the Bible, the Christian tradition, and, then of religion more broadly. So today we tell the Easter story not only because it is part of our religious heritage, but also because it continues to challenge us to have faith and hope as we face the open questions of our own time.

We may be scared by what is happening in our nation, in the wider world. And we are not the first to be scared by an uncertain future. Today my hope comes from the courage of all those who have resist empires of violence, overcome their fears to speak out, and organize with others to offer mutual aid such as food, clothing, and shelter. My hope comes in *you* who have showed up here today seeking a larger story of Love that welcomes the stranger, embraces diverse understandings of the Divine, and celebrates the possibility of transformation and change, even in dismal times.

On this Easter morning, even if we feel afraid, may we face the open question as we consider our next actions to help build a more loving, just, and free world for all.

May it be so. Ashé. Amen.