

“Easter Sunday”

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For all of the world’s Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this season is one of reflection, of returning to the center of who they are and what their faith teaches, so that they may be reminded of what matters most. It’s a time of introspection, of taking a break from the ordinary rhythms of life, in order to recenter. They are called Abrahamic traditions because they all share the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament as part of their scripture and thus belong to a lineage that is said to have begun with Abraham.

It is unusual to have all three major holidays fall in biblical sequence. This past week was Passover, today is Easter, the culmination of the Christian Holy Week, and next Sunday is the beginning of Ramadan. All three are seasons for remembering the origin stories of each separate tradition, so that the followers of these traditions might live more fully into their beliefs and values.

And these three Abrahamic holidays are long. This is not a holy night, but a holy week, a holy month of preparation, weeks of fasting. Because remembering how to live after death crosses our door cannot be done in a day. Learning how to live after a revelation changes everything, sweeping out the dust of what once was so that we can begin again, that’s hard work.

Next week, we’re going to talk about the Exodus story and the importance of telling stories that remind us of our own resilience. But Easter and Passover are different stories, celebrated by different people, that have entirely different meanings.

So amidst this season of Abrahamic holidays, we gather together on this day to celebrate Easter. As Unitarian Universalists, our roots grow out of the Protestant tradition, beginning with the Puritans all those years ago. And yet, our tradition has ceased to be specifically Christian. Many among us hold Easter with some degree of ambiguity. The chocolate is nice, but the cross is confusing.

And in truth, there are many interpretations of Christian theology that are directly at odds with Universalism. We do not accept any notion that salvation is conditional. Not on baptism, not on belief, not on anything. The old joke is that the Unitarians believed they were too good for God to damn them, and the Universalists believed God was too good to damn them. Either way, grace is

boundless.

We also refuse theologies of redemptive suffering. Within Universalism there is no space for the idea that suffering saves us, that someone was killed as an offering to an angry God so that we could be loved. Universalism doesn't operate within a system of conditions.

Holding this ambiguity, what are we, Unitarian Universalists, some Christian, some atheist, some averse to any religious labels, what are we to make of Easter?

I will say that I didn't understand Easter until I went seminary with Christian classmates of all different denominations. Prior to that, Easter was confusing to me - it was either sickly sweet with chocolate bunnies and eggs and all things pastel, or it was this violent and gruesome story that I didn't understand.

But what I saw in my Christian classmates was this blossoming of hope and possibility and wonder when Easter came around. It was as if remembering this ancient story returned them to themselves.

See, Easter is about the hope that comes after devastation. It's about life entering into the empty and impossible places. It's about the journey into that place of wonder and the terror that comes with having to reenter the world once we've been overtaken by grief.

Because Easter comes last in the Christian story. And Easter as a holiday isn't about death, it isn't about suffering. That's Good Friday, the day that Jesus died on the cross. But that isn't the end of the story. After Good Friday comes Holy Saturday, the day in between. The waiting and the broken heart and the timelessness of grief. Easter comes last. It's only after processing the loss, giving time for grief in its fullness, it is only after this that new life bursts forth, like spring after the deepest cold of winter.

It takes time to find our way back to life. And without the struggle, the profundity of Easter's hope would be lost. A few weeks ago I preached about what Cornell West calls our "tragicomic commitment to hope." Because naive hope, toxic positivity hope that pretends suffering doesn't exist, that's cheap hope and it isn't helpful. The hope we hold dear as Unitarian Universalists is hope that can hold the horror and the wonder of life together and still believe that goodness is possible. That kind of hope doesn't have a candy coating. That kind of hope knows the cold stone of the cave as well as the joy of love and reunion.

Easter is a story with profound richness.

In considering the story of Jesus's crucifixion, I find Christian liberation theology to be the balm that redemptive suffering theology is not. Liberation theology teaches that no one is alone in their suffering because God has known suffering in God's own human body.

Liberation theology teaches that Jesus was the God made flesh and it was in his earthly experience of living and dying that God joined the people of the world in the reality of life. In this theology, Jesus wasn't punished for our failures, but rather meets us in those hurting places because he lived through them too. That is a theology that has met people in the extraordinary depths of suffering and helped them carry through.

And still, maybe this story, this remembering reminds you of a time when you were asked to be something other than yourself. A time when you belonged to a religious tradition that rejected the essence of who you are. Spiritual abuse is a horrible thing to bear. So maybe the most life-giving thing you can do today is have that chocolate bunny and notice the coming spring.

However you enter into this sanctuary on this day, I want you to know that you are enough, exactly as you are. If the story of Easter does not help you live more fully into your own hopeful human goodness, I pray that you find stories that do, stories that help you hold out hope for hope on the hardest of days. Stories that help you feel more fully yourself. Stories that abide with you through the empty night and help you hold faith in the coming dawn.

We are Unitarian Universalists. We hold it as true that grace and goodness exist in abundance, that there is no single path towards sacredness, no exclusion from life's struggles or life's sweetness.

So, on this Easter Sunday, I pray that you give space to your grief and your suffering when it comes. And I pray you never forget that a new day will dawn, that the stone can be rolled away and new life will come again.

Again these words by Elena Westbrook that began our service:

When all the world has gone dark and we cried out,
"Why have You forsaken me?"—even then,
there is a sunrise.

Even then, there is a resurrection, if we will climb the hill to look for it.

If we will roll away the stone
And recognize the different shapes that Hope can take
To walk among us in the returning light.

May it be so and Amen.