

## THE BIBLE TAKE 2: EASTER MEANINGS

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One of my ministerial colleagues has suggested—only half-jokingly—a simplified procedure for determining whether someone is fit to become a Unitarian Universalist minister: Ask them to **explain Easter so that a UU congregation will understand**. “From there on,” he says, “it is simply a matter of weeding out those applicants who run screaming from the room. Anyone who can condense centuries of religious writing, church and cultural tradition, contradictory interpretations—they’re in.” [Greg Ward, “The Easter Exam,” *Quest*, April 2009] Easter is indeed a complex and often confusing holiday, combining tragedy and triumph, despair and hope, Judeo-Christian and pagan themes, the cross and the Easter bunny. What I hope to accomplish this morning is to sift through some of the potential meanings that Easter offers, and to do it in such a way that **you** will not run screaming from the room.

Whatever else we might say about Easter, it is clearly the pivotal event in the formation of the Christian faith tradition. If the early followers of Jesus had not shared a belief in the Easter story, I am convinced there would be no Christian faith as we know it. For the time being, I will ask you to set aside the question of whether or not the Easter story is **factually true**. Instead, consider that a story can be **meaningful** regardless of its factual accuracy. For example, for millions of people the *Star Wars* stories are meaningful even though they are not factual. Each of the New Testament writers has their own angle and their own agenda in telling the Easter story.

However, the Gospel accounts of the events leading up to the **death** of Jesus are remarkably similar. Jesus and his followers travel south from the northern province of Galilee to Jerusalem in order to celebrate Passover. Jesus is welcomed as a popular hero in Jerusalem, thus provoking the anxiety of both the Roman authorities and Jewish religious leaders. The Roman authorities fear that Jesus might inspire a political insurrection among the thousands of resentful Jews who have gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate their liberation from Egypt centuries earlier. The Jewish authorities deeply resent Jesus because he has repeatedly defied the restrictions of Jewish law. Jesus seems to be aware of his vulnerability and celebrates a final Passover meal with his disciples before being taken into custody. The Jewish and Roman authorities agree that he must be eliminated, and he is put to death in the Roman method of a political insurrectionist.

The accounts in the New Testament about what happens after the death of Jesus differ widely and in some cases contradict one another. Marcus Borg, who has devoted much of his career to reintroducing Jesus to a contemporary audience, argues that the **factual** accuracy of the post-crucifixion stories is not the central issue. Instead, we should regard the Easter story itself as a **parable**. He writes, “Christians agree that the truthfulness of Jesus’ parables is not dependent upon whether they are historically factual. Nobody is concerned about whether there really was a Samaritan who came to the rescue of a man who had been robbed and beaten by bandits or whether there really was a father who lavishly welcomed home his prodigal son. . . . To worry or argue about the factual truth of a parable misses its point. **Its point is its meaning.**”

And ‘getting a parable’ is getting its meaning—and often there is more than one [meaning]. . . . Seeing the Easter stories as parables need not involve a denial of their factuality. The factual question is left open. . . . Believe whatever you want about whether the story happened this way—now let’s talk about what the story means.” [Marcus Borg, *Jesus*, p. 280]

Marcus Borg’s approach offers both advantages and disadvantages. We can avoid getting hung up on the question of factual truth—about belief or disbelief. Instead, we can focus on the question of meaning. However, by approaching Easter from the standpoint of its subjective meaning, we run the risk of turning Easter into a projection of our **wishes**—our deepest longings and our darkest fears. Throughout my series of monthly sermons about the Bible, I have emphasized that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures speaks to us in many different voices. The Easter story is many different stories, each with its own meaning. Let me now discuss some of these possible meanings, and speak candidly about which ones I find personally meaningful and which ones I don’t. Then during our discussion time, I will invite you to do the same.

Let me begin with popular interpretations of the meaning of Easter. Perhaps the most important is the assertion that Jesus’ resurrection demonstrates his divine origin and purpose. In his provocative book titled *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk writes: “By the time the documents of the New Testament were written, belief in the resurrection of the body had become widespread. . . . The motivation for entertaining the idea was that the human sense of justice demanded that somebody, presumably God or the gods, rectify the injustices perpetrated in this life. . . . The resurrection was a particularly congenial idea for the new Jesus movement. This movement had a savior figure who was not treated as the messiah should have been treated. Jesus’ fate seemed to match the fate of many, if not most, of Jesus’ early followers, who were poor peasants. There was a disjunction between their experience of life and their belief that God would vindicate them. Jesus’ resurrection represented a vindication for the persecuted and wrongfully executed man Jesus. It was compensation for his suffering. It also positioned Jesus as a cosmic judge who would return at the end of the age and preside over the resurrection of the righteous to eternal life and the resurrection of the wicked to eternal punishment.” [p. 275]

Stories of people being brought back to life were common at the time. For example, a contemporary of Jesus named Apollonius was reported to have revived a young woman who died suddenly just as she was about to be married. After Apollonius spoke a few words over her, “all of a sudden the young woman awoke from what looked like death.” [quoted in Robert W. Funk et al., *The Acts of Jesus*, p. 457] The author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote almost as a footnote that at the moment when Jesus died, “There was an earthquake, the rocks split and the graves opened, and many of God’s saints were raised from sleep; and coming out of their graves after his resurrection they entered the Holy City [of Jerusalem], where many saw them. [Matthew 27:51-53]

What imparts special significance to the death and resurrection of Jesus is its cosmic implication, as expressed in the doctrine of **atonement**. The doctrine of atonement asserts that **Christ died for our sins**. It forms the cornerstone of the Apostle Paul’s theology, which maintains that Jesus’ sacrificial death redeems humanity from the judgment of God for our sinfulness, and Jesus’ resurrection represents the final triumph of good over evil for all time to

come. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “If this is what we proclaim, that Christ was raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there be no resurrection, then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so is your faith.” [I Corinthians 15:12-15] I do not find this interpretation of the Easter story personally meaningful. The image of a god who requires human blood sacrifice is deeply offensive. As Marcus Borg says, “The notion that God’s only son came to this planet to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that God could not forgive us without that having happened, and that we are saved by believing this story, is simply incredible.” [Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 131]

So where does that leave us in our quest for the meaning of Easter? Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, argues that the traditional interpretations of Easter form a **barrier** between us and Jesus of Nazareth. In all of his writings about the significance of Jesus as the Christ, Paul scarcely mentions his life and teachings. The Apostles’ Creed moves directly from Jesus’ miraculous birth to his sacrificial death with no mention at all of his life and teachings. We are left to discover the alternative meanings of the Easter stories by other means, and for this we should be grateful for the efforts of the **Jesus Seminar** and their predecessors in the quest for the historical Jesus. Robert Funk says, “I am not primarily interested in affirmations about Jesus but in the truths that inspired and informed Jesus. . . . Jesus pointed to something he called God’s domain, something he did not create, something he did not control. I want to discover what Jesus saw, or heard, or sensed that was so enchanting, so mesmerizing, so challenging that it held Jesus in its spell.” [*Honest to Jesus*, pp. 304-05]

How does that vision generate another meaning of Easter? For me, it revolves around the metaphor of **transformation**. For his followers, that meant recovering from the horror and despair of his death to a new sense of mission and purpose. The small band of disciples who scattered like chickens after his crucifixion somehow reconstituted themselves as the nucleus of a faith tradition that would transform world history. The “passion of Christ” is **not** the story of his gruesome suffering and death as depicted so graphically by Mel Gibson’s movie. Rather, “His passion was the kingdom of God, what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers and systems of this world were not. It is the world that the prophets dreamed of—a world of distributive justice in which everybody has enough, in which war is no more, and in which nobody need be afraid. It is not simply a political dream, but God’s dream, a dream that can be realized only by our being grounded ever more deeply in the God whose heart is justice.” [Borg, *Jesus*, pp. 291-92] Let me close with a meditation by Jane Rzepka:

O Spirit of Life and Renewal,

We have wintered enough, mourned enough, oppressed ourselves enough.

Our souls are too long cold and buried, our dreams all but forgotten, our hopes unheard.

We are waiting to rise from the dead.

In this season of steady rebirth, we awaken to the power so abundant, so holy,  
that returns each year through earth and sky.

We will find our hearts again, and our good spirits.

We will love, and believe, and give and wonder, and feel again the eternal powers.

The flow of life moves ever onward through one faithful spring, and another,  
and now another.

May we be forever grateful. Alleluia. Amen.