



Becoming Alive Again

Easter Sunday

by Rev Michelle Scott-Huffman

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Earlier this week, Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick Gray, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association shared these words about the significance of this week within Christianity and Judaism, and in our culture as a whole. She wrote “This is a sacred week – Pesach week in Judaism and holy week in Christianity, happening at once. It is a week that includes Passover, the telling of the story of the Exodus, the messages of struggle, of loss, of freedom, justice and community. It is a week that includes Good Friday and Easter, the telling of the story of Jesus’s death and resurrection, messages of sacrifice, of loss, of justice, of freedom. Traditionally, these holy days are celebrated with gatherings of family traveling across distance to share a meal and renew the bonds of love and care. Yet it is still not safe to

gather in person across distance and with multiple households. This year has taught us so much about collective care, justice, interdependence and sacrifice to ensure the safety and well-being of our communities and loved ones, our neighbors and strangers.”

Our UUA President’s words remind us that these ancient stories, these myths of origin held dear by nearly a third of the world’s population, have been grounding people, offering comfort and hope in hard times for thousands of years. The Jewish Passover tradition nearly 3000 years old and the Christian story of the death and resurrection of Jesus now going on 2000 years, and these stories persist because they hold meaning and power. Today in Myanmar, opponents of military rule distributed Easter eggs inscribed with messages of protest and resistance. I can’t think of a more appropriate celebration of Easter, or Passover, for that matter, than retelling the stories of oppressed peoples being victims of state sanctioned violence and bondage and rising up to take their power back, even in the face of death. The power of these stories lies not in the promise of resurrection to some unknown afterlife, but in the resolute insistence on being fully alive today, here and now, even in the face of what seems like insurmountable circumstances.

Today we honor our fourth source in Unitarian Universalism, *“Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”* And I would invite you to reflect on the ways that you might be lifted up, comforted, and encouraged by stories of loss and renewal, bondage and freedom, and even death and new life.

In his article, Passover: Sharing the Bread of Affliction, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, *“Pesach*, the Jewish festival of freedom, is an extraordinary testimony to the power of ritual to keep ideals and identity alive across the centuries.

On *Pesach* we relive the story of our people, sitting together at home as an extended family as if we were back in the Egypt of the pharaohs, on the night before we are about to go free after long exile and harsh enslavement.”

He goes on to say, *“Pesach* also has hidden depths. I always used to be puzzled by two features of the evening. The first is the conflict between the two explanations of the unleavened bread. At the beginning of the story we call it *the bread of affliction*. Later on in the evening, though, we speak of it as *the bread of*

freedom they ate as they were leaving Egypt in such a hurry that they could not wait for the dough to rise. Which is it, I used to wonder: a symbol of oppression or liberty? Surely it could not be both. The other element I found strange was the invitation to others to join us in eating the bread of affliction. What kind of hospitality is that, I thought, to ask others to share our suffering?”

Rabbi Sacks described Pesach, or Passover, as the journey each of us is invited to take from slavery to freedom, tracing out the route of one of the most powerful stories ever to have fired the human imagination.

In this year that the Jewish celebration of Passover and the Christian observance of Holy Week are more in sync than in some years, due to differences in the calendars and calculations used to set the dates of those observances, it feels natural to think about the deep connections between the two. Jesus of Nazareth was, after all, an observant Jew who made his way with many others to Jerusalem for Passover. The meal that is commemorated on Maundy Thursday, known as the Last Supper, and commemorated weekly in many churches would likely have been a Passover Seder. At this meal, Jesus unknowingly instituted a Christian practice, a sacrament, when he shared bread and wine, and the truth that his understanding of the liberation story of Passover would not end well for him, but that he wouldn't turn back, because his faithfulness to the God of his understanding and the liberation of God's people called him to stand up and speak out. He knew that it would likely lead him to the cross of Rome, a tool of imperial domination where they made examples of those who would dare to challenge the oppressive systems, and around the tables he shared with his friends, remembering the faith of his ancestors, he talked about how they could not fear death, his or theirs, and how they could find new life in the midst of it. He knew that they would be devastated and paralyzed and he encouraged them to push through all of that and to become alive again, with renewed strength and resolve to work for justice and liberation for all people.

Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wyman asks us to imagine the disciples gathered together in a room somewhere after Jesus' crucifixion, maybe even hiding from the crowds for fear that they were next, even though they had all denied even knowing him. You can imagine that they were ashamed, discouraged, traumatized, anxious, afraid, and they had no idea what to do next. Granted, they had mostly misunderstood the ways that this prophet had come to save them, thinking that Jesus would take care of it all, would defeat the powers of

domination and destruction and return dignity and the power of self-determination to a battered community, and he was gone. Had they been the victims of a fraud, was anything that he said to them true, what were they to do next? And one of them says wait a minute, he's here, he's with us, his teachings are alive in us. And then another and another feel his presence like all of us have felt the presence of someone we have loved and needed after they depart this life. And in the belief that he was still somehow with them in ways they couldn't quite understand, but also couldn't question, they remembered their mission, they trusted themselves to live out what he taught them, and they emerged from that dark room ready to share what he had given them. Christ is risen. It was the embodied Jesus who died, but the spirit of a universal hope that couldn't be contained in one body that rose up in and around them. Christ is risen indeed.

We could get caught up debating the impossibility of literal bodily resurrection, but that would be a tragic waste of one of the most widely known and empowering stories ever told. A tragedy played out in Christian fundamentalism, in which the need to be right and prove something to be literally, factually true completely obliterates the deeper meaning that can't be proven, only experienced. It is the sad reality of what happens when a story developed and shared by and for an oppressed and marginalized people gets coopted by the richest and most powerful people in the world who begin to imagine themselves the oppressed ones. The distortion of the story for the purposes of exclusion and dominance, the exact opposite of its origin, has understandably turned many of us away. But today, I invite you to enter into the stories, and to find in them resilience, courage, freedom, and new life.

So to return to Rabbi Sacks' question "What kind of hospitality is it to ask others to share our suffering?" It is an invitation to continuing the story. In the Christian tradition, Jesus continued the story, entering into suffering himself for a cause that was greater than any one person. We are, in turn, invited both into the suffering and the liberation of those who came before us, so that we might also find liberation in our own suffering, and be led to work to diminish the suffering of others. We are invited into the journey from bondage to freedom and from death to new life.

We are invited to become alive again and this is an invitation that we must still need because too many of us are living in bondage to one thing or another and

not believing that we can be free, and others of us (or maybe the same ones of us) are giving all of our power to a fear of and obsession with death and failing to be alive while we have the chance. I sometimes refer to this tendency, which seems fairly universal, as going through our daily lives with one foot planted firmly in the grave. This time, springtime, Easter, Passover, and many other ways of marking seasons, invites us into new growth and new hope.

David Whyte writes, commenting on his own poem, *Easter Morning in Wales*, which we'll hear in our closing words today "Christian or not, the time between Good Friday and the dawn of Easter Sunday morning is the precise mythological and psychological representation of that breathless giving away all human beings feel, no matter their beliefs, when they must let go of what seems most precious, not knowing how or when it will return, in what form or in what voice. The return of our life - the feeling that we have been given back what is needed -- is strangely connected to the return of real longing, our conversation with the horizon and what will take us there, as a renewed physical reality."

The observance of both Easter and Passover provide an opportunity for us to remember sacred stories that have breathed life into weary people for thousands of years. As we feel the weight of our own weariness, may we be reminded that we, too, can become alive again and those old sacred stories may just help us get there. Because the reality is that the bread of affliction in our lives does often become the bread of freedom, and the signs of spring all around us, as well as the ways that our loved ones who have passed on continue to live in and through us, do indicate that the death of living things is always followed by new life.

May we, inspired by these stories walk today in liberation and new life, both for our own sake, and for the others in the quest for justice, peace, and reconciliation in our world. May we find that which gives us hope and sit with it for a while until it seeps into us through our pores. May we connect with the stories that have formed us, even as we live out new stories that will form those who come after us.

Blessed be and Amen.