

**April 4, 2021**

**Easter Sunday - the Messiah(s) Among Us**

**Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church**

Our Unitarian Universalist theology does not include the resurrection of Jesus; still, there can be room in our hearts for the way that holiness is acknowledged in our midst. Join us as we consider the possibilities.

### **OPENING WORDS**

It is said:

"A resurrection (a rising, a restoration, a renewed spirit) is always a mystery, though it happens every day." (Rev. David Ranken, adapted)

We fail, and yet we keep trying.

We lose, and yet we find again.

We fall down, and rise to see a new possibility.

Spring follows winter: the night moves on, and morning greets us.

We are here to witness the mystery and the wholeness of it all,  
this life of spirit and wonder,  
and to celebrate together.

This morning, as we acknowledge the Christian celebration of Easter, we'll share some perspectives on this observance from within our own tradition. Our Unitarian forebears were decisive about the personhood of Jesus, the human prophet whose three-year ministry changed the history of religion ever since: hence, we are Unitarians as opposed to Trinitarians. Still, his ministry was about the transformation of a life dedicated to unconditional love - we all have the capacity to be changed by that possibility.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares this thought: "Jesus heard the call of a spirit, and from that moment forward lived his life as if he mattered . . ."

### **Our First Story – a Lobster Tale**

*"Long ago, when the world was very new... there was a certain lobster who determined that Creation had made a mistake. So he set up an appointment to discuss the matter. "With all due respect," said the lobster, "I wish to complain about the way my shell was designed. You see, I just get used to one outer casing, when I've got to shed it for another; very inconvenient and rather a waste of time."*

*To which Creation replied, "I see. But do you realize that it is the giving up of one shell that allows you to grow into another?"*

*"But I like myself just the way I am," the lobster said.*

*“Very well. From now on, your shell will not change... and you may go about your business just as you are right now.”*

*“That’s very kind of you,” said the lobster, and left.*

*At first, the lobster was very content with wearing the same old shell. But as time passed, he found that his once light and comfortable shell was becoming quite heavy and tight. After a while, in fact, the shell became so cumbersome that the lobster couldn’t feel anything at all outside himself. As a result, he was constantly bumping into others. Finally, it got to the point where he could hardly breathe. So with great effort, he went back to see Creation.*

*“With all due respect,” the lobster sighed, “contrary to what you promised, my shell has not remained the same. It keeps shrinking!”*

*“Not at all. Your shell may have gotten a little thicker with age, but it has remained the same size. What’s happened is that you have changed inside, beneath your shell.” Creation continued: “You see, everything changes... continuously. No one remains the same. That’s the way I’ve designed things. And the wisest choice is to shed your old shell as you grow.”*

*“I see,” said the lobster, “but you must admit it is occasionally inconvenient and a bit uncomfortable.”*

Barbara Brown Taylor’s words expanded: “Jesus heard the call of a spirit, and from that moment forward lived his life as if he mattered, and as if every single other person mattered too.”

### **Our Second Story - The Stranger's Gift (adapted)**

*There once was a village – a quite wonderful village - that had fallen on hard times. It happens for lots of reasons: political turmoil, pandemics, justice issues for just a few. The villagers had once been relatively happy, at least - and their community had been full and busy.*

*But something had gone wrong in the village for a time. People had begun to be impatient with one another. Disagreements had broken out, and while people felt sad about this, they also weren’t quite sure what to do.*

*But it happened that one day a stranger came by (with a mask.) She approached the village like one with a mission, and very soon, she met lots of different villagers. She recognized the sad expression in their eyes, and they were soon engaged in conversation.*

*They mentioned their feelings of despair, and their fear that soon the community would just fall apart.*

*The visitor mentioned something she had observed.*

*“What’s that?” they asked.*

*“Well, the fact is that a Messiah is among you - the kind of being that brings love, and reminds you it’s the most important thing.”*

*The villagers could hardly believe what they were hearing, yet the stranger had an air of authority about her that was irrefutable.*

*The stranger left, but no one could forget what they had heard. “A Messiah is among us! Can you believe it? Somewhere, hidden among our number, a Messiah is here!”*

*Now, deep down, the villagers were a good folk who wanted things to be right in their community, and even though some of them didn’t necessarily believe in a divine savior, they understood the impact of a very special message of love. They were willing to suspend their disbelief and consider the thought that there just might be THAT kind of person living among them, OR - possibly - more, and it made them see things very differently. Could the baker be a Messiah, they wondered? Or the candlestick maker? Could anyone or everyone grow into the capacity to love in a really big, big way?*

*And the strange thing was that, after the stranger’s visit, things were never the same again. People remembered to treat each other with reverence. They lived like people who had a common purpose, and who were seeking something very precious together, never quite knowing whether the treasure was actually right in front of them. They learned to see the holy in each, as though each were the most holy.*

*As it turns out, it was the Stranger’s Gift.*

*Before long, visitors began to come to the village, just to be part of the atmosphere of reverence and joy that prevailed there.*

*The stranger never came back. She didn’t need to.*

**OFFERTORY**            The 23rd Psalm - TPC Choir

**HOMILY**            the Rev. Anne Bancroft

The 23rd Psalm, as many of you know, is the poem from the Book of Psalms often used at memorial services for a particular reason: this Psalm is about being reassured that something larger than ourselves is always available to us, even in the scary times, even the times of loss. This year has certainly been one of those times - a year of those times and we need that reassurance, don’t we?

It’s not a psalm often referenced in Christian churches on Easter Sunday, where the resurrection is the focal point; but I don’t know why not because this psalm is about being in right relationship with the world, which is - at the end of the day - what Jesus was all about.

Theologian Marcus Borg suggests, “When we emphasize (Jesus’) divinity at the expense of his humanity, we lose track of the utterly remarkable human being he was,” . . . the someone whose living said look in your heart for the willingness to grow ever more open, ever more in awe, ever more grateful; the someone who said shed the skin that constrains that willingness; and, then look amongst yourselves for the power to care for each other, every other, no matter their title or role or position, as though each might be the epitome of love.

That capacity, that bigness, that holiness, is our guide - our shepherd, if you will. We want for nothing when we know the truth of our capacity to love and be loved because really, really, that is all that matters in this living. The rest is dress-up. It’s nice dress-up sometimes, but it’s just dress-up.

Even when we walk in the shadow of darkness, the creativity that is inspired by love is there. That’s what Easter tells us, and - of course - that we do not walk alone. We are all in this together. Everyone walks in darkness sometimes and we are here to carry each other through, and to look for and see the healing love that is all around us but for our recognizing it. That is resurrection. A Wendell Berry suggests, “Be joyful though you have considered all the facts . . . Practice resurrection.”

Love sets a table for us, even when we are surrounded by anger and fear. A greater love - a greater creativity, a greater capacity for imagination - blesses us, each and every one of us, and anoints us with that constant possibility.

Surely we can dwell in that house forever.

Gordon Kaufman - my “good friend” and theologian who shares with us the idea of God being a verb, an event, a Creative moment in our lives - offers that “Jesus is . . . the principal and most dramatic symbol humans have of a truly radical ethic of caring, of giving ourselves to others in love. Indeed, it is hard to see how this radical giving of our lives for and to others could have become such a powerful idea in our human world without the story of Jesus . . . As the supernaturalism fades, its radical ethical demands come into sharper focus.”

Kaufman maintains, and I think he’s right, that over these last 2000 years - somewhat less, actually since it took hundreds for the story to get started and then solidified, we have idolized the Jesus story, AND that too often we look back into history for how the story will impact our lives instead of imagining the story forward, applying it to who we can be and want to be, appreciating the CREATIVITY that is offered within it. Ours is a living faith, right? We are all about finding new ways to bring meaning forward into our living.

Kaufman suggests that “Creativity inspired by the radical Jesus should be healing, redemptive, reconciling in our suffering world. The self-giving agape-love that Jesus advocated and exemplified during his life will inspire us, we can hope, to find ways that will help create a more truly humane world for the future.”

That is our good news today - that as we are willing, we can move through any change, any darkness - even one as long and relentless as this year's has been - and grow into a new way of being and being together and being among, even - for awhile longer - from a distance. That is what Easter can remind us of and inspire us to.

May it be so - Alleluia!

### **BENEDICTION**

Being the Resurrection, adapted

By Victoria Weinstein

*The stone has got to be rolled back from the tomb again and again every year.  
Roll up your sleeves.*

*It is our work now.*

*Because if by some miracle (and why not a miracle?)*

*He did . . .*

*come riding into town*

*He could take a look around and say*

*"This is what I meant!"*

*And we could say*

*it took us a long time...*

*but we finally figured it out.*

Oh, let us live to make it so.

Go in peace, great love, and great joy - that it may be for others as it may be for you.