

“Easter for UUs”
by Rev. Meghan Cefalu
April 12, 2009 at UUCM

Modern Unitarian Universalists tend to place a great deal of importance on the use of reason in our theological and philosophical thinking. It is true that we are a motley bunch. This room, and every UU meeting space, is comprised of a broad spectrum of ideas about issues of ultimacy: why we are here; what happens when we die; is there some purpose to Life or is it simply a random coincidence; what is it that transcends us?

No matter the religion of our upbringing or the theological perspective that fit us when we woke up this morning, it is safe to say we have been drawn to this particular religious movement, at least in part, because it allows us - it encourages us - to use our rational minds to question our assumptions and forge our own religious, spiritual and philosophical beliefs. And that is truly unique.

It was certainly not the case in the United Methodist church of my childhood.

One Easter when I was a teenager I remember helping my mom prepare dinner for our gathered extended family. She and I were talking about the church service that morning with the array of lilies on the altar, the scriptural telling of Jesus’ resurrection and the choir singing “Hosanna in the Highest”. I remember she turned to me and said, “You know, I just don’t believe all that resurrection stuff. And what does it mean that he shed his blood for my sins?”

It wasn’t exactly shocking to me. But it *was* a moment that stands out in my memory. It didn’t change anything about the way my family celebrated Easter in the following years. But it *was* the moment when I first remember being aware of how some religious beliefs and customs ask us to dissociate from our rationality; we have to let our minds go fuzzy around the edges about some of the details that just don’t make sense in this age in order to continue to participate in them.

Those of us gathered here at the UU Community of the Mountains on Easter Sunday are people who prefer to live in integrity, to bring our whole selves to our religious understandings.

As a society we are clearly in a confused place about Easter. The other day I was looking for some clipart of Easter images on the internet and discovered a schizophrenic array of illustrations. There are cute little bunnies, baskets filled with candy, pretty potted lilies, fuzzy yellow chicks, and a blood-streaked man carrying a cross to his brutal execution.

How do we make any sense of this holiday? One option is to stay safely on the “bunny and eggs” trail. We could explore the life-affirming aspects of the pre-Christian pagan traditions, with their emphasis on fertility and the cycle of rebirth. And then watch as things get rather bizarre when those myths and traditions were subsumed by and combined with the Christian death and resurrection imagery.

Or we could choose to take, what is in my opinion, a slightly more challenging and certainly more controversial path and make the effort to understand the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus from the perspective of his earliest followers. I don't mean just read the Bible and regurgitate all the things that have been said on Easter Sunday in Christian churches for hundreds of years. What I mean is use contemporary biblical scholarship and really try to get inside the minds of these early writers of the gospels. If we could begin to understand the story in that context we just might be able to glean something important for ourselves.

There is a temptation among many UUs to declare our congregations free of Christianity. As if Christianity is something we just needed to outgrow and now we can move on. I think we do ourselves a disservice when we forget or deny that for the first three hundred years of their existence both Unitarianism and Universalism were Christian denominations, like it is some embarrassing family secret. Christianity is our root. And just as it would be unwise to cut a tree off from its roots, though it grows ever upward, extending its branches in many directions, I think it would also be unwise to sever our religious movement entirely from its origins.

Instead, I suggest that a more mature approach is to apply our rationality and our commitment to reason when considering Christian stories and traditions. Of course the miracles, the bodily resurrection, the conflicting accounts in the different gospels do not make sense to our modern minds. I am asking us to be willing to look beyond the either/or thinking – the temptation to say, “This doesn't make sense; therefore it is not good, useful or true.”

There is another way to understand the story of Easter. This way uses reason and rationality. It does not ask us to believe in magic or to let our minds go a little fuzzy around the edges. My hope is that we can find something in it that is meaningful to us.

In preparation for today's sermon I studied some of the writing of the radical Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. He is a leading scholar and spokesperson for liberal Christianity. Spong's body of work, especially the book “Jesus for the Non-Religious” has helped me to understand the biblical telling of the crucifixion of Jesus and the empty tomb and the visions of the risen Christ in a new way. It is important to realize that there are a couple of different things going on here behind the scenes influencing the gospel writers.

First, it helps to think of the accounts not as literal stories but as liturgical ones; stories influenced by the existing scriptures and traditions, stories that were intended to interpret and express the experience of God his followers felt in Jesus.

Bishop Spong says that, “Miracles...are the expression, not of supernaturalism, but of the inadequacy of human language to be a vehicle for making rational sense out of an ultimate God experience.”¹

When I read that quote to my husband he asked, “What is the difference between a supernatural experience and a God experience”. I think of it this way: that being in the presence of Jesus was such a profound experience, it was like being in the presence of intense love. I think of modern accounts of the way various Hindu and Buddhist masters seem to carry with them a certain intensity, almost a luminosity, and being in their presence brings people an overwhelming sense of calm and peace.

This feeling was so difficult to put into words that his disciples said things like, “He is so filled with the spirit that he could make the blind to see, and raise the dead”, “He is so inspiring that wherever he goes and speaks it is as if the food multiplies itself to feed the multitudes”.

It is not that these supernatural things actually happened, but that they were attempts at expressing, as Spong puts it, the “God experience” that people had with Jesus.

The **second** thing to realize is that the gospel writers crafted these stories to help them make sense of Jesus’ execution. They had to find or create some meaning in his death because the chilling reality of his brutal murder countered everything they experienced about God through his life.

Spong writes,

“The earliest Christians, all of whom were Jews seeking to interpret the power they found in the life of Jesus, feverishly explored the sacred writings of their people, searching for a way not only to understand what the sources of his power were, but also, and more importantly, to make sense out of the fact that the one in whom they believed they had experienced the meaning of God had actually been executed on a cross.

As they processed this internal debate, they found consolation and affirmation in their sacred writings, so that these writings began to shape their memory of Jesus. They fitted his life into this emerging scriptural portrait. Far from Jesus fulfilling the expectations of the people of Israel for a messiah who was to come in some programmed way, they simply told the story of Jesus so that he fitted into the scriptural pattern.”²

When we look carefully it becomes obvious that there are elements of the crucifixion and resurrection that appear to have been shaped from some of the existing scriptural stories. When the early Christians looked to their own sacred writings to better understand the life of Jesus and make sense of his death they the ancient texts begin to affect how they remember him.

¹ John Shelby Spong. “Jesus for the Non-Religious” HarperOne, 2007. Page 69.

² Ibid. Page 114.

For example, there are quite a few parallels between the crucifixion story and the exodus story that is told at Passover. Remember the story of Moses leading the people out of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea happened five thousand years before Jesus was born in Nazareth.

First, consider that both the crucifixion and the exodus were considered founding moments for these two communities of faith, the Christians and the Jews.

Both were expressions of delivery from bondage; the exodus from the bondage of slavery in Egypt and the crucifixion from the bondage of sin.

Both stories are about conquering death. In the exodus it is the symbolic drowning in the Red Sea followed by God's divine rescue. In the crucifixion the death on the cross is transformed by the promise of new life and resurrection.

And both stories focus on the death of one who was called the "lamb of God". In the exodus it is the blood of the young, unblemished lamb from the Jew's flocks. In the passion story it is the young, unblemished man who was called the "lamb of God" by John the Baptist. In both stories the blood of the liturgical lamb was the symbol that broke the power of death.

If we look at the Easter story alongside the ancient Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur we again find many similarities. Yom Kippur is the liturgical expression of a deep longing for wholeness, completion and at-one-ment. In the Jewish tradition one day each year was set aside as the Day of Atonement. On that day rituals were performed that symbolically overcame the alienation from God, restoring the people to wholeness.

To prepare for this day the people gathered and selected two animals from their flocks; usually a lamb and a goat. The animals had to be young, healthy and male without any blemishes, scars or broken bones. The idea was that it was humanity's sinfulness that kept them separate from God. In the act of sacrificing a perfect, sinless animal the people could symbolically be reconciled with God – at least for that one day.

After the lamb was sacrificed the high priest would grab the horns of the goat and begin saying rhythmic prayers of penitence, recounting and confessing all the sins of the people. The sins were symbolically pictured as rising out of the people and landing upon the head and back of the goat. The goat became the bearer of sins of all the people and the people were then cleansed and innocent. The goat was then banished into the wilderness leaving the people pure and free of sin. This is how we came by the term "scapegoat".

Now from that perspective, let us look again at the passion story. All four gospel writers mention a man named Barabbas who was slated to be crucified along with Jesus. In Hebrew the prefix *bar*

means “son” and Abba was the name for God that Jesus used most often. So we have two young men named the “son of God” up for execution.

The story also says that the tradition at Passover was to release one of the criminals. When Pilate asked the gathered crowd which one he should release the people demanded Jesus’ death crying out “crucify him”. So Barabbas was released. Just like in the Yom Kippur tradition where there are two animals, one that is sacrificed, the “lamb of God”, and one that is set free, the scapegoat.

The Gospel writers were clearly using the liturgy of Yom Kippur to shape the story of the crucifixion. The early Christians resonated deeply with this ancient Jewish understanding of atonement and so it became the means of interpreting Jesus’ otherwise incomprehensible death.

Here’s my take on what seems to have happened. You’ve got this guy, Jesus, who seems to have been able to make people feel deeply loved and close to God. He teaches all kinds of radical and controversial stuff about how people are all equal, and that we should love our enemies and give the clothes off our backs to help the poor.

His teachings were challenging, they were not easy for many people to get. But those who did understand him, his closest followers, were determined to spread his message. *And* they were afraid that his words alone would not be enough to convince people. So they took these stories that people already knew, the stories that had power in the society, like the exodus and Yom Kippur, and they fit Jesus into them. They likened him to Moses and said he brought a new covenant. They said he was the sacrificial lamb that freed people from the sins that separated them from God.

This idea of wrapping a person in a powerful cultural myth in order to boost their status is not really that unusual. We are sold mythologies all the time. Take George Bush Jr. as an example. He was an Ivy League graduate from a family of well-to-do politicians and yet he somehow was able to cloak himself in this image of a cowboy. It could not have been farther from the truth. But like it or not the cowboy figure of strength and rigid self-reliance is a cultural myth that resonates with Americans. By grafting himself onto the cowboy myth it made him seem somehow more competent and powerful.

Bishop Spong asks, "What was there about Jesus of Nazareth that caused people to liken him to the creatures in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, whose roles were to bring the people and God together, to overcome that human sense of alienation, separation, guilt and anxiety that mark all human life? What was there about Jesus that caused people to believe that in him oneness with the source of life itself was possible, that guilt and alienation do not have to be our daily bread?"³

³ Ibid. Page 169.

I keep coming back to those more contemporary experiences that people have shared with me about sitting in a room with the Dalai Lama or with the Hindu spiritual leader called Amma. Friends have told me that there is a sense of love and acceptance and calm that seems to almost radiate off of these masters. In their presence people experience joy and deep inner peace. I don't think of it as supernatural, it is like they are just people who are for some reason more spiritually advanced, almost like they vibrate at a higher frequency than the rest of us do. I don't understand it from a scientific point of view, but it seems to be common enough to be considered part of the natural world.

So now when you consider the Easter story I hope you feel you can bring your whole self, including your rational mind and your reason. There is no need to go fuzzy around the edges. We gain so much by looking at the stories in their context. In that way we can begin to understand and appreciate that there was something about the Jesus experience that opened people's eyes to what it meant to be at one with God, at one with each other, and at one within themselves.

In that vein, I wish you all a very happy Easter.

Amen