

Easter Morning in Unitarian Universalism
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What we have in Unitarian Universalist churches, with respect to our relationship to Jesus, is a complicated situation to explain. As a result, no time is more difficult to deal with than the one holiday that really rests on the crux of the matter—Easter morning. We have a lot of different Christologies—different things people believe about Jesus. Today I want to share a bit of what being a liberal Christian means. And I use the term “liberal Christianity” because that’s what Unitarianism and Universalism were, and the tradition in which we continue to stand. “Liberal” here has a very different meaning than it does in politics. You can be a political conservative in a liberal faith. So let me explain. This is a rather heady sermon on a rather heart-felt holiday, but I hope that it will leave people feeling more grounded in our tradition as we explore our historical roots and our contemporary expressions of faith.

As a merger of two liberal religious traditions, we have Unitarian Christians and Universalist Christians, to start with. Unitarian Christianity is perhaps the most difficult to understand. Unitarian Christians see themselves as Christians in that the Bible and Jesus are their most important religious sources, yet they consider that the Bible, which tells a true story for them, tells the story of a fully human Jesus, not Jesus the son of God. And they could be Universalists or they could believe in Hell, either way. Universalism, the no-Hell religion, could have a fairly traditional Trinitarian Christology, or a Unitarian Christology. Either way, they, too, were part of liberal Christianity, which we will explore further. And, of course, both of those traditions would include people who considered themselves non-Christians. And then we have newer liberal Christians who’ve joined our faith for other reasons post-merger who may be neither Unitarian nor Universalist. I’m going to set aside the question of non-Christians for right now. We know and understand and embrace the fact that many in our movement do not call themselves Christian. That’s an important part of who we are. For them, Easter morning may be about cultural expressions of Easter, like eggs and bunnies, or the Pagan roots of Easter, with the goddess Eostre, or the beginnings of spring and the Equinox, or certainly about Passover. And on previous Easters I’ve preached on all these themes, and I will again. It’s an important part of who we are as a movement that we include the Pagan tradition, the Humanist tradition, the Jewish tradition, and other religious traditions as part of our living and growing tradition. But I think it’s important to understand what this liberal Christian tradition we’ve inherited is, and so I want to focus on this on this Easter morning. There are those in our movement who don’t understand why we include the non-Christian, it’s true, and that also needs to be addressed, but there are also those who don’t understand why we include Christians in our tradition, that this also needs to be addressed. And I think a large part of the lack of understanding why we include Christianity in this living tradition comes from the lack of ability to distinguish what makes the liberal Christian traditions that we include differ from some other branches of Christianity. And I’m talking beyond the obvious of the fact that Universalists don’t believe in Hell or Unitarians don’t believe in the trinity. You can be both unitarian and universalist and yet not be connected and a part of the liberal Christian tradition that both denominations were part of before they merged into Unitarian Universalism. This is a complicated point to understand, so it’s what I want to focus on this morning. Here’s a quote from John B. Cobb, Jr., from *Liberal Christianity at the Crossroads*, written in 1973 to get us started. He said:

I am convinced that liberal Christianity has little future unless it can articulate its stance to itself in such a way as to differentiate itself from the activist, mystical, and psychological movements toward which it gravitates from time to time. Theologically it cannot exist as a watered-down form of conservative Christianity. If we liberal Christians are unable to state the authentic Christian gospel meaningfully and relevantly in our own terms, there is little value in our survival. Unless it is the Christian gospel that makes us liberal, and not simply an erosion of faith, we are not in any serious sense liberal Christians.ⁱ

I think that gives us a little nugget to start with. We often look at UU Christians as if they're simply watered-down versions of Christians elsewhere. And sometimes this may be the case, but this is not the Christianity we've inherited, the liberal Christian tradition. And it is that liberal Christian tradition that we must understand.

So what does it mean to be a liberal Christian this Easter morning? My answer is that Easter is not the central point of Christianity for liberal Christians. Looking at historic professions of faith from our history, one finds statements like the Winchester Profession in 1803. It said:

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.ⁱⁱ

Nothing in this makes a statement about Jesus' death and resurrection. On one hand, it might be because that was taken for granted, or because that didn't differ from other churches' doctrines. But what they do say is something more—that Christians should practice good works. That was central enough to their faith in 1803 that they put it in the Winchester Profession. And it's what makes us different from fundamentalist, conservative Christians today, who place the emphasis on only belief. We realized long ago that belief alone was not the important thing. John Murray recognized it when he became a Universalist—God's grace is for everybody, even the unbeliever.

The Washington Declaration of 1935 stated:

The bond of fellowship in this Convention (church) shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to

co-operate in establishing the kingdom for which he lived and died.

To that end, we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of good-will and sacrificial spirit to overcome evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

It's there again—the importance of acts of goodwill here on earth. Unitarian Universalist historian Conrad Wright explains further:

Between (1735 and 1805), two generations of religious liberals, commonly called Arminians, rejected traditional Calvinistic patterns of thought and developed a new set of basic assumptions about human nature and human destiny.

The doctrinal position of the liberals combined three tendencies which may be logically distinguished: Arminianism, supernatural rationalism, and anti-Trinitarianism.^{iv}

Wright goes on to define these terms. Anti-trinitarianism is Unitarianism, that God is one. Supernatural rationalism, he says, “asserted that the unassisted reason can establish the essentials of natural religion: the existence of God, the obligations of morality, and a divine order of rewards and punishments.” In other words, here is where we see another hallmark of liberal religion: the assertion of the importance of reason in religion.

Lastly, Arminianism, the third assumption of religious liberals, is the belief that people are not inherently evil, that we can choose to do good or bad in this life. I would argue that this Arminianism is perhaps our most controversial heresy, although we've dropped it out of our name. This puts us in direct disagreement with conservative Christianity which sees people as inherently evil and needing a punishing God. Conservative Christianity needs the central message of Christianity to be about Christ on the cross—that God needed a blood atonement for the sins of mankind, and therefore had to slaughter his son to redeem us.

Liberal Christianity doesn't see that as the message of the Bible at all. It sees the important message of the Bible as a message of love, of equality, of giving and caring. Recently my colleague Fred Hammond asked, “What if the crucifixion and resurrection is not the cornerstone of the Christian narrative?” and followed upon that by asking, “What if his torturous death on the cross was an attempt to kill an idea, akin to Gandhi's assassination, or Martin Luther King's?”^v His answer was, “The message that Jesus taught during his life was that God is love. Love one another. . . Be generous in all things; if someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt as well. If they ask you to walk a mile, walk two. Love your enemies.”^{vi} Oh, have we come back to that again? To love? Is this really what it's all about? Love, love, love? God is Love, the greatest of these is Love, all you need is Love? Why, yes, we have; it is. Love.

The problem we have with Easter in Unitarian Universalist churches is that for the two-thirds or so who don't call themselves Christian, Easter isn't such a meaningful holiday because they don't believe in the resurrection, and for a good percentage of the one-third or so who do call themselves Christian, only some of whom believe in the resurrection, the resurrection is by

far not the most significant thing about Jesus. We aren't redeemed by the cross. We're saved by Love.

All my life in Unitarian Universalist churches I've heard the message of resurrection on Easter—we twist it and turn it and talk about the metaphor—the resurrection of our spirits after hardship, the resurrection of the earth after winter, the resurrections big and small we experience in our life. It's a useful, important metaphor. It's been a sustaining metaphor for centuries for numerous people. And it's often a meaningful thing to take this time of year and talk about that metaphor, as I often do.

But if we want to talk about the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth on this day, if we want to use this day to talk about what makes Christianity important and relevant to our world, the answer is not resurrection. The answer is love. The answer is justice. The answer is the message that Jesus taught over and over again about how to treat your neighbors, and how to turn the other cheek, and how the meek shall inherit the earth and how the greatest of these is love. If I were to list the ten most important things about Jesus' life, resurrection wouldn't make the list. Liberal Christianity is about how this one amazing man taught us how to live on earth, and how to talk to God, how to feel the spirit in our lives and call it family, Father.

So I invite you to go ahead and enjoy the spring and think about the resurrections in your lives, but think, too, about what living in this liberal tradition means—that we feel the spirit and we engage in reason, and we do the work of justice. This is what we teach our children every week—that we are the church of the open mind, the caring heart and the loving hands. It's true every week, every day. It's true on Easter. And may this liberal tradition continue to grow strong in our hearts as we engage in the world.

May it be so.

ⁱ <http://www.uuchristian.org/Articles/LiberalChristianity.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.uuchristian.org/Articles/Avowals.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} <http://www.uuchristian.org/Articles/LiberalChristianity.html>

^v <http://serenityhome.wordpress.com/2011/04/23/reframing-christianity/>

^{vi} *ibid.*