

“Just Who Was Resurrected?”

April 04, 2010

The Reading

The reading is by the Reverend Burton Carley, serving our Unitarian Universalist church in Memphis, Tennessee, since 1983. It is a meditation published in the March/April 2003 issue of the *UUWorld*, the magazine of our Unitarian Universalist Association.

Here begins the reading.

From the end a new beginning. From a painful, terrible end, a new beginning. The beginning was unimaginable, unprepared for, unrehearsed; something more born than made. Out of the end of dreams put to death, hopes mocked, and expectations vanquished, new dreams and hopes and expectations came to life.

Oh, there was wild confusion in between these two great events, the grief and the rebirth. The space separating the two was plowed by sharp instruments of doubt, failure, incrimination, and foolishness. There was the endless playing of events to discover where it all went wrong, the long days of listless activity, and the longer nights of fitful sleep when there were no distractions from the pain of separation. The fallow time, the emptiness of spent, before the surprise of recognition.

Here ends the reading.

“Just Who Was Resurrected?”

by

The Reverend William Haney

April 04, 2010

The Unitarian Universalist Church

Columbia, Missouri

There probably isn't a more difficult aspect of a religious perspective to understand than the Christian resurrection story. For many Unitarian Universalists there is the difficulty compounded by the many features of our theological and ethical diversity. In honoring that diversity, one must step back first and get a handle on what it means to be a Christian. That in itself is difficult, since there are so many spins on that tradition: witness the recent arrests of the apocalyptic warriors as one extreme. There are those who see no problem with violence against our government; or murdering a physician who performs legal abortions; or spread hate toward all gays: all of this in the name of the Prince of Peace. Those ironies, even perhaps heresies, are offset by many who adhere to the teachings of the tradition in one way or another. However, given the question of the resurrection, I doubt there would be unanimity in the understanding of it among Christians. It will vary from the strict literal interpretation to a metaphorical understanding. The question for Unitarian Universalists is whether the story has merit to delve into the symbolism or not. Some would argue to dismiss the story altogether as mere superstition. I find the story of significance that I am compelled to try my hand at an understanding. This does not mean I am a Christian in the doctrinal sense. Nor do I count myself as a Christian in the Unitarian Universalist sense, either. I am a member of the UU Christian Fellowship for the purpose of receiving the newsletters. I find value in my colleague's UU Christian theology, just as I find value in my Humanist and Nature Centered colleague's ethics and spirituality. These are the treasures I receive within the diversity of our Free Church tradition.

Easter is tied to the lunar calendar that establishes the Jewish celebration of Passover. Easter is the founding event for the Christian tradition, just as Passover celebrates the Exodus is the founding event for the Jews. Each event is mixed with mystery, with legend, with symbols and with abiding astonishment. In a sense, both celebrate a release from bondage, a new being in freedom. One cannot deny that is something to celebrate. For the Jews, the Exodus was the escape from slavery in Egypt. In that escape, there was a saving event at the edge of a body of water, and a commanding event at the base of a mountain. We don't know where and when those events actually took place. That is all that can be said, since the actual moments are lost to history and consumed by legend. The same can be said for the resurrection.

The idea of resurrection was not unusual in the days of Jesus. The Pharisees believed all would be bodily resurrected at the arrival of the messianic age, what Jesus called the Reign of God. What was unusual was to say that a particular person was resurrected – and before the arrival of the Messiah, at that. With the influence of Paul of Tarsus, it was believed Jesus would return as the Messiah, as the Christ. The return would usher in the Reign of God. There are those Christians who still, to this day, await the return of Jesus, a holding pattern described by the poet W. H. Auden as “the Time Being.” Of course, there are those who can't wait. We have predictions of all sorts as to when the end will come. We also see those who believe the end must be forced by some widespread violence, either by nature, AKA God, or by persons of ill will. Without a doubt, there is a risk in this resurrection thing. However,

I doubt that many devout Christians really believe in those apocalyptic visions. Most would make the resurrection as a personal and individual event, such as going to heaven after death. Regardless of all of these variations on resurrection, I still find the metaphor of human significance.

The story of the resurrection has six spins – that of Paul’s, the earliest recorded; that of the author of the Gospel of Mark, the next earliest; then the story according to the author of Matthew; followed by that of the author of Luke; and the one by the author of John; and finally by the author of the Book of Revelation at the end of the 1st-century. While a couple are similar, none are consistent as to details. In its simplest form, the man Jesus died by crucifixion, he was buried in a borrowed tomb, on the third day the tomb was empty and Jesus was later seen by his disciples at various places and times. My take on this story is not about Jesus, but about those who were left behind. I know nothing of the factual or historical circumstances of the death of Jesus: since the accounts differ, there is little reliability in them. I do know of the human factual and historical circumstances of those who have lost a loved one. I can imagine the grief and sudden fear in the hearts of the disciples. The one whom they loved, and who loved them, was lost – forever. Or, is that necessarily the case?

Resurrection for the disciples was the presence of their teacher among them even after his death. The texts say they “saw” him. Do we need to take that literally? I think not. To this day, I can still conjure the image of my deceased grandmother of nearly 60 years ago. I can “see” her; I can feel her presence as the caring and nurturing person she was for me. Yet, there is more to resurrection than just the presence of that which we lost. There is the opportunity for a new beginning. It is worthy to repeat Burton Carley’s reading;

From the end a new beginning. From a painful, terrible end, a new beginning. The beginning was unimaginable, unprepared for, unrehearsed; something more born than made. Out of the end of dreams put to death, hopes mocked, and expectations vanquished, new dreams and hopes and expectations came to life.

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There is more to Carley’s meditation, when he continues with these words;

You might think I speak about Jesus and his death, and how those who loved him were raised beyond their devastation to live what they had only heard from the Hebrew scriptures before – that love is stronger than death. Yes, it was true for them, but it is also true for us, this capacity of the spirit to rise again after the loss of someone or something so very precious. In either case, we call it Easter.

So, in this regard, Easter is more than just a liturgical celebration. It is the celebration of the ability to find new life out of the pain and suffering. This is called by one of my UU colleagues as the “Easter faith.” Out of death arises new life – that is truly resurrection. In a real sense, it is dying in order to live.

Now of course, nobody really wants to die. Yet, we are called out of our complacency, out of our confusion, out of our distraction to a new life. We are reminded by Simone Weil by what she calls humility: "the freely accepted movement toward the bottom." This is what Carley meant when he said, "From a painful, terrible end, a new beginning."

As my beloved colleague, Barbara Pescan once wrote;

Bodies do not survive death. If minds and souls do, I do not know where they gather. But I know that love is stronger than the grave. It survives, and it abides, and all the dead rise again and again in us, giving themselves to us for as long as we will receive them.

So Easter can be and is about Jesus and those faithful to him and his teachings. Yet it can also be about everyone, as it was for them in their days of trial. It is about their humanness and about all that we are in our humanness, in our doubts and in our love. It is the love that survives all the devastations of death and misery. It is love that brings to life my grandmother who died nearly 60 years ago. We bring our loved ones back to be with us, "again and again in us, giving themselves to us for as long as we will receive them." Sometimes it is at special occasions; those special days in our lives we shared together. Sometimes it is by a sudden burst into our lives without warning. The story of the resurrection of Jesus may be difficult to understand as a literal interpretation. Yet it is real as a human event that occurs in all of our lives. As we are bound to each other in love, so when that bond is broken by death or loss of relationship, we are in a state of "doubt, failure, incrimination, and foolishness." In the depths of loss and despair, there is hope yet to come. We are given the opportunity for a new life born out of the love we had before. May this season of new freedom be with us as we journey through our lives. May we always know, "From the end a new beginning."

Amen.