

Beyond the Tomb: Easter 2012

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, April 8, 2012

Easter is a story of how life, and love, continue after death. I use the word story because I understand Easter as a metaphor, not as a literal historical event. The holiday draws from humanity's rich tradition of spring religious festivals and the enduring myth, found in many cultures, of the world savior or creator who is slain and then returns to life.

In our Northern clime, the arrival of spring after the dark and chill of winter reminds us that life falls in cycles. Birth follows death. Hope follows despair. Cold follows warmth. The deadheads on marigolds, like the ones we planted weeks ago on the windowsills, transmute, in spring, from lifeless papery husks to green thriving, budding, soon-to-be-blooming plants.

The lasting power of the myth of rebirth at springtime is linked to such natural cycles. Myths are sustained across the millennium not because they capture historical truths but because they convey metaphorical ones. As the Unitarian Universalist minister Marilyn Sewell preaches, a "story doesn't have to be true for the truth to rest in it." After all, it is metaphorical truths that help us, in the words of William Blake, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And Heaven in a Wild Flower." When we see such truths, Blake reminds, the world opens up to us in unexpected ways. Each of us then can learn to "Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour."

On Easter Sunday we direct our attention to the metaphoric truth of the Easter myth. You are all familiar with basic outlines of the narrative of the passion and resurrection of Jesus as recounted in the gospels. The narrative is not unique to Christianity. It appears in other forms. It appears as the story of the Egyptian god Osiris who was murdered by his brother Set and returned to life by his wife Isis.

It was a common theme in Greek mythology where the children of Zeus sometimes died and then came back to life as immortals. There was Dionysus who was torn to pieces and then taken up into the heavens. Hercules died, went to Hades and then ascended to heaven to join the gods. The parallel between the Easter myth and Greek paganism was not lost on early Christians. Justin the Martyr wrote in an early Christian text, defending the reasonableness of Christianity, "In saying that... Jesus Christ... was crucified and died and after rising again ascended into heaven we introduce nothing new beyond [what you say of] those whom you call sons of Zeus."

Such parallels prompted Joseph Campbell, in one of his studies of myth, to borrow a line from Leo Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" and write, "Like happy families, the myths and worlds redeemed are all alike." I tell you this to remind you that even though Easter is a Christian holiday its roots stretch back further than the stories of Jesus. The human need to believe that life, and therefore love, can continue after death is not original to Christianity. It proceeds it. If Christianity ever ceases to be a lived religion the need for myths like Easter will remain.

This morning then we are not going to focus on the part of the Easter myth that Christianity shares with other traditions. We are not going to narrow in on the narrative of resurrection. Instead, we are going to consider what makes the Easter myth unique. That is not the resurrection. It is what happened after that part of the myth was created. That story, whether history or mythology or a

blend of both, is captured in the book of Christian New Testament titled “The Acts of the Apostles” and usually shortened to “Acts.”

This text tells the story of what Jesus’s followers did after his resurrection and ascent into heaven. It tells the story of how a community survives, and thrives, after the loss of its leader. For Jesus’s followers the greatest period of growth came not during his lifetime, but after his death.

The canonical gospels themselves make this point. If you read them closely you will notice that the gospel authors portray Jesus’s disciples as at least somewhat clueless. This is especially true of the gospel of Mark, thought to be the oldest gospel text, which has passages about the disciples like, “But they did not understand what he said, and were afraid to ask.” In some of the gospels the disciples do not just come off as clueless, they also have a tendency to doubt. In the text, Jesus performs a miracle and his performance is followed by his disciples doubting his abilities.

This lack of faith and cluelessness is not present in Acts. In Acts Jesus’s disciples are filled with faith, faith in their own abilities and faith in the message of their community. They also seem to understand the message a great deal better than they did in the gospels. Throughout Acts there are not passages about how clueless Jesus’s disciples were. Instead, the text is filled with speeches and stories about how ably they communicate to others what their community is about.

The success of their communication is attested to by the rapid numerical growth the community underwent after Jesus’s death. Throughout the canonical gospels Jesus is depicted as having a small group of followers. The numbers vary. Sometimes he has twelve disciples and sometimes he has seventy. He ministers and teaches crowds but the crowds never join the community he is building. He blesses the crowds, raises the dead, and works miracles but the crowds, for the most part, do not join with him and his disciples. It is only after the gospel story is complete, after the mythic narrative of the passion and resurrection has taken place, that large groups of people start to join Jesus’s community. In contrast, one early passage of Acts reports three thousand people joining the community in one day. Nothing like that ever happens in the gospels.

Central to Acts is a passage about the transformation that took place within the community of Jesus’s followers after his death. That transformation is what allowed for such mass conversions to happen. It reads: “The day of Pentecost had come, and they were all together in one place. Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them flames like tongues of fire distributed among them and coming to rest on each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance.”

This passage, which serves as the inspiration for the pentecostal movement, marks the moment when Jesus’s followers began to take responsibility for sustaining and building the community he had created. The central verse is “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Acts and the gospel of Luke were either written by the same author or come from the same early Christian community. Either way, they were meant to be read together. If you read them together, you will notice that it is after this point, after the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, that they become competent at continuing the teachings of Jesus.

We could argue a great deal about what exactly is meant by the Holy Spirit. Certainly throughout the ages there have been a wide variety of different interpretations of the phrase. It is barely mentioned in the Hebrew Bible but it appears throughout the Christian New Testament. Since about the fourth century of the common era the Holy Spirit has been understood by orthodox trinitarian Christians as part of the Trinity.

I would suggest a slightly different understanding. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is the sense the divine dwells within us and among. When the Holy Spirit is present we are aware of our deep connection to all that surrounds us. And we are aware of the human possibility that lies within us. The awakening to the Holy Spirit that Jesus's followers underwent was an awakening to their own potential. It was an awareness that even without their beloved leader they had everything they needed to create a strong and vibrant religious community.

Acts was a favorite text for our early Unitarian ancestors in Europe and New England. When they read the Bible they found little evidence within it to support most of the theological doctrines of the orthodox and the ecclesiastical structure of the Catholic Church. Rejecting these, they turned to Acts and the epistles of the Christian New Testament for guidance on how to create, sustain and structure religious community. They rejected the priesthood because they saw little evidence of it present within these texts. And they came to the conclusion that religion is at least as much about what you do as what you believe.

One lesson that Acts teaches is that any member of the religious community can be a leader. Or, more accurately, since everyone can be filled with the Holy Spirit everyone potentially is a leader. Leadership takes many forms. In our culture, we tend to think of a leader as someone who tells other people what to do. I have never jived with that understanding. Instead, I think of leaders as having one of two characteristics. Leaders create community. And leaders are people who others follow.

We can all be leaders. We are all leaders. I was reminded of this last night at our Seder. At one point early in the service someone, almost spontaneously, led us in a Hebrew prayer. He said a line and then everyone repeated after him. An elementary act of leadership. Later in the service we sang a hymn. Even though I was the official leader of the Seder someone else spontaneously took the lead with hymn, 'cause you all know I can't really carry a tune. They led and we followed.

This morning's service provides another example. As most of you know, in addition to being Easter, today is "Bring a Friend Sunday." I would argue that anyone who participated by bringing a friend to the Society this morning committed an act of leadership. You invited someone to join with us and in doing so you helped to create a stronger community.

The lesson presented in Acts that everyone can be a leader is important for this congregation at this juncture in its history. As most of you know, I am leaving the Society at the end of the summer to begin a PhD program at Harvard. For the last four and a half years I have been the religious leader of this community. In that time, the congregation has grown in numbers and vibrancy.

When I started in 2007 the Society had not had a full-time minister in thirty-five years. In that period the congregation went from about two hundred members to less than sixty. Since I came here, we have managed to reverse that pattern of decline and membership has grown from sixty to ninety. In

the language of sociologists of religion, we have moved from a family sized congregation to a pastoral sized congregation.

In a family sized congregation, the community is led by a handful of longtime members who function as its matriarchs and patriarchs. Decisions are often made informally and the community is usually inwardly focused. There is a sense amongst community members that “we belong together” and people sometimes act more like members of a family than members of a religious community. Bad behavior on the part of longtime members is frequently tolerated because it is more important to preserve that family feel than have a larger vision. Expectations for what it means to be a member are often low and poorly communicated. The quality of worship and programs varies a great deal from week-to-week and year-to-year. Family sized congregations rarely have more than fifty people present for worship on Sunday morning.

A pastoral sized congregation, in contrast, has between 50 and a 150 people at services. The focal point in such a community is not on preserving its family feel. Instead the community tends focus its energies on its religious leader. In a pastoral sized community, the religious leader is involved in, or informed of, almost all important decisions. Communities of this size find it hard to grow beyond about 150 members because an individual religious leader, no matter how talented, only has so energy.

I have noticed in the last couple of years that the Society is tending to function like a pastoral sized community. Most committees do not succeed unless I take an active role in them. There seems to be a somewhat unwritten assumption that if things do not get done then either I or another member of the staff will take care of them. Probably the most glaring example of this is the congregation’s relationship with its’ building. We do not have a functioning Building and Grounds committee. In the absence of such a committee the staff has assumed primary responsibility for managing and maintaining the building. This means that we are unable to devote our energies to things like outreach or pastoral care.

Most members of the Society talk about wanting to grow the congregation. Close to a majority of our members joined the congregation in the last five years and the congregation that they joined was a growing one. They want to continue to cultivate the sense of vibrancy that they have found here and share our liberal faith with others. If significant growth is going to occur in the next few years the congregation will have to shift from functioning like a pastoral sized community to a program sized one. A program sized congregation focuses on its mission and the programs that it offers.

One of the central missions of a program sized congregation is to encourage everyone to function as a leader. In such a congregation, it is the members themselves who take primary responsibility for functioning of the congregation. This is different from a family sized congregation where a small group of, usually self-appointed, leaders take responsibility for the life of the congregation. And it is different from a pastoral sized congregation where much of the responsibility falls to the staff.

If we wanted to, we could borrow language from Acts and say that a program sized congregation is one that is filled with the Holy Spirit. In such a congregation members are aware of the potential gifts that they have to give to the larger community and the responsibility they have to make sure

the community thrives. Rather than thinking of the leader of congregation as someone else they recognize that everyone has a leadership role to play.

Over the next couple of years as the Society transitions between settled ministers you will have time and opportunity to imagine what sort of congregation you want to be. Do you want to be pastoral sized? Or do you want to do be program sized? Where do you feel the spirit moving you?

Times of transition can be rich times for such imaginings. Our first reading this morning by denise levertov spoke of the way possibilities can open up during transition times. At the beginning of her poem she asks, "In this silvery now of living alone, / doesn't it seem, I ponder, / anything can happen?"

Easter is a holiday of transition. It marks the beginning of the period when the community of Jesus's followers began to undergo a time of great growth. It marks a time when Jesus's followers realized that they all could be leaders. This Easter, as this congregation prepares to undergo a time of transition, I offer you a prayer:

Spirit of life
within and around all
of us,
spark of divine,
may you grow
in this community
and its members in the coming years.

May each discover
their gifts for leadership
inside and,
in doing so,
may this beloved community
grow and thrive.

Amen and Blessed Be.