

O Day of Light and Gladness

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

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I'm sure that many of us have special memories from past Easters.

I remember as a child of about five, for example, going outside on a sunny southern California day, excited to search for Easter eggs, and then, I discovered that our black lab, had found all the eggs before my sister and I had. Judy, (the dog was named Judy) had left us only the empty shells!

I can still see in my mind's eye, the colored shells, lying under the beautiful bird of paradise plants, and red geraniums, and Judy wagging her tail, happily.

I'm sure that today at least some of us are planning on celebrating Easter with family, friends, and indeed we are doing so, right now, as congregants in this service. Yes?

And what about future Easters?

I do not doubt that Easter will continue to happen, in some form or another.

For humans have always celebrated long before Jesus walked on this earth, rebirth, renewal and resurrections in different forms.

I have been pondering the meaning of this word "resurrection," beyond the meaning we usually enjoy this time of the year.

For example, we may think of the resurrection of spring from winter when we look at the bulbs now peeping up as green blades through the moist spring soil.

We may joyously embrace the return of new life all around us in nature.

This word "resurrection" is an ancient belief in the possibility that a life lost, comes back to life after death, coming back to life again in the same body.

For example, in the Hindu sacred text, the *Ramayana*, after a great battle, Rama requests that Indra restore to life all the monkeys who had been killed. And the monkeys then come back to life again.

In Islam today there is a belief in "the Day of Resurrection," a day believed by Muslims to be preordained by God and unknown to humans. The Koran emphasizes bodily resurrection.

This concept of resurrection has been part of human belief, since ancient times, and entered into Jewish thought, most likely from Persian and Zoroastrian influences.

Recently I received from Rev. Dr. Peter Baldwin, (Peter, as he known to many of us), a paper he recently wrote entitled "The Persian Influence upon Jewish and Christian Beliefs and Faith."

Within this paper, Peter links the influences of Zoroastrianism on the Hebrew exiles in Babylon, who had been captured by the Persian King, Nebudchadnezzar. Under this king, Zoroastrianism was the main religion, and as Peter wrote: “In their captivity Zoroastrian sacred stories and beliefs, infiltrated the Hebrews’ thinking and worship.”

Included in those beliefs were the belief in resurrection, as well as the belief in a future Messiah of the world (Saoshyant) who was said would be born of a virgin - impregnated by the seed of Zoroaster, while bathing in a lake!

This Messiah, the Saoshyant to come, will raise the dead, and eventually, the righteous will be purified, and *the forces of good will triumph over the forces of evil.* ¹

(Sound familiar?)

These Zoroastrian beliefs and others, too, travelled back to Canaan, in 538 BCE when King Cyrus of Persia defeated Nebudchadnezzar. King Cyrus released the Hebrews from bondage, and they returned to their homeland of Judah and Israel. Thus, the Hebrews brought with them beliefs in resurrection, as well as a belief in a hoped-for Messiah.

The belief in resurrection originally entered into Jewish thought through the prophet Ezekiel, whose famous vision of the valley of dry bones is one of God putting flesh on the dead again. ²

Ezekiel was a priest during the Hebrews’ captivity by Nebudchadnezzar. He proclaimed his vision of the Hebrews eventually returning to Jerusalem, to rebuild their sacred Temple, which eventually they did, of course.

We know from the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, and from the New Testament, that the Sadducees, one branch of Judaism at the time of Jesus’s ministry did not believe in an afterlife.

But among the Pharisees, another main branch of Judaism, At least some most likely did believe in resurrection. ³

The New Testament tells us that of Pharisees who did believe in resurrection, most likely believed in a resurrection that is solely of the soul, or spirit.

Josephus, ancient Jewish historian, who was a Pharisee, wrote that “only the soul is immortal.”⁴

Within Christianity St. Paul, who described the Church itself as “the body of Christ” had never seen Jesus when Jesus was alive, nor as a resurrected being, as described in the four canonical Gospels.

St. Paul witnessed Jesus as a vision, as a “revelation on the road to Damascus.”

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism>

² *Ezekiel 37*

³ [Resurrection - Wikipedia](#)

⁴ Josephus *Jewish War* 2.8.14; cf. *Antiquities* 8.14-15.

Thus, St. Paul, like Josephus, did not interpret resurrection as a bodily resurrection, but as a spiritual one.⁵

And yet, we have in *The Gospel of John*, written long after St. Paul lived, the account of “Doubting Thomas,” who didn’t believe at first in Jesus’s resurrection and who famously said, “*unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand on his side, I will not believe.*”

When, in *The Gospel of John’s* account, the resurrected Jesus does appear to Thomas, Thomas exclaims, “*My Lord, My God!*” And Jesus famously replies, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*”

I sense that an issue at the time of the writing, of the Gospel stories of Jesus’s death and resurrection was how to convince Jews interested in Christianity, that Jesus’s death was a bodily resurrection.

Many Jews at the time most likely saw death as the end of personhood. You die, and you are dead, period.

According to Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, UU scholar, and past president of our UUA, within the Hebraic tradition resurrection was what happened when life is given back to the dead.⁶ Most likely the Gospel stories were written to try and convince people at the time that the resurrected Jesus was not a ghost or a person without a spirit, but was embodied, AND connected with his Jewish, prophetic way of life.⁷

This may have been a hard sale, because in the Hebrew Bible only two figures are raised to Heaven.

Enoch and Elijah, who in bodily form are taken up to heaven directly alive. In contrast, we find in the Gospels a number of stories, of Jesus restoring the dead to new life.

The most famous, of course, being the raising from the dead of Lazarus.

And most likely Jesus’ resurrection for the early Christians and the writers of the Gospels was thought to be that of a righteous, innocent man, who is taken up to be with God, thus, demonstrating that Jesus was not **only** an historical person, but for the early Christians, he represented “*a figure with a larger world- historical role – the harbinger of the End Time, and the first of those to be raised to eternal life.*”⁸

Through a study of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’s death and resurrection, we find different versions about what happened in these resurrection stories.

⁵ *1 Cor. 15:42-51*

⁶ John A. Buehrens. *Understanding the Bible. An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992 p.. 161

⁷ Buehrens. P. 167

⁸ John Buehrens. P. 163

In the first Gospel, *The Gospel of Mark*, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James had purchased embalming spices and just at sunrise, had come to the tomb, where they saw that the stone had been moved away. An angel dressed all in white is inside, and tells them that Jesus had come back to life.

“Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.⁹”

One possible interpretation is that Jesus has gone ahead, and leads the way for all who will follow Him.

This is the Jesus of the heart, of the spirit. This is the Jesus who, through his death and resurrection, goes ahead of all others, and shows those who believe in Him the way to his God.

In *The Gospel of Matthew*, we read of guards being placed at the tomb, by Jewish leaders, who are fearful that someone might come and steal Jesus’s body during the night. Matthew states that the tomb is guarded, at the request of the Jewish authorities, to prevent the disciples from saying that Jesus’ body was resurrected, and thus, presenting a huge theological challenge to those who do not believe in bodily resurrection.

As the story goes, an earthquake occurs, and the stone is rolled away by an angel, who speaks to Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary,” When they have come to prepare Jesus’s body for burial. Then Jesus appears to them in resurrected form and tells them to go and tell the other disciples that they will see Him in Galilee.

John Buehrens, UU minister and scholar, suggests that the Gospel writer Matthew may have been angry at the Jews who did not believe in Jesus’s resurrection. Matthew wrote in his gospel that the guards later were bribed by the chief priests to not tell what truly happened.

Of course, today we know that terrible harm has been done, and continues to be done, to Jews because of different gospel accounts blaming the Jews for Jesus’ death.

I have often thought that such anti-Semitic verses would best be rephrased to show that it was only **some** of the Jewish leaders at the Temple, as well as the Roman authorities, who wished to prevent an uprising, that led to Jesus’s death.

In *the Gospel of Luke* Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, as well as other women go to the tomb, and are reminded by two angels that Jesus is not there, and that Jesus had foretold that he would be crucified, and then arise on the third day.¹⁰

The women returned to the apostles, and told them that they saw Jesus, but the disciples did not believe the women.

Next in Luke, two followers of Jesus were travelling from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were talking with one another about Jesus’s crucifixion. As they are walking along, another person joins them. The two men tell him about Jesus’s death, and his prediction that he would return

⁹ The Gospel of Mark. 16: 7.

¹⁰ Luke 24: 4-7

on the third day (which was that day.) When the men stop to eat, the third man broke bread with them. *The Gospel of Luke* says that “their eyes were opened.” The two men realized that the third man was Jesus, and at that moment, Jesus disappeared. The two men went on to the apostles and told them that they had seen Jesus, but they too were not believed by the disciples.

Next, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus appears to the disciples not in Galilee, but in Jerusalem. Luke’s resurrected Jesus scolds the disciples for not believing in his bodily resurrection:

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see;

For the spirit has no flesh and bones as you can see, I have.”¹¹

In the fourth Gospel, *The Gospel of John*, from our scriptural reading this morning, we heard that only Mary Magdalene goes first to the tomb, and seeing that it is empty, runs to tell Peter and John.

After Peter and John leave, Mary is weeping at the tomb, when she has this powerful interaction with the resurrected Jesus. At first believing him to be the gardener, she demands to know if this gardener has taken her Lord.

When Jesus says her name, “Mary,” she realizes who he is.

He tells her not to touch him, but says:

“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say I am ascending to my Father, to my God and to your God.”¹²

Again, Jesus is embodied.

Each of these resurrection stories are different, yet each most likely was included in the Christian Biblical canon because they wrote of the **bodily resurrection** of Jesus. And thus, helped to differentiate the Christian Faith from Judaism.

What is clear is that these stories of Jesus’s resurrection, helped to establish a new religion – that of Christianity, which today has over 31% of the world’s population as believers.

We each will have to discern what we truly believe about resurrection.

Do we believe in resurrection of the spirit only?

Resurrection of the body and spirit?

No resurrection at all?

Do we believe something else happens or doesn’t happen when we die?

Clearly as I have tried to show, resurrection as a **belief** has been part of the human condition long before the Gospel writers wrote of Jesus’s ministry.

¹¹ Luke 24:36-43

¹² John 20:17

Whatever we each believe, on this special spring day, let us remember Jesus, whom today almost a third of the world regards as God, and whom many of us, as liberal religionists, at least hold as a very, very good person, a God-centered person, whose way of life points to all of us a way of being, that leads to living more compassionately, more lovingly, more at peace with ourselves and with our neighbors, as well as challenging the injustices of our day as best we may.

Jesus's life, more than two thousand years later, his life of self-giving love, continues to touch both the sacred and the ordinary within our very lives, offering today, and always, to any who believe in him, a way to experience the transcendent, the sacred, amid our daily lives.

Whatever meanings we as UUs give to the word "resurrection," during this Easter and Springtime, resurrection can provide us with *the human hope for life after death, or at least a sense that life is deathless, and continues in new forms*¹³.

We are about to see a video of Andrea Bocelli with his granddaughter, Virginia, singing their version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* together.

Although I do not know for sure, I believe that, the woman you will see leaning out of the balcony is most likely Virginia's mother and Andrea's daughter.

And so, this special rendering of this song by Andrea and Virginia represents to me indeed that *life is deathless and continues in new forms*.

Here, the forms are grandfather and granddaughter, with mother in between!

And so, it is in our lives as well.

Peace and love to you.

¹³ Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris. P. 11

THE PERSIAN INFLUENCE UPON JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND FAITH Peter Baldwin, S.T.B., Ph.D.

Consider the influence of Zoroastrian belief and faith upon Judaism and Christianity to sharpening our wits regarding religious belief and faith.

First class session, eight a.m, not quite awake college students, twenty-five of them, a horseshoe seating arrangement. As Visiting Professor I was unknown. The style of my entering was unpremeditated. Improvisational classroom theater in the greater theater of every day life! Placing my teacher's folder on the desk, I asked for someone to collect the registration cards, then left the room for the lavatory across the hall.

Upon my return I staged an improvised fool's performance that generated confusion. When one student declared: "I am totally confused," I immediately shifted into professorial manner and voice saying: You're all totally confused! This is the perfect state of mind for investigating and examining theoretical concepts, myths, and stories explaining existence and meaning for being.

From earliest times, from thousands of years ago and currently, whenever people have been confused, lost, clueless, and afraid, people wonder: "What can I think about whatever is happening? What sense, what meaning, what purpose, what to do? What can I make of what's happening? What can I suppose?"

If I like what I suppose. If I come to believe in what I suppose. If I come to need to believe in what I suppose, if I'm at all unsure I can absolutely prove the absolute truth of what I want to believe, I take a leap of faith from supposing to firm believing. I take what I suppose as a firm belief. A theory is essentially a strongly embraced supposition. And, a theory may derive from inspired intuition or firm, empirical observation and testing.

I repeat: Theories generate from wondering, and wondering may be inspired by curiosity, awe, or fear. When evolving theoretical explanations gain public support, and seem to prove valid and reliable through application, theory becomes accepted truth by consensus. **Beware!** There is no such thing as objective truth, only theoretical truth.

Eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant theorized that there is more to Being than meets the eye, that there is more to what's specifically and generally happening than can be explained by or reduced to appearances. Kant's theory of ultimate reality is to be understood in terms of the nominal and noumenal, this is to say: appearances and that which can only be inferred behind appearances.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget opined that reality is everything the imagination can conceive. Therefore, all thought and belief is illusion, some by public consensus pure fantasy, others by public consensus viable and better-founded. A student of Buddhism finding his master weeping asked: "Master, why are you weeping?" His master replied: "My son has died." "But Master. You have taught me that all is illusion." "Yes," responded his Master, "But my son has been my most precious illusion."

However fiercely people claim hold onto so-called undeniable truth, final and conclusive truth eludes human certainty. Theoretical truths are forever subject to question and revision.

Let us say the moon symbolizes all Being, and that concepts and stories of the reality of specific and all-encompassing Being are like fingers pointing to the moon. We do well not to confuse the pointing fingers with the moon.

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We are, all of us profoundly subject to and affected by the beliefs, faith, and practices of prevailing religious orientations at play in local, national and international politics, each one of them fingers, as it were, pointing toward the moon.

To be informed Unitarian Universalists, we do well to consider where we fit in historical perspective. The Unitarian and Universalist movements have emerged from and evolved within Hebrew and Christian culture and politics.

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To start with, there is more than adequate basis for believing in the historical Jesus of Nazareth, and that he brought to the people where he lived wisdom stories, teachings, and remarkable conduct. However, his conduct and his spoken words apparently proved alarming to those in power. He was interrogated, judged, crucified, and his presence, after the death of his body, was powerfully felt by those who loved and followed him. So, we might also say of the historical Mohammed, Buddha, Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King!

Today, throughout much of the world, Jesus is believed to be Son of God, the second God in the three persons of God: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is believed to be the Deliverer of those who believe on Him from mortal sin, from fear of death, from fear of being the "left behind" following the certainty of an inevitable eternal struggle between Darkness and Light, which is to say the struggle pitched between Satan-the-Lord-of-Darkness-and-Evil and God-the-Lord-of-Light-and-Goodness culminating in the end of the world when all souls, living and dead, shall with Christ's second coming be judged as worthy of eternal bliss in heaven or torment in hell.

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Where did these beliefs and the life of faith deriving from these beliefs and stories come from? They derived from the personal revelations of individuals living in Canaan and Persia.

For nearly 4000 years from 6000 BCE to 2000 BCE, thousands of years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, much of Europe, the Mediterranean area, Egypt and much of Africa were characterized by "Old European Culture" featuring: an agricultural (without horses) and sedentary economy; villages and townships with no hill forts; an egalitarian matrilineal cooperative social structure; and a peaceful, art-loving, woman creatress ideology.

About 1900 BCE, nearly four thousand years ago, the first Babylonian dynasty was established dominating the Near Eastern and Mediterranean populations. It was about 1900 BCE that Abraham, the patriarch to whom Jews, Muslims and Christians hearken in common and in awe, arrived in Canaan.

In 1800 BCE the great and wise Hammurabee ruled the spreading Babylonian empire.

In 1320 BCE Nomadic tribes from the steppes of Russia and from the east began invading the Near East. These nomadic tribes kept and herded livestock and horses. They settled in the Near East, living in small villages in semi-subterranean houses. They were ruled by warlord chieftains. Theirs was a patriarchal, patrilocal, hierarchical social structure, and they worshiped a warlike, male creator god.

By 1200 BCE the twelve nomadic Hebrew tribes were conquering Canaan, the homeland of the indigenous Canaanites who worshiped the mother and father gods. The Bible's Old Testament is full of accounts of Hebrew wars with other nomadic tribes and indigenous peoples, pitting themselves ferociously against goddess worship.

In neighboring Babylon, also known as Persia, Nebuchadnezzar reigned as King of the Babylonian empire from 605 to 562 BCE. Persian prophet Zoroaster was born about 600 BCE.

That was two thousand six hundred years ago! By 587 BCE, when Nebuchadnezzar's forces over-ran Canaan and carried captive Hebrews to Babylon, Zoroastrianism had become the religion of Nebuchadnezzar's rule. In their captivity Zoroastrian sacred stories and beliefs infiltrated the Hebrews' thinking and worship.

The captive Hebrews remained as slaves in Babylon until 538 BCE following Persian invasion and the collapse of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. King Cyrus of Persia released the Hebrews from bondage; they were free now to return to Judah and Israel.

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So! What Zoroastrian beliefs and faith did they bring with them in their return home?

At the age of twenty, Zoroaster retired into the wilderness for a period of contemplation. At the end of his wilderness retreat he had a mystical experience, the first of several that served as the inspiration for his teachings. He stated that his soul had been guided into the very presence of Ahura Mazda, The Wise Spirit," the One God. He received instructions to preach the truths revealed to him by Ahura Mazda. In time he gained support from the people who embraced his teachings.

He taught that God, Ahura Mazda, the great Creator,

--is eternal and transient,

--that Ahura Mazda works through Spirits, the Immortal, Holy Ones: Angels known as Dominion, Prosperity, Piety, and Immortality.

Zoroaster taught that: Angra Mainya, the Spirit of Evil, was not created, rather exists automatically wherever goodness exists. Zoroaster taught the people that the human soul is the seat of a war between good and evil, and that in a worldwide battleground between equally powerful forces, each fighting for the souls of humanity, through pure thought, good conduct, and the practice of rituals, good would eventually prove victorious.

During his wilderness retreat Zoroaster mystically experienced Ahura Mazda revealing to him that he, Ahura Mazda, would have three sons, each born miraculously, who were to be Deliverers of the world from evil.

The Zoroastrian bible, the Zend-Avesta, identifies the third son as the greatest, the Beneficent One, the Messiah who will preside over the last days of the world. Then he will restore the world which will thenceforth never grow old, never die, never decay. Creation shall become deathless, and the Spirit of Evil shall perish.

In the final days each soul shall have its good and evil deeds judged, the good directly entering paradise, the wicked delivered directly to hell, not to suffer eternal torment, rather to be purified before being lifted into Paradise.

These were the beliefs and faith to which the Hebrews in Babylonian captivity were exposed. These beliefs they brought back to their own land once they were released from captivity.

We should note that the revelation that came to Zoroaster regarding the Mediator would sound a responsive chord among the Hebrews “back home.” The Hebrew prophet Isaiah had foretold the birth of a Messiah in the mid-1700s BCE in his Emmanuel Prophecy. Handel’s Messiah weaves together many of the themes generated from this prophesy. The revelations that came to Zoroaster and to Isaiah before him were, according to scholars, rooted in a yet more ancient belief system!

I find it significant that in the story of the birth of Jesus, three wise men, magi of Zoroaster, came to worship him.

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So, what’s there to believe?

How can all this sharpen the wits of Unitarian Universalists, and contribute to the depth of our beliefs and faith? Several relevant ideas come to mind:

Consider the Hindu saying that there are nine hundred and ninety names for God, and that each one is “that and not that.”

Theologian Paul Tillich defined religious devotion as the “meaningful belief which comes out of the depths of your life, the source of your being, of your ultimate concern.”

My maternal grandfather, an American Baptist minister, talked with me during our last conversation of his understanding of the divinity of Christ. What a change in his thinking from his earlier orthodox Christian days, as he talked with me of God as the source of all that is godly, which, he added, is to say goodly. He talked of Jesus’ wisdom, his sense of justice, his compassion, his teachings, his gift of healing as so deeply goodly and mysterious as to pass all understanding. My father, a Congregational minister, wrote in his book, *The Drama of Our Religion*, of Jesus as a “deeply God-Conscious man.”

As for me, I am inspired by the historical Jesus, an extraordinarily God-conscious man, whose

godliness or goodliness inspires our commitment to realize the same. I think of Jesus crucified because, in my opinion, he embodied the spirit attitudes and conduct of the cooperative “Old European” culture that flourished long before the Babylonian empire, long before the invasion of the near east by Hebrew and other nomadic tribes. I believe he was crucified because his teachings and conduct proved subversive to the hierarchical, male dominant, violence-enthralled principalities and powers of the Roman and orthodox Hebrew establishments.

I ask once again: What can Unitarian Universalists do with absolute belief systems, with religious orthodoxies?

Absolute belief and faith declarations are projections generated by human imagination of good and evil upon ultimate, noumenal reality, projections upon the “moon,” not simply fingers pointing toward the moon, rather, fingers imprinted upon the moon.

If Being is represented by the moon. Beliefs and faith declarations are like the finger pointing to the moon. We do well not to confuse the finger with the moon.

We do well to live every moment in AWE, in WONDER, inspired by awe and wonder to live *goodly* lives.

So Be It!