

*Rise, Awake, Rejoice***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered April 17, 2022**

It is Easter, the holiest of days for Christians. A day that for many years of my life served as the cornerstone of my faith, and that is why, I cannot skip over it. I know that many Unitarian Universalists often have a tough time with what to do on Easter. Often, UU Sunday services that fall on Easter migrate towards the “let’s talk about Paganism or Spring or rebirth so we don’t have to talk about Jesus.” But, I want to talk about Jesus. I remind us all that Unitarians and Universalists were Christians. Albeit, Christians who very early on questioned the resurrection story, questioned the divinity of Jesus, and questioned the human sacrifice narrative. We are descendants of those “questioners” and thanks to us also our UU Humanist history, many of us see Easter as ‘just another day’, but I’m inviting us all to rethink the Jesus story especially as we live in the days of a pandemic.

Jesus was a pretty radical cat - I like to call him a socialist, a rabble-rouser, a teacher-leader, - prophet, or a person who walked the walk and not just talked the talk. One of my favorite theologians to turn to for all things Jesus, is Marcus Borg. Borg writes about a Pre-Easter Jesus and a Post-Easter Jesus. Borg paints the Pre-Easter Jesus as a Spirit person, or simply, a person who had vivid experiences of the sacred, he calls Jesus a healer, a wisdom teacher, a social prophet, and a movement initiator. He and his early followers were Jewish, and Jesus was calling his followers to a more disciplined practice of scripture and deeper respect for the ways of God. He had no intention of forming a new religion. So this multifaceted fellow who roamed the land teaching, healing and instigating, found himself in the destructive hands of Empire. The Roman Empire decided to silence him. He was brutally crucified by the Romans and placed in a tomb. And this is where the story gets tricky for many of us.

When Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus’ mother returned to the tomb they found that Jesus was no longer there. Thus begins the invention of Post-Easter Jesus. For in Christian Scripture we read that Jesus has risen from the dead, he has been resurrected. As a result, he becomes Lord and King, and his sacrifice washes away our sins. If we weren’t doing this service via Zoom, I would take more time to dig into that transition. But for now, I want to point out that I know full well that these beliefs of resurrection and substitution are not consistent with Unitarian Universalist theology or mine for that matter. But that doesn’t mean we can’t learn something from the Jesus death and resurrection story. We are now living through a time, where death is just on the other side of our doorsteps. Where we are living in fear, living with the unknown, and watching our nation - and many other nations - unravel. Jesus, as I just mentioned, was crucified because he dared to call out the Roman Empire and the corrupt Jewish hierarchy for putting the Rule of Man over the Rule of God. Meaning, he called “Empire” out for its greed, it’s violence, it’s claim of superiority, and it’s claim of holiness, while he encouraged (or maybe admonished?) his fellow Jews to live more deeply into the Torah by loving one another and creating and living the Kingdom of God on Earth.

He was inviting his friends and followers to embrace and be the Divine Light instead of being party to the destructive methods of the Ruling Class. And now, as we live in the midst of a pandemic and we see the damage that Empire has wrought - inadequate health care, misinformation from top elected officials, vanity superseding compassion, the power of greed, corruption, and corporate deception, what we could call blatant eschewing of what Divine Law calls us to do - to love one another, to care for the least of our people, to respect the interconnected web of all life, to honor the dignity of all beings - we must pick up where Jesus left off and fight the forces of Empire that seek to undo, divide, and oppress us. As a result of Empire's actions, we will witness physical death of friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, loved ones - as well as material death - the loss of jobs, homes, financial security, and even spiritual death - our mental well being and sense of security or normalcy. And we may also possibly (dare I say, hopefully), see the death of the structures and institutions that Empire creates to enslave, demean, kill, exploit, and oppress us.

So, what if we put all of those awful things (the things that demean, exploit and oppress), the numerous things we UUs have fought against for years, into a metaphorical tomb and work for resurrection. We create a New World out of the entombment of Empire. With Jesus' death and resurrection, a new way of living and believing was born. This unexpected, unimaginable thing happened! His tomb was empty! He was resurrected! What will the unexpected, unimaginable result of our deciding to put to death, to put into the tomb, all the things that do not serve as individually and collectively? If we put all the systems and expectations and misguided values into the tomb? When we roll the stone away, what will be there instead? How will we each be reborn? How will our local communities be reborn? How will our society writ large be reborn? What changes will you make, will we make, so that "normal" - which was so very far from anything I'd consider normal - will not in fact return. I have no interest in seeing "pre-pandemic" America resurrected. I am tired of the Rule of Man superseding the Rule of Love/Divinity/Justice/God/Nature. I would like to have our resurrection be a rebirth into something more spiritual, interconnected, and just. Oddly enough, the America, the world, I would like to see, is one that returns us to the teachings and actions of pre-Easter Jesus. May we put that which does not serve the greater good into the tomb. May we work to end practices and policies that exploit and demean our siblings. May we see resurrection as a chance to create a more loving, just, and equitable world.

May it be so.