

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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“Rising from the Dead: A Journey of Faith”

Grace Note: “The Way of Christianity”

Part I: “Everything You Always Wanted To Know, (But Didn’t Want to Ask Or Even Ever Have to Listen to) About Death and Suffering” or “Descending into Hell: Maundy Thursday And Good Friday”

Part II: “The Alleluia Easter Good News”

Rev. Kathy Duhon

The Way of Christianity

Easter is the greatest celebration in Christianity, at the heart of the faith ... and... something of a conundrum for modern, diversely believing Unitarian Universalists, ... but is it really? You first have to know what basic Christianity is, which I believe is not well understood, even by many Christians.

First, a disclosure: I am a UU Christian, and there are many of us and we are all different in what that means for us, but I am going to witness from my faith. I am a struggling Christian, have often had questions and doubts and drifted; I probably have had many of the same experiences as some of you have had with Christianity or with other faiths, but for a long time I have been a practicing Christian – yes, I keep practicing and practicing, and I hope to get it right someday.

Christianity early on called itself ‘the Way’, actually very common in religion. I have numerous books from several religious traditions about the Way, like the Tao te Ching. Perhaps all religions are proposing a “way”; a way of being, a way of acting; a way of life that brings you and the world peace, joy, wellbeing.

The Way of Christianity is to be a follower of Jesus the Christ. We follow Jesus’ teachings, his actions, and his story. Jesus seems to have understood something amazing, not completely unique (that’s the UU in me talking), but something only realized by a handful of people over the history of this planet – how to be truly, fully oneself and love completely. Like the Buddha, he talked about waking up – this way that he was trying to show folks is open to all if we would only see with a wide awake soul. The Way of Jesus is the way of loving with one’s whole being – that’s the essence of the Great Commandment he taught. If you lose yourself – your life – to love, you will find it. Jesus preached and was a living example of the Kingdom of

God, which some modern folks have roughly translated “the beloved community” – that already, and not yet, experience of Love Eternal. To understand that this way is both already here and not yet here is to be given the grace of hope and faith in which to practice the greatest of all, love. Jesus and his followers preached good news, that the news is good, that goodness is already here and within, and also, that where we are not so good, goodness, transformative change, is actually possible, within us, and in the world around us, and we are called to this transformation.

But perhaps you’ve heard that Christianity means believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who saved us from our sins by his death and resurrection. When I say I am a Christian UU I sometimes get asked if I believe this.

First, Jesus apparently didn’t say he was the Son of God – others called him that – but that he was the “Son of Man”, which we don’t understand well, but at least one meaning of which is “every man”; he said he was like everyone. So was he the Incarnation of God? In some ways, I’m a Hindu – Jesus is one of the several avatars of the one deity. In some ways I am an old style Unitarian Christian – to me Jesus is the Divine Exemplar – he is a Holy One and a child of God, and he tried to convince others that they were children of God, holy ones as well. He tapped into the Soul of the World, of which we are a part, and showed us the way.

The Jesus story does save people. At the heart of Easter and at the heart of Christianity is the resurrection. What that means to me is what I will tell you about later, but I can assure you it’s most likely not what you think it is.

Finally, I am a UU Christian because I believe that Unitarian Universalism offers the closest way for me to follow Jesus. I am a Unitarian Universalist because this great religion has the good news that fits all of me, the Christian part and the other parts too. My way is not to convert you to become a UU Christian, but to honor your way and to keep converting myself.

Part I: “Everything You Always Wanted To Know, (But Didn’t Want to Ask Or Even Ever Have to Listen to) About Death and Suffering” or “Descending into Hell: Maundy Thursday And Good Friday”

I want to talk about suffering, your suffering and mine; all the little deaths and the final dying. As John Prine sang, “to believe in this living is just a hard way to go.” Everyone has been laid low, has felt the anguish of existence. Have you not grieved, or felt betrayed? Have you ever lost your faith, your faithfulness, the sense of yourself? When did you fail, mess up big time, feel shame and guilt? Where is your fear? What are your false certainties that led you astray? When did your body ache, your spirit sag, your interest in life dissipate? Are you exhausted? Are you laid low from despair, a lack of the sense of meaning in your life that just wears you out? Many lead lives of “quiet desperation”, as Thoreau noticed, perhaps all of us at some point, so quiet indeed that we may not even be conscious of how desperate our lives have become until something happens to wake us up a little, and then it hits us. We are not whole, not well, not fully ourselves, and we suffer.

“By standing respectfully and faithfully at the borders of another’s solitude, we may mediate the love of God to a person who needs something deeper than any human being can give,” wrote Parker Palmer. You gave me this, and so did my family, and all who stood by my bedside or prayed or lit a candle or sent a card, or brought a casserole or served my healing process, whether I knew it consciously or not, whether you knew it or not, or even whether you think that this is real; I believe that you mediated the love of God to me, for I needed something quite deep to draw me forward from my suffering and dance with death.

My death was widely anticipated a year ago at this time, from the acute pancreatitis, the failing organs; even the surgery that eventually saved me. After I'd been in the ICU for several days, an effort was made by much of my family to see me, as the doctors were giving me a 50/50 chance. It wasn't the possibility of my dying that was the worst, I was told, but the losing of me as myself. I was different when tormented by the ICU delirium, when possessed at times by anger or fear or the loneliness of isolation. I was suffering and my loved ones were suffering along with me.

I'd be willing to bet that none of us believe in a classic understanding of Hell, but I knew that I descended into hell, the hell that means suffering of all kinds, including the Spirit. I was not in my right mind for days, weeks, whether because of the pain or the drugs or whatever, and I had delusions. Dreams were real and reality was confused, confabulated. At first, I was sure I was being held in a bus station basement in downtown Boston, and that those who seemed to be offering me medical help knew nothing of what they were doing and were being mean to me. My delusion was based in some tiny part on reality, as they were losing me and I really needed to be transferred to the experts at MCV Hospital, and because the staff had shut out even my family most of the time.

My worst delusion was one of the Spirit. I often experienced a cartoonish reality that I thought was real, and in one such drama, walking along in some alternate outdoor universe, I felt that I was given a huge new wisdom, the understanding that all things lead to evil. Whether something starts out good or neutral, eventually it devolves to evil, was what I thought. I twice received this horrible Truth, which I believed it to be. And I cannot say clearly enough how diametrically opposed to my basic faith this is, though my mind was in too big a fuddle to even notice that at the time. I just felt weighted down by this awful knowledge. Normal Kathy, by the

way, has long believed that the universal and the eventual is Good, Love Eternal. As my mentor Carl Scovel has written, there is a good intent at the heart of the universe, which is another way to name the love of God – I had always believed in that good intent. My spirit was so far removed from this good intent, this love of God, that I had posited evil as the ultimate reality. At some point, I innately understood that I could not fight this terrible understanding, nor reason it away, that I could only turn from it, and I did, deliberately and resolutely turn away from this devil of a notion that hurt me so, and it simply dissolved.

In the Bible, Jesus and his disciples go through hell in those last few days of his life, especially Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as told through the Gospels. They gather for an important religious meal – the Passover – and the followers get into a squabble about who is the greatest among them. Meanwhile, one has plotted to betray Jesus to the authorities. After the meal, Jesus takes three of his closest friends to a garden to pray and asks them to help him in his distress by staying awake, but they keep falling asleep. He meantime is begging not to have to go through with the terrible ending, which he can tell is coming – he’s been speaking truth to power, so of course he knows he’s in danger – but he is also trying to accept his fate. Then Jesus is betrayed by Judas, and later by Peter, through his denial. The followers only follow at a safe distance as he is tried before the authorities, stripped and whipped – they don’t come to his aid at all, and the crowd who recently adored him is fickle and feckless and call for his killing. His loved ones are scared and Jesus feels abandoned, not only by them, but by God, as he prays from the cross. As he is dying in a most painful way, he cries out from his thirst, yet he also ministers to the guy on the next cross, and, he forgives those who are crucifying him.

By the way, a little six year old girl, Ruby Bridges, (who by herself was desegregating a New Orleans school in the early sixties), while being escorted through crowds who called for her

killing, was able to say the Jesus words of forgiveness from the cross, as she bore her own cross. “Father forgive them because they don’t know what they’re doing,” little Ruby said, and so did Jesus. Finally, Jesus calls out that he is abandoning himself into the hands of the loving Parent whom he has been proclaiming, and he dies.

There is so much hell and suffering in the last days for Jesus, but also for the followers. They know they have failed him and betrayed themselves. They hide. They perhaps believe, as I did when in my hell, that all their good intention and healing service was now ending in evil, but they don’t stay in their hell, nor did I stay in mine. (More about this later.)

For many Christians, the suffering of Jesus gives them strength because it becomes a compassionate accompaniment to their own suffering. I once visited a woman soon after her three children had been killed in an accident on their way home from school in another mother’s car. She said, “I’m clinging to the cross of Christ,” and I believe that was a saving grace for her.

What do Unitarian Universalists have to offer to those suffering, to those in great need? Everything, the whole kit and kaboodle. We get it all: Wisdom and Compassion and Truth and Hope and Faith from so many religions and all the corners of the world. If Buddhism has a healing word or practice, we share it; ... or if Judaism does, or Islam or Hinduism, or Humanism, or a poet or a teacher – all is available to our path, our way. Do we do a good job of ministering to those among us who are suffering? Sometimes, and sometimes we don’t use all the possibilities that are available to us – we bring the much needed casserole and smile, but we don’t always speak the Word of Truth when it is needed, or minister to the spirit.

Today I share with you the grace that comes from Christianity, which is also ours to offer and receive as UUs. Peter Gomes wrote, “The work of Christ is the manifestation of the love of God.” That is as good a summary of the Christian response to those who suffer as I know, and of

course, manifesting the love of God is not exclusive to Christianity. By the way, I hope I'm not tripping you up with the word God – yes, it is loaded and not defined or definable and I apologize for that, but it's the best word that works for me. If it doesn't make sense to you, substitute Beingness or the Universe or just drop it altogether and know that I am talking about Love, the love that is bigger than any of our individual loves. When it's not all about me, or you, which is only possible when the center is posited elsewhere – in Beingness or the Universe or God – then we can love and live in compassion and joy and well-being. Then we can die, no matter how much we have suffered or been abandoned, with forgiveness and compassion. So may it be.

Part II: The Alleluia Easter Good News

Each Easter I follow the ancient tradition of beginning this sermon with a joke – for today is a day of Joy. (Of course, I can't help but tell a morbid joke.)

“Three friends die in a car accident, and they go to an orientation in heaven. They are all asked, “When you are in your casket and friends and family are mourning you, what would you like to hear them say about you?”

The first one says, “I would like to hear them say that I was a great doctor in my time and that I loved my family.”

The second one says, “I would like to hear that I was a wonderful spouse and a school teacher who made a huge difference in the lives of our children for the future.”

The last one replies, “I would like to hear them say, *‘Look, Pat’s moving’!*”

We don't want to die. No – whatever our faith is, we would rather stay right here – not the object of the conversation, but part of it, and engaged in love and meaning.

Most of the time when we talk about Easter we focus on death and life, re-birth and being raised to new life, but what does that mean?

If you are a Biblical literalist, you might think it's about a dead body being re-animated. And by Biblical literalist, I'm not talking about fundamentalists or any Christians 'out there' – some of them are Biblical literalists – but today I am talking about the people who reject something in the Bible because they take it literally and decide it is not rational. We tend to be very rational, a good thing, but the Bible isn't supposed to be taken literally.

The Bible is not rational; it is poetry. The Bible is not history; it is faith, and not as much a specific faith as about faithfulness. The Easter story is not about a dead body being re-animated, which isn't all that exciting anyway – it happens regularly in our modern hospitals. My vitals plummeted in a hospital when I was in my 20's, and I entered the process of dying. I got as far as the ceiling, only to be wrestled back by the medical folks – and my Mom – it's marvelous, but it's not the center of faith. I don't see anybody starting a religion about me – there's no Kathianity. Being brought back from death is not enough.

There are many ancient stories of people being brought back from death, the brink of death, in other religious scriptures, and in other stories in the Christian scriptures – people are brought back from death and dying by Jesus, by the disciples, and by shamans and healers of all types. Large spirits sometimes do not take death for an answer, and go the extra distance with you until the rest of the world realizes, “Look, Pat's moving; Kathy's back; she will live, alleluia!

The Easter story is the ground of the Christian faith, and it goes like this: Jesus was a large spirit, so enormous that people followed him and hoped that he could save their lives from meaninglessness, and redeem the brokenness of their world. Then he was betrayed and tortured. He died. His followers thought that was the end of the story. They were frightened and brokenhearted. Some of them hid. A few went to tend his dead body. And then a miracle happened. (No, not *that* miracle.)

Stay with me, it's still not about a re-animated dead body – that's not the really Good News. Some have faith in a physical resurrection, and that is their faith which I respect, but I believe that a different miracle is at the heart of the Christian story.

Let's go back to the Gospel of Mark. This is the oldest gospel, by quite a bit, and the part we heard was the end of the gospel. Much later on, a few more verses were added, but this is the oldest ending we have of the Christian story. Do you remember how it ends? The women fled in terror and amazement, and didn't tell anyone, "for they were afraid." "For they were afraid"? That's not an ending.

It's not an ending, but it is a beginning. That's the first clue to the miracle. Like most everyone, Jesus' followers are messed-up, don't handle catastrophe and death very well, and even when amazed by glory, let fear have the upper hand, at least at first.

Do you know that if you visit Israel, there is a cave that is said to be the place where Jesus was laid on Good Friday? On the wall of this tomb there is a little brass sign, nothing fancy, that says, "He Is Not Here." That's the second clue, and those are words in Mark's gospel that are spoken by the young man in a white robe, sitting inside the empty tomb.

Who was this young man? He seems like a vision. He's never explained and he doesn't need to be – this is a story of faith, not a historical account. This visionary young man tells them everything they need to know, everything the early community of faith needed to know. He names their fear and tries to reassure them. He acknowledges they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth – not the Messiah, not the Christ – they are looking for the man they have known and loved and lost. He tells them, "He has been raised; he is not here."

At the end of the Christian story, a vision tells the followers that Jesus is not in the tomb – the tomb is empty. It might be a metaphor and his body is there but emptied of its being, or it could be based on a memory – his body might have been removed by followers or zealots or opponents. He might even have been re-animated, but that's not in this oldest story of his death.

It doesn't seem crucial to the story that the body is missing, rather that Jesus is not there; only emptiness remains.

Whenever someone we know dies, whom we mourn deeply and crave, that person is not at the cemetery, even if the body is six feet under. He is not here; she is not there. Don't go looking for the one you mourn in the place you last saw him or her. Even the body six feet under or in a burial cave will no longer be there in a few years. Your grief is here, but He is not here.

He is raised. This Greek word in the Christian scriptures does not mean to re-animate a dead body, does not mean that a physical body comes back to life. Being raised up is the poetic expression most used in the oldest scriptures about what happened to Jesus when he died, and it means rising up to a higher state, and is used to imply that something, the best something of life, continues after death, is raised up. The scripture tells that they did not experience the old, perishable body of Jesus. Even the accounts added decades later of physical experiences of the Risen Jesus make it clear that this Real Presence was different from Jesus before death, and from any other body.

The story that the early Christians heard was that they don't have to go to the tomb, to the cemetery, to find Jesus; that his raised-up spirit is in a different place. Where is this raised up Jesus? Here comes the third clue. The vision says that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and that they will see him there.

Galilee? A little nothing place. Not Jerusalem? Galilee – a crossroads, where lots of folks from different places and religions travel through, a little like here. Why Galilee? Galilee is home. Just an ordinary place, but it is where their lives together happened, where Jesus and his followers lived and taught and witnessed miracles of faith. Where is the raised up Jesus? He is at home, and if you follow him home, you will find him. Go, be at home.

Whoever dies is raised up in the lives of those who are left behind. Whoever dies and has a large spirit is a force for years to come in the world. You all may believe differently about life beyond life – I believe that a part of me, my soul, does continue after death and does go home to God, though I don't really know what that means – but you may not believe that. The early disciples probably did not believe that their souls continued after death – they were Hebrews at a time when that would have been an unusual belief. They believed that at the end time, they had a chance of coming back - a restored Peaceable Kingdom. Their beliefs changed.

What the disciples experienced was that Jesus was raised up among them and the followers called this miracle the Body of Christ – and they were the Body of Christ. The Church was the raised-up Jesus. They knew that his spirit continued and that they could still follow this large soul, this so-close-to-God being that they called him the Son of God. To them, Jesus was bigger than any prophet who had ever returned in the spirit to a people; Jesus was bigger than anyone's dead father or mother in the ability to return to folks personally. They experienced his Real Presence among them. Jesus was so large to his followers that he could go on and on for them, and they could find him in their everyday lives, at home, in Galilee, eating breakfast by the sea, anywhere.

What did the gospel, good news story tell the followers of Jesus? The Gospel of Mark said that even though they were messed up, dejected, and scared, (in other words, normal), that first clue, that they could begin again, and again, and again, in hope. The story said that Jesus is not in the dead body, the missing body, the empty tomb, or any other place that reeks of our brokenness – the second clue. He is not here. His spirit is raised. Death and evil do not have the final power – love and life and spirit do.

And as for the third clue – it is the Christian map, the Way, and it's there at the end of the Gospel of Mark. Go, follow Jesus, follow him home and he will be with you. For as long as Christianity has been around, people have been known as Christians because they follow Jesus, or follow the Gospel, or follow the Way.

The amazing miracle that happened after Jesus died was that his followers, his scared, pathetic followers, still followed him. They found that the raised up Jesus, whom they called Christ, which means the 'Anointed One', was still saving their lives from meaninglessness, and still redeeming the brokenness of their world, only now it was them – they were the Body of Christ. This Church, this Body, knew that evil and death were conquered by love and life, and that if they followed Jesus, the Way of Jesus, then they were at one with the Risen Christ, and that made them unbelievably powerful and free. Now, practicing Christians were and are still practicing, like me; they don't fully have this Way figured out, but when they get it even just a little bit right, WOW.

This is what I believe the Gospel of Mark meant to the early followers of Jesus. They felt he was calling to them, "Follow me home. You will find me in your ordinary lives. You will be raised up. You will be at home with yourselves and the world. Your love is so big that it will save you." The center of the Christian story is this: if you follow the Way of love and life, then you will be raised up, freed, and ready to redeem the world from brokenness. The miracle continues as lives are transformed. This is one of the ways home. Jesus' Way is not the only way home, but it is a spacious way.

How did **I** get home, you might ask? Kind of a miracle, even just being alive, being able to breathe and eat and walk again all still feel very miraculous to me – I have come so far. The

furthest is from the hell of the spirit. I began to pray when I was finally conscious enough and soon I was graced with a second wisdom, this time not from the land of the devilish delusion. I received a grace-filled glimpse of oneness, unity; something I've always believed was at the heart of spirituality. I also could see fully how flawed I am – you have a lot of time to think about your unlovable parts in the ICU. The stumbling block I didn't even know I had was that I'd thought the oneness had to involve being fully good, when truly we are none of us so, and then I realized quite deeply that the unity comes through humility, from accepting ourselves and all others, with all the flaws; the already and not yet beloved community. I entered into a period of wild joy and great love and incredible gratitude, and alleluia living, right around Easter last year. And then, I had an operation and had to learn how to breathe again, and everything else that I have been doing this last year to heal, but now I am home again, in every way.

Many have said that it's a miracle I am alive – ah, yes, and I rejoice in being alive, but that's not the miracle I'm touched by the most. Now you know another one – the miracle that my spirit was transformed from a place of horrible hellishness to the glory of unity, love and joy, at least for a little while. My Christian path of prayer and story helped me, but that miracle was all grace. Ah yes, that was marvelous, but there is yet another amazing miracle.

Thich Nhat Hanh has posed the possibility that the next Buddha may not take the form of an individual, but may come as a loving community. Perhaps the Christian Second Coming can be best understood in this way; the next Messiah will be an anointed and Holy Community whose spirit is raised up in Love. Did the early Church believe this when they called themselves the Body of Christ? (I wonder.) My beloved community – you, my loved ones – my beloved community was raised up in the Spirit; became, at least for a little while, the Church Universal,

the Risen One, and that is a great miracle indeed. A very mixed group of folks, most of whom would *never* think of themselves at the Body of Christ, demonstrated that great miracle which I celebrate today – the spirit raised up in Beloved Community. Talk about a miracle! I know; the miracle was tender and short. We are not all Holy Ones now; we are still practicing. We'll get it eventually; we'll be the beloved community that is not yet, and yet is already here.

I believe in the resurrection for I have known it, in my own self and in others and in the story of Jesus, and in the Beloved Community, in you. Being raised up in the spirit means faith in life and love, a transcending, alleluia joy.

Rise up! Happy Easter! May Joy be yours! Alleluia.