

THE PARABLE OF EASTER: PERSONAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

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One Easter Sunday, a few years ago, the minister of a Methodist Church called the children to come to the front of the sanctuary for the Time with Children. Once all the kids were sitting on the floor in front of him, the minister began with the question: Who knows what the word “resurrection” means? After a second or two of silence, one little boy raised his hand. When the minister called on him, he said, “I don’t know what it means, but I know that if it lasts longer than four hours, you need to see a doctor.”

Speaking of resurrection...

How can any one church, one faith, one culture own the copyright on resurrection? The spring time, the equinox, new life, new beginnings, forgiving the past and gazing toward new horizons — These wonders are eternal and they are realities for all faiths and all people.

The ancient writings of Greek and Roman mythology were filled with stories of life after death. You may remember the story of the Phoenix.

Listen to this abbreviated version:

One day, when the world was still very young, the sun looked down and saw a magnificent bird. The beautiful bird dazzled the sun. “Glorious Phoenix bird, you shall be my bird and live forever! Live forever!” the sun called out.

After hearing the sun, the Phoenix was overjoyed. It danced around in the sky. But the poor bird was not happy for long. It was so magnificent that everyone wanted to have a feather from it. All kinds of people chased the Phoenix, attempting to trap it.

The Phoenix was incredibly upset so it thought, "I shall fly away and go east. I shall fly to the land of the rising sun." At last, the Phoenix came to the desert. The desert was free from all humans. It flew freely in the desert.

Years passed and the Phoenix did not die. Almost five hundred years later, the Phoenix grew old and feeble. It could not soar high among the clouds nor could it sing as it used to. "I don't want to live like this," thought the old Phoenix, "I want to be young again."

So, the Phoenix decided to return to the land it came from.

Finally, the Phoenix reached its destination. There it found a tall tree and set to building a nest.

Now, everything was ready. So the Phoenix lifted its head and sang one last time, The sun swiftly chased the clouds and put the winds at rest and shone down the hillside with all its power. A blinding sight it was!

All the animals ran back to their caves and hid away from the sun's fierce rays. Only the Phoenix sat on its nest. It bathed in the sun's light. Suddenly, there was flash and the Phoenix was surrounded by fire. When the flames died out, the Phoenix was nowhere to be seen. All that was left was a silver-gray ash. (Pause)

Then the ash began to tremble and it started rising upwards. Slowly a young bird's head emerged, and the bird grew as every minute passed by. Finally, the bird was itself again. The Phoenix had risen from the ashes.

The Phoenix flew towards the city of sun, and it lives there still. But every five hundred years, when it grows weak it returns and builds a nest. It sings to the sun again and is surrounded by flames. And each time, it rises from its own ashes young and strong.

There are many other myths about the gods living and dying and then living again. Two names in Greek mythology are **Dionysus**, the infant who was torn to pieces by the evil Titans. But his heart was saved by Athena, and he was resurrected by Zeus. And **Persephone** who ends up symbolically dying when she goes to live with Hades

in the underworld, then she's symbolically resurrected when she returns to her mother in the land of the living. This is her fate year after year, and the whole world mirrors her death and resurrection, because when she descends to Hades, winter arrives and the plants die. When she returns to the living, she brings spring with her.

Joseph Campbell would tell us that a myth, as different from a folk tale, is a ubiquitous story about the human condition and the journey of the human spirit — about that which happens internally and unconsciously in our own psyches. They are stories that are not bound by a certain race or culture - they are universal.

One more myth worth mentioning is the story of **Prometheus** who met with a cruel fate for stealing fire from the gods for the human race. Prometheus stole the fire of the gods and gave it as a gift to the humans who so needed fire to create civilization. The very act of stealing fire was creative. When Prometheus did steal the fire, Zeus was outraged and condemned Prometheus to be lashed to a rock where a vulture would feed each morning on his liver. One interpretation of that story is that Prometheus is the artist whose energy (the liver) is “spent” at the end of each day, but it grows back each night for another day of creative work.

Reflecting on this interpretation, Matthew Fox examines the archetype of the liver. It cleanses and recycles the toxins in our bodies. The artist cleans and recycles the toxins in a culture. Artists turn pain into insight — struggle into triumph — ugliness into beauty — forgetfulness into remembering — and grief into rejoicing.

In a book by Matthew Fox titled *Creativity*, he speaks of CREATIVITY as the essence of our nature as humans. In that sense, every human is an artist. Fox is not talking about creativity as in arts and crafts - he is talking about creativity as the most elemental and innermost and deeply spiritual aspect of our being. He works with the idea that our fear of death is the major obstacle to creativity. He says that it is our powers of creativity that distinguish us from other species. Evil as well as profound goodness transpires through creativity. Human creativity is capable of both extreme good and extreme evil. Fox has a chapter in his book entitled

“Revisioning Easter: Rolling away the obstacles to creativity so that the spirit of creativity can resurrect.”

For Fox, the Easter story is about the triumph of creativity. Think about it...what is wilder in its implications than the notion that resurrection overcomes death? In the biblical story, a “large boulder” blocks the door to the tomb where Jesus’ body lies. We are all entombed with large boulders blocking our escape and liberation.” What are the boulders that hold you captive and keep you from expressing your whole Self - your full potential?

Now let’s look at the Christian myth.

For me, the biblical stories of resurrection are not just for Christians — these stories can impart meaning for all people, religious or not. And certainly they have meaning far beyond any literal interpretation. So, if there was no literal empty tomb, if the story did not happen exactly the way they “report” it, what is their purpose and what do they mean?

John Dominic Crossan suggests the stories are not meant to be historical/factual, but rather parabolic. The genre of parable, like the parables that Jesus told, is not dependent on historical factuality in order to be truth-filled or contain truth. But what DO they mean, then?

Crossan and Marcus Borg, both renown scholars, say that “Easter completes the archetypal pattern at the center of the *Christian* life: death and resurrection. I would say the stories complete the archetypal pattern at the center of an evolving, conscious life.. and both parts of the pattern, death AND resurrection, are essential.

So let me put your anxiety at ease. I am not talking about the theology of the fundamentalists and evangelicals who still interpret the stories of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection as sacrificial atonement for the sins of the world. That is not where I am going. In fact the Jesus story, as I understand it (along with scholars like Borg and Crossan), is not about something that Jesus did for us; it is the metaphor for our human journey toward wholeness.

So let's look at the Easter story as parable:

The Gospel of Mark is the earliest and shortest of the gospels. (Matthew and Luke each embellish the original story with more details.

One thing that makes Mark's story so unique is that it is brief - only eight verses.

The original manuscript does not even report an appearance of the risen Jesus. Those stories are only in the other 3 gospels. In Mark's account, a man dressed in white sits in the tomb and tells the women that they shouldn't be looking for the living among the dead.

Mark's story ends very abruptly: *So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (16:8)*. That ending, in the judgement of most all leading biblical scholars, is the original ending of Mark. About the second century, a longer ending was added to Mark, because the church wanted and needed to harmonize the Gospels for purpose of preaching and teaching.

As a Jewish mystic, Jesus, was intimately connected to the Divine. He was the finger pointing to the moon. And if you are familiar with the Jungian concept of the Self (our wholeness), Jesus is the archetype of the Self. So the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, the descent into hell, and the resurrection — are all descriptive of the stages of the inner process of transformation. It is the slow, painful death of our small ego - our preoccupation with our individual fears, concerns, desires, achievements - in order to be resurrected to a new self, a new way of being in the world. What would that new way of being look like for you? What would have to die in you first? And just like the story of the Phoenix, it is a process that happens - not just once - but over and over again.

But if we only emphasize the personal meaning, "we betray the political passion for which Jesus, was willing to risk his life." It was his conscious and intentional confrontation with imperialism. He was a non-violent revolutionary - resisting the domination system of his time. It was his clash with empire and the religious authorities that were in collusion with empire that resulted in his execution.

So think about this...the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter sees the human problem as injustice - not personal moral failure but our collective participation in systems of injustice. And, according to the story, the solution to this problem is Divine justice. Divine justice looks like a society in which the poor, oppressed, and marginalized are lifted up, and power and privilege are shared by all.

Yes...Resurrection is about personal transformation in this life AND it is more than that. Resurrection is also about acknowledging the reality of suffering and death and still choosing life — and not just any life, but a life filled with meaning and purpose — the pursuit of justice and the celebration of difference. It is about the courage to live this life boldly - knowing there will be consequences for speaking our truth to the world.

Namaste.

Resources Used for Presentation at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock, Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019:

Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet, by Matthew Fox

The Last Week: The Day by Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem,
by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan

The Power of Myth, by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers

Closing words:

Say “yes” to life! And may our lives be renewed again and again with meaning, purpose, courage and hope.