



## Sermon

We Unitarian Universalists tend to have a difficult time knowing what to do with Easter. We struggle with Easter because many of us are rational people and we don't want to be asked to believe in anything that demands we suspend our thinking minds. There's a pretty big miracle that happens at Easter, and many of us have experienced a form of Christianity that demanded that we believe in that resurrection, literally, and in fact that our faithfulness could be measured by our level of belief. For that reason, many Unitarian Universalists avoid Easter altogether and turn it into a celebration of Spring. It's our way of rebelling against a hurtful religious history.

But there's another reason, in fact, a bigger reason, that we struggle with Easter. We struggle because the theology that is usually used to give it meaning and value seems so offensive. That theology is called substitutionary atonement, and what it says is that Jesus was crucified as a sacrifice for our sins. His horrible death was what God needed to forgive us for all the sinful things we do. God needed someone to pay the price. At the same time, we are the ones who hammered in those nails, and even though we didn't deserve it, Jesus then rose from the dead so that we could be saved from damnation. I would hazard a guess that for those of you who have left Christian churches to become Unitarian Universalist, this theology is part of your reason for leaving. It was certainly mine. I could not reconcile myself with a theology of a blood-thirsty God who needed his son to die a horrible death in order for me to be reconciled to him.

There was also a more personal reason. I come from a family that has been marked by generations of violence. All of my elders have struggled with a theology that was imposed onto their bodies and their spirits. The God they were supposed to believe in had been beaten into them physically and emotionally. I would not worship such a god.

We must have a different theology of the Easter story because the doctrine of substitutionary atonement is fundamentally flawed, dangerous and abusive. In fact, I'm not the only one who has come to that conclusion. Liberal religious people around the world are becoming louder and louder in proclaiming that the whole concept of substitutionary atonement is a dangerous theology, completely out of keeping with Jesus' teachings, and supports a worldview of redemptive violence that has imprisoned us in cycles of violence. Redemptive violence is the idea that justice is created and maintained through violence, and that if justice is in peril, you restore it through more violence. Violence is sacred. Violence is divinely ordained. Violence is cleansing. Violence restores what has been broken.

The theology of redemptive violence was the bread and butter of the Roman Empire. The one who could use violence to impose their will on the people under them was held up as a God. In Roman theology, Ceasar was God. It was this theology of imperial might that the Roman Empire proclaimed during Passover when Pontius Pilate rode into the city in all his glory, surrounded by soldiers in full regalia. He knew that the Jewish people became more resentful than usual of the Romans during Passover, because their celebration of freedom from Egypt gave them religious language to challenge their new rulers. And sometimes that language spurred them on to resistance. So his parade was about saying, "Don't even try. I have the power to determine your fate. You are nothing beside the imperial divinely ordained power that I bear."

Compare this to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He rode on a borrowed donkey into the poorest part of the city. He and his disciples had no weapons. They wore the clothing of peasants, and those who met them pulled palm leaves off the trees and threw their modest clothing on the ground before them. And they risked their lives to do so because they stood in peaceful resistance to the theology of redemptive violence.

What theology was operating in Jesus' parade? This parade was a collective creation, not imposed from without but emerging from within. The power of this parade rested not with the mighty but with the poorest and the most powerless. Jesus' radical message of peace and unconditional love was an ongoing challenge to the theology of empire. When Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is nigh," what he was saying is that the time was coming when the powerful would be brought down and the powerless would become the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. What did he say in the Sermon on the Mount? Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Good Friday was the Roman attempt to eliminate this radical message of peace and unconditional love using the power of redemptive violence. A crucifixion was the most humiliating death sentence that the Roman Empire handed out. It was as public as possible so that those on display would send a bone chilling message to anyone who dared to challenge the theology of redemptive violence.

These are the tools of redemptive violence: anger, fear, betrayal, and injustice. Whenever we live through anger, fear, betrayal, and injustice, we are living the theology of redemptive violence and adding to its power. The crucifixion happens when our hearts become closed, when we become blind to the consequences of our actions, when we dehumanize others or minimize our responsibility for this world. We have a lot of crucifixions going on. We are crucifying our earth. Our economy crucifies the weakest. Our health care system crucifies the poorest. Anti-immigrant sentiment is crucifying those identified as outsiders. Our nation clings to the illusion of empire even as its political, economic and cultural power slip away. Are we following the one who arrives in a blaze of glory and might, or the one who enters on a donkey and asks for our softened hearts?

Both Unitarianism and Universalism were born because enough people were tired of the theology of substitutionary atonement. Unitarianism said we aren't depraved. We are made in the image of God. Jesus invited us to live fully into that promise. Universalism said that God would never need such a sacrifice. God is pure love and we are called to respond to that love with gratitude and thanksgiving. The challenge of Easter is for us to turn away from our addiction to redemptive violence and into the image of the holy in which we are made, in the spirit of the unconditional love and forgiveness that has always been there for us, so that we become agents of resurrection in a world with far too many crucifixions.

"Killing Jesus didn't do any good. In fact, it backfired pretty badly. People didn't forget what he said. His followers loved him so much they went on teaching in his name." (Christine Robinson) And although many have tried to twist that teaching for their own selfish needs, the teaching has never disappeared. You find it in all the religions of the world and in every culture, and a piece of it in every heart. Let us be true to that teaching, let us be true to the resurrection that is promised for us all, that lives and breathes through us and in us and beyond us. Amen and blessed be.

#### Sources

Rev. Christine Robinson "A Tennebrae Easter Service." Celebrating Easter and Spring. Eds. Seaburg and Harris.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. The Last Week: What the Gospels really teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem.

James Juhnke and Carol Hunter. The Missing Peace: Non-violent alternatives in United States History.