

# “Deepening Our Understanding of Easter”

Reflection by Allan McKeown (April 5, 2015)

We know Easter comes from the name of a pagan goddess - itself derived from the fact that the Sun rises in the east and that after the cold, the solitude, darkness and struggle of Winter, the Sun in the Springtime brings warmth and new life, hope and renewal.

In the Springtime, people need to hear good news to help them forget the hardships of winter and to look forward to better times. Christians adapted the Easter celebration to include the good news that Jesus had risen from the dead and with that came the promise that all those who believed in a God who sent his son Jesus to be executed as a sacrifice so that humans could be “saved” from their sins could look forward to a life after their own death, to be with Jesus, and their loved ones, in Paradise.

It is a story that today many Christians still accept as a literal truth.

It is a belief that I repeated every Sunday morning as a boy when we stood to recite the Nicene Creed in unison in my Church of Ireland congregation in Belfast, joining with Anglicans around the world.

It is a belief that many progressive Christians today have trouble accepting. The Easter story is a fascinating and complex one and today I will reflect on some aspects of it - acknowledging that I am not a theologian or biblical scholar - just a curious pilgrim, one among many, on a spiritual journey of exploration and discovery.

Easter, like Christmas, was a Christian response to ancient pagan worship rituals and an alternative to the Jewish celebration of Passover. But more than that, according to theologian Tom Harpur, it is the most potent myth in the history of human thought (“Myth” in the true meaning of that word: *a story whose truth takes us into another realm of understanding*).

But if we interpret the story in a literalist sense we lose the meaning of the myth and its power to bring about a change of consciousness in each of us - to transform us in ways that allow us to be more truly ourselves, to liberate us to live more intensely, to be a light unto ourselves and to others whose lives we touch. The suffering, death and resurrection are about your life and mine, about dying to the past and embracing the future with less fear of suffering and death, and more passion about living - living on

a higher spiritual plane with greater conscious awareness, wisdom and peace. That is the potential power of this myth.

The Easter story in the literalist sense is like a Greek Tragedy. It has everything: celebrity worship of Jesus on Palm Sunday, then betrayal, guilt, torture, sacrifice, sorrow, loneliness and despair, violent death, forgiveness, hope and love.

There is the triumphant journey of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey, with people waving palm leaves in tribute, Jesus being emboldened to go into the temple and overturn the tables of the money-lenders and rebuke them in anger, the efforts of the church leaders, the Pharisees to convince the Romans to arrest Jesus who they see as a threat to their power and authority; his betrayal by Judas and his arrest; the reluctance of the Romans to condemn him to death, the execution warrant finally granted, his abandonment by his disciples; Peter's fear of arrest and his denial of even knowing Jesus; Jesus' torture and humiliation, his physical and psychological suffering, his despair and yet his ability to pray that his tormentors be forgiven, for they know not what they do; his death on the cross, the recovery from the cross of his body by some friends and the entombment of his corpse. Later Mary discovers that the stone is rolled away from the entrance and the tomb is empty. Jesus then makes a re-appearance in a room to his followers and declares he is risen.

Jesus was executed by a military empire that used crucifixion to terrorize the occupied and oppressed peoples and to discourage revolution. It was carried out in full public view and often mass crucifixions involving many victims were carried out. Being nailed to a cross is a long, brutal and cruel suffering before death brings relief.

The consequence of Jesus' execution was that his death ruptured his community and its scattered ashes were difficult to restore to flame. Without the resurrection and the promise of atonement for our sins and the promise of eternal life, this would be a very grim story indeed.

And yet, in Thomas Jefferson's famous Bible he makes no reference to a resurrection. Jefferson, the 3<sup>rd</sup>. President of the US, was a Unitarian and a Biblical scholar. (of the first 5 American Presidents, 3 were Unitarians). He believed that the 4 gospels were a very incomplete account of Jesus and he wanted to rid them of all supernaturalism and distill what he could about the real life of Jesus. He called his effort "*The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth - in English, French, Greek and Latin*".

It later became known as "*The Jefferson Bible*"; it contained no references to a virgin birth, no miracles, no resurrection. Jefferson, like a good heretical Unitarian Christian, believed that the life and philosophy of Jesus had later been corrupted by

St. Paul into a religion about Jesus and the monstrosities of dogma, superstition and priest-craft followed and became Christian orthodoxy.

The essence of Jesus' life needed to be rescued from these distortions, so that the true personality and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, - the renegade, profeminist, bachelor Jew who reminded the people of the ancient Hebrew wisdom to love our neighbours as ourselves, and to take a stand against power, oppression and greed, - that these lessons might rise up from the dead page - a resurrection of renewed enlightenment that would unify Christians and not divide them but instead provide a set of morals for living a good and purposeful life as a Christian.

Certainly the idea of God literally sending his son to be sacrificed for our salvation would have been unconscionable to Jefferson. Divine child abuse it has been called and a theology that condones violent killing of a child is a troubling one.

There are many others who refuse to accept the Church's literal interpretation of sacrifice. They say that it condones torture and murder as the will of God. They say that it negates those who loved and missed Jesus, those who did not want him to die. It says these followers were wrong and that the enemies who cared nothing for him were right. They say the theological message becomes distorted to condone intimate violence as necessary for atonement and that such divinely inspired violence is holy and good.

Many theologians believe that Christianity has not been honest in addressing these concerns and one consequence is that "Divine intimate violence" has been used as an excuse for men to subjugate women and children and to justify war. Let me quote from a sermon by Rebecca Ann Parker a Unitarian minister and co-author of *"Proverbs of Ashes - Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for what saves us"*:

*In a sermon to her congregation one Sunday she said: "If God is imagined as a fatherly torturer, earthly parents are also justified, perhaps even required, to teach through violence. Children are instructed to understand their submission to pain as a form of love. Behind closed doors, in our own community, spouses and children are battered by abusers who justify their actions as necessary, loving discipline. "I only hit her because I love her". "I'm doing this for your own good". The child or spouse who believes that obedience is what God wants may put up with abuse in an effort to be a good Christian".*

*"Theology that defines virtue as obedience to God suppresses the virtue of revolt. A woman being battered by her husband will be counseled to be obedient as Jesus was*

*to God. After all, Eve brought sin into the world by her disobedience. A good woman submits to her husband as he submits to God.*

*“But obedience is not a virtue. It is an evasion of our responsibility. Religion must engage us in the exercise of our responsibilities, not teach us to deny the power that is ours.” unquote*

Rebecca was moved to challenge her congregation in this way after being coerced into having an abortion by her partner and then being abandoned by him. She realized that some other women in her congregation were having various challenges of power and control in their relationships and this sermon became a starting point to encourage them to come together and share their stories with each other in a loving and supportive environment.

If God condones torture and violence to save humanity then it is a short leap of faith to also justify war and of course Western powers have always believed they are doing God’s work when they go to war. The European powers who invaded and subjugated the Native Peoples of the world believed they were carrying out God’s plan.

Today, many Christian fundamentalists view the so called “war on Terror” as a crusade against Islam. “God Bless America” - a phrase first used by President Reagan, has often been interpreted to mean that the military is carrying out the will of God.

So let me return to the truth of the Easter story as a powerful myth. In a previous service I lead a number of years ago, I suggested that the best Easter story was in fact written by a Unitarian -Charles Dickens, “*A Christmas Carol*”. Ebenezer Scrooge is a man who is the walking dead. He is locked in a prison of twisted grief, greed and loneliness. The three spirits force him to stare into the abyss, acknowledge the reality and truth of his past and present and possible future and this catharsis allows him to become transformed - to be resurrected from his miserable life and to understand how to live and love again.

The message of Easter is that it challenges each one of us to confront the truth of our lives and guide us to a mystical resurrection - the rebirth of our spirit. We acknowledge that life can drag us down, sometimes horribly - that all of us experience losses, heart-aches and sorrows in our lives.

But Easter offers us the hope that we can find a way to not deny or obliterate our grief but to confront it and transcend it, to be reborn into a new way of living and a greater understanding of the meaning of our lives. To “die” to the old you and come again to life!

Granted it may seem like a daunting challenge and you may not be able to do it alone - and you won't have the help of ghosts. We may need some kind of help on our journey, possibly including professional care and support and the love and support of family and friends, including us. "*We are here for each other*" it states on our order of service each Sunday. We are a loving community as much as Rebecca Ann Parker's congregation is.

I certainly don't want to minimize anyone's personal challenges but I am just saying that in order to live fully we should attempt to transcend our suffering and discover an authentic life that will realize our potential for living at peace with ourselves and in communion with others.

Without referencing any Christian theology in "*A Christmas Carol*", Dickens nevertheless brilliantly illustrates that you don't need to believe in God to be good - you just have to find the love and goodness within you - which is really what every religion is about. What you believe is not as important as how you live your life.

Jean Vanier ("*L'Arche*"- *transformational communities for the intellectually challenged and those who work/volunteer there - acceptance and love*) refers to making these changes as steps to our liberation: to discovering our more compassionate and loving natures while also shedding our illusions - perhaps of narcissism and egotism and our fears - to learn the spiritual reward found in a life of gratitude, kindness and service. By serving others we discover our humanity.

*(note: Jean Vanier was recently awarded the 2015 Templeton Prize which honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works. Established in 1972 by the late Sir John Templeton, the Prize aims, in his words, to identify "entrepreneurs of the spirit"—outstanding individuals who have devoted their talents to expanding our vision of human purpose and ultimate reality. The Prize celebrates no particular faith tradition or notion of God, but rather the quest for progress in humanity's efforts to comprehend the many and diverse manifestations of the Divine).*

We live in a world that does its best to dumb us down and make us succumb to soul destroying conformity. A world that equates happiness with materialism but we know that in reality materialism kills us spiritually.

Only when we challenge ourselves to change, can we become transformed. Transformation and wisdom does not come from a new piece of information, from anything I have said, or anything that you already know. Transformation and wisdom

come from what we do not know but are open to experiencing. Remember, a myth takes us beyond the present way of thinking and believing into another realm of understanding.

To conclude I invite you to join me in a meditation: ***“Rolling Away the Stone”***

*In the tomb of the soul we carry secrets, yearnings, pains, frustrations, fears, regrets, worries.*

*In the tomb of the soul we take refuge from the world and its heaviness.*

*In the tomb of the soul we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness.*

*Sometimes this is a comfort, sometimes it is an escape.*

*Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us from life.*

*Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us and locks us up with our own concerns.*

*In this season where light and darkness balance the day, we seek balance for ourselves.*

*Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.*

Sarah York