

RESURRECTING HALLELUJAH

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

We offer two readings this morning. The first, Psalm 149 one of the last five psalms in the Hebrew scripture known as the Hallelujah Psalms. This is an alternative translation by Stephen Mitchell.

Sing to the Lord a new song; praise him with words and silence.
Praise him through all your actions; praise him in sorrow and in joy.
Praise him with music and dancing, with bodies moving in delight.
Let the wise sing out in their freedom; let the whole earth echo their song.
Let all God's creatures be peaceful and walk in the path of true life.

And this adapted from Rev. Scott Alexander.

So I pray you, blessed and fragile folk, go ahead, each and everyone of you...this day or any other.
No matter what it is that particularly befalls, afflicts, limits, pains or confounds you, Practice resurrection! Make a judgment for life over death.
No matter what life circumstance threatens to entomb and disempower you, roll that stubborn rock away - just roll it away!
Nobody else can or will do it.... No matter what entombs your heart, no matter what now constricts your life or being, ROLL THAT ROCK AWAY!
Trust that Easter is true. Trust that life (in spite of the many dangers and sorrows which always accompany it) remains a promise and a possibility.
You are free this day - any day - to practice resurrection!
You are free to retain your moral agency as a person, and continue to shine out in your living....
This Easter - this bright and beautiful Spring season – freedom [and the] possibility of the human heart is assurance enough.
Each day we can choose to live with courage and hope and purpose - and for freedom.
[And so], there comes to my trembling heart this Easter morning, a cry of "Hallelujah".

SERMON

Easter is early this year, but you may not realize just how early. Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. It is based on the lunar Hebrew calendar and therefore based on an even more ancient human calendar. So yes, you can make the case that this most holy of Christian holidays has pagan roots. I find this far more heartening than ironic. For when we celebrate Easter, we are connected to an ancient human lineage, establishing our connection to one another and to a turning earth orbited by a waning and waxing moon.

Because it is lunar, Easter moves around on our Roman calendar. The equinox, that glorious first day of spring, arrived on Thursday and the moon was full on Friday. The first Sunday following those celestial events is today March 23. Easter can only possibly fall one day earlier, on March 22.

More fascinating to me is the rarity of Easter being this early. The next time Easter will be on March 23 will be the year 2228 – 220 years from now. The last time it was this early was 1913. Those 95 and older, and I not sure that anyone here qualifies, are the only ones that were around for that.

The last time Easter was one day earlier, on March 22 was in 1818. The next time it will be its earliest is the year 2285 – 227 years from now. So this is the earliest Easter any of us here will see in our lifetimes.

It is, of course, not coincidental that Easter falls in the season of rebirth and fertility. Not coincidental that we celebrate the myth and metaphor of resurrection at this time of the year. But in this case, it is not a matter of Christians appropriating a pagan holiday because the death of Jesus was a historical event. Key to the story is that Jesus returned to Jerusalem for Passover – the celebration of the liberation of the Jews from Egypt. And Jesus was crucified and died just as the sunset for the Jewish Sabbath on Friday when all work must cease. His followers could not bury him properly and had to wait until the Sabbath was over to ceremonially anoint his body. And so they came on Sunday morning only to find the stone rolled away and an empty tomb. Somewhere in there, we shift from historicity to myth, although it's not clear exactly where. Passover is based on an ancient lunar schedule. What better time than spring to for the ancient Hebrews to celebrate their story of liberation from bondage? And because Passover is in the spring, the Easter story lands, too, in the spring. What better time to celebrate the grand human metaphor of resurrection and rebirth than the season when the earth blooms anew?

Yet Easter, as we now know, rarely actually falls so very close to the first day of spring. So we have double reason to celebrate. To sing Hallelujah. The earth awakes again and so do we. Hallelujah.

Unitarian Universalists have a complicated relationship with Easter. We love the metaphors of rebirth and fertility, but the crucifixion – which is essentially the story of a powerful nation torturing a dissident slowly to death – is another matter. We find nothing redemptive in such a death. Personally, it gives me the willies, now more than ever as I contemplate my place in a powerful nation which seems unwilling to repudiate torture.

But our complicated relationship with this holy day has sometimes led Unitarians to Easter celebrations about flowers and eggs and bunnies, embracing the pagan symbols of fertility and avoiding the hard parts of the story. There can be value in this, but too often it keeps us on the surface, failing to engage the deeper human truths, the drama of human suffering and mortality and the real possibilities of redemption and resurrection in our lives.

As for Lent, the season of fasting and denial that Christians use to prepare themselves for the power of resurrection, we usually simply ignore it. As part of that preparation Christians “bury” Hallelujah. They fast from praises, metaphorically entering the tomb and resisting pushing the stone away too soon.

We might think this kind of self-denial and sacrifice counter productive at the very least. It can seem unnecessarily life-denying and we like to think of ourselves as a life-affirming faith. We see no need to bury our Hallelujahs. Why go voluntarily into the cave?

But at least practicing Christians limit their Lenten discipline, their time in the cave with the stone rolled over, it to six weeks. I would posit that we are in danger of spending far more time there.

Unitarian Universalism is a hopeful faith. We truly believe that we are called upon to answer the pain and suffering in the world with compassion and justice. And we believe that we have agency. That we can make a difference. That we can change the world with our love – hands and hearts more than willing to pitch in.

Yet precisely because we so want to “fix” all the ills of the world, all these troubles can overwhelm us. There is so much amiss. We remain embroiled in an immoral war. As of this morning at least 3996 members of the US military have been killed, along with thousands of soldiers from other countries and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. At home the economy is teetering. Oil prices are at record highs. The gap between the richest and the poorest among us grows. The planet is warming and so much of the world still spews out green house gases at an alarming rate.

To say nothing of what might be happening closer to home within your own family. Are you dealing with some great sorrow, illness or death? Are you or someone you love dealing with an addiction or abuse? Perhaps someone close to you is depressed. Perhaps you are carrying an anxiety through life that won't let you rest.

It can all seem so overwhelming that we fall into despair, isolation and fear. Life can lose meaning and purpose. We can lose our sense of capacity and agency in waves of powerlessness. At our worst we fall into cynicism, become negative and life-denying. It all can feel so hopeless and serious. And we bury our Hallelujahs whether we mean to or not. We enter the cave, roll the stone over, and sit with worries that threaten to bury our Hallelujahs more permanently.

But we need Hallelujahs at such times most of all. We must let the Hallelujahs come, encouraging us to lay our burdens down. We must let the Hallelujahs rise within us, connecting us with the beauty of the earth we so desperately want to save. We must let the Hallelujahs burst forth in dance and in song as we remember once the simple gift and great joy of life itself. Such Hallelujahs give us the strength to move through the challenge and suffering.

Rev. Scott Alexander says it helps him to turn Easter into a verb. He writes:

Yes, of course, Easter as a verb! Easter as a decision...a decision of the heart against Crucifixion. Easter as the spiritual process of a human being moving against negation and death...moving against meaninglessness and despair ... moving against powerlessness and incapacitation . If easter is an everyday verb of human being, then it does not just belong to those who call themselves Christians, it becomes spiritually accessible to each and every one of us year-round. If easter is a verb that describes a life-saving decision that can happen within us in moments of life crisis, then it transcends this old mythic story about the death of an itinerant preacher on a cross. I easter...you easter...we easter together by means of the resurrections of the spirit we work to bring to birth in our battered, trembling hearts

For though we wish it were not so Good Friday and the crucifixion happened. They point to the truths that we are mortal, we suffer, there is violence and greed in the world. But Easter puts us in touch with another powerful, life-affirming truth. If Easter, says Alexander, is not an exclusively Christian celebration. He writes, “Easter is not a day long Spring holiday day of bunnies, bonnets and bluebirds. Easter is rather a verb of brave human being. It is ... a daily possibility, a decision we can each make (when we face the inevitable difficulties in our lives [and sorrows in the world]) to practice resurrection.”

It is good that the calendar moves ever onward, that the moon orbits the earth in a regular pattern, helping us mark the days and seasons, providing us with occasion to dust off our Hallelujahs, to roll away the stone and carry them out of the cave and into the light. For human as we are, we sometimes need permission to celebrate. To sing praises for all that is good, all that is right, for all that we can do. To see life as a miracle.

Sometimes we need to be given permission and sometimes we need to be cajoled, shaken, jostled, exhorted into singing praises. Some of you may know Rev. Scott Alexander whom I have quoted liberally here for he is a force of nature and hard to miss when he is in a room. While I might be one

to give permission, Scott might seeks to have you vibrate with his own frequency and wake you up to the glorious human truths that call forth Hallelujahs.

I can just see him in his pulpit in Virginia, exhorting his flock:

Practice resurrection! Make a judgment for life over death.

No matter what life circumstance threatens to entomb and disempower you, roll that stubborn rock away - just roll it away!

Nobody else can or will do it.... No matter what entombs your heart, no matter what now constricts your life or being, ROLL THAT ROCK AWAY!

Trust that Easter is true. Trust that life (in spite of the many dangers and sorrows which always accompany it) remains a promise and a possibility.

You are free this day - any day - to practice resurrection!

We need our Hallelujahs perhaps most of all in these worrisome days. So on this Easter I encourage you to take them out. Give them an airing. Take time to sing praises. Indeed, let every instrument be tuned for praise. Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise. Let us sing Hallelujah. It's spring for goodness sake.

Blessed be.

Amen.