

Sunday April 12, 2020 Pacific Unitarian Church, Easter Sunday Rev. Steve Wilson, Title: It is not Easter Yet.

I have some bad news. It's not really Easter yet. Not really, not fully. The calendar is right, of course, but the timing feels wrong. I don't think I'm making a radically bold statement here. I suspect it snuck up on you, too.

I think it is clear. When you see the simple grief of parents struggling to find any time free from kids to hide eggs, to our inability to gather with family because of the quarantine, it's not Easter yet.

For those unable to see loved ones in quarantine, to those working 12-hour days in our hospitals, to the supermarket clerks forced to play the strange game of "does this person have the coronavirus" roulette with a new stranger every 40 seconds, the idea that it is Easter is almost an insult.

With the hollow audio of thousands of empty churches being streamed into homes right now, to, obviously, those thousands of people either sick or dying from the coronavirus right now, it is plain to everyone paying attention that the calendar is a liar. It's not quite Easter yet.

This year the little girl who, when was asked by her pastor what happened when Jesus rolled away the stone and came out of his tomb on Easter, raised her hand tentatively, to say, "He saw his shadow and we now have six more weeks of winter?" turns out to have gotten it about right.

Emotionally and culturally, it feels like it has arrived a month too early. It is as if the famous three wise men showed up with their presents on December 1st. All of this is painfully ironic, too, because we need Easter this year more than most.

As our own beloved Darcy said to me, "It will be Easter when we are back together again."

At a gut level, we know Easter doesn't take place in the middle of stories of death and despair. Easter is the script-flipping positive moment toward the end, when victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat. We are, more accurately – emotionally, at least – right in the middle of a massive cultural Lent.

So, while we may want to symbolically rush from cross to resurrection, and rush out of our relative isolation, like Jesus pursuing his challenging destiny, it is important that we finish the job, for fear that we will again and again and again have to walk back into our tombs and pull the stone back into place.

Like an injury left untreated that flares up each time worse than the last, let's honor where we're at. It's Lent.

You are, of course, invited to ignore me; there is a long-standing Unitarian Universalist tradition of people ignoring or disagreeing with the minister. If it pleases you stay loyal to the day on the calendar, dye your eggs, eat your ham, and dress up fancy for either yourself or the same people you have been cooped up with for the last three weeks, go for it. My point is that we can't afford the feeling of liberation that Easter has to bring for it really to fulfill its purpose. We are only, at best, halfway.

I have a friend back East who is a nurse. She is, for obvious reasons, having a hard time these days. In her darkest hours, she has thought, “Maybe I should give up. Quit.” She might be ready for Easter to come, but we’re surely not ready for her to have Easter yet. That’s the hard truth.

I can say that without feeling heretical, because what Easter is about is bigger than a Sunday on the calendar. It’s even bigger than the holiday’s almost perfect tag-team of Jesus and the Easter bunny. Although both carry the message of new life in their own way, to me, Easter is, at its core, about the intoxicating truth that life is irrepressible, and about the release of the limitations and deprivation that came before.

And that truth is even bigger than a holiday. Easter is. Easter is rooted in the very real, buzzy, religious feeling that newness is part of the world. And that is just true. The best metaphor for that truth is probably the literal new growth that comes in spring, but it is also contained in our very human ability to move forward in our lives. And, in one way or another, we have all seen and experienced that firsthand.

WE UU’S STRUGGLE

I believe Easter comes too early this year because the spiritual message we need, for at least the next few weeks or months, to remain stuck in the limitations and constraints of Lent, is really no more complicated than that.

You don’t have to agree. In case you have forgotten, you are watching a UU Easter sermon. If you have fallen into watching the sermon by mistake – and at least a few of you were coaxed by my housemate to check it out – here are two things you might want to know. The first – we UU’s have a long-standing history of disagreeing with the pastor; it’s almost a sacred tradition. Secondly, it might be helpful to know that Easter was already always the clumsiest day of the year for us UU’s.

Every year, we wonder and worry how, or even if, we should celebrate a holiday whose chief moment most of us don’t believe really happened. I am, of course, speaking about the resurrection. If you’re new to this, you might also want to know that most UU’s, with various degrees of adoration, respect Jesus as a prophet, but not as a savior or cosmic figure. Our church, does, after all, have Christian roots, and many to most of us grew up Christian, or Christian-ish. But few UU’s today believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead, or that his death was a sacrifice for all our sins. Most UU’s do not believe that a belief in and allegiance to the Christian story will lead to eternal salvation. That’s a lot of things about Easter that I/we don’t believe in. We UU’s in general have traded the security of belief for the love of values, principles, and questions. We are much smarter, more curious, more skeptical, and more cautious than we are excitable. And we know it.

Being encouraged to, as our principles phrase it, “freely and responsibly pursue their own truth and meaning” is hardly as amazing a story as your dead hero inexplicably coming back to life. But it just might be less fraught with cynicism and a loss of faith in the world, if ever you don’t find it believable. We UU’s are generally a bit too cautious to really indulge in Easter. And all that makes Easter the day when we can feel like a theological turd in the punch bowl.

If you are offended by the hubris of suggesting Easter be postponed, or that Easter is more about a feeling of liberation than about the resurrection of Jesus, I'm sorry. I love Jesus. He's my hero. I also just can't not know what I do know, and that's, historically, the origin of the Easter we mostly think about rests on a wealth of spring pagan holidays that celebrate the return of life and nature. Developing rituals and celebrations for the end of hard times is nearly as natural for human beings as breathing, and the Christian version of that story is the resurrection of Jesus.

However, it is not like we UU's are willing to be silent on Easter. See, change the word "resurrection" to something like "renewal of life," and then our UU ears perk up. Translate Easter from the bigger promise of Jesus's bodily resurrection into something that speaks to the potential for a new lease on life that is represented by all that spring brings, and are on board.

And it is now, at about this moment, that our message really begins today.

As I mentioned, the precursor to the glory of Easter morning is Lent. "Lent" means not only the thing you resented you did with your rake to that shady neighbor who still has it; Lent is, in a religious sense, the challenging, ideally deepening, 40-day period of relative solitude and deprivation that precedes Easter.

In the Christian tradition, this time frame begins on Ash Wednesday (which, for all my fellow partiers out there, takes place on the day after the Fat Tuesday of Mardi-Gras fame) and ends with a bang on Holy Week. This time frame, which begins by having the burned palm leaves of Palm Sunday placed on your forehead, was set up to be a symbolic parallel to the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert and the 40 years Moses and the Israelites went wandering in the wilderness. It is also, not coincidentally, the last stretch of winter in the northern hemisphere, where Christianity took much of its shape alongside Pagan holidays. At its most ambitious, Lent is a 40-day spiritual retreat from life designed to teach restraint and self-discipline. It is set up to be a prayerful, quiet, dormant, fallow time filled with self-reflection. The very word "Lent" means "long-time" or "a lengthening of time," and who doesn't feel that? This year the calendar is laughing at us.

I have always been more of a Good Friday Christian than an Easter one. Even when I was a Christian, the Jesus of Easter always seemed a little too distant for me, a little too hard to believe in. We never celebrated Lent in my family; Lent was mostly, as we thought of it, "a Catholic thing" my Protestant family would have shied away from. However, when I was a teenager and an acolyte in the Episcopal Church, I did, for a couple of years, participate in a Good Friday service where we had to spend 45 minutes kneeling on a hard tile floor. Hardly 40 days in the wilderness or a good long bout of silence in a monastery, but you felt it. I think we are all starting to feel it, too.

Easter shouldn't just be flowers, bunnies, and brightly colored eggs that are unearned; Easter Sunday is best when it is spiritually earned. The stone that the angel rolls away from Jesus's tomb has to be least a little hard to move. I don't want to pretend that I have an active Lenten practice. I don't expect that you do, either. This year, however, I think we all do.

If you're trapped in your own home tomb, you are both practicing "social distancing" or "sheltering in place" and at least kinda experiencing Lent. Lent is supposed to be hard. It is hard to live out the punishing combination of too much time in too little space that is asked of us now. Good. Feel the burn. Lent is supposed to be hard. John Oliver joked that Jesus was asked to shelter in place, and even he couldn't make it more than a couple days.

I am well aware that fallow time might not be the season you're personally in. Maybe you're newly in love or excited about something else. I don't know. But since most of us are stuck in the quiet, challenging deprivation of this biological quarantine, I think we should just roll with it. In a weird way, I think we should get as much out of it as we can. Soon enough most of us will be busy again and wonder with a sigh where all that time we "wasted" went. So ask yourself, in addition to streaming cat videos, washing your hands, drinking wine, washing your hands, counting the toilet paper, homeschooling your kids, and bingeing on Netflix, wouldn't it be wise to use the opportunity to do what one is called to do in Lent, and be still and reflective? Ramadan, which just began this week, is about more or less the same. I say go for it.

As Doug Murder in his sermon "Wrestling with Easter" phrases it, scratch the bright surface of Easter and all the spring holidays – Passover, Easter, and even the Pagan holiday of Beltane – and there is a backstory that the reprieve felt in these holidays should be the accomplishment that hardship and quiet reflection was endured or earned, ideally for greater spiritual depth, but, if nothing else, for the sweet joy of reprieve. Easter has a physicality we in the modern world, and, in particular, here in generally pleasant California, can forget about. We tend to forget that, for many who helped shape the nature of the holiday, the fresh green grass of Easter was not too long before frozen or covered in snow. This is why we celebrate Easter in March and April, not October and November.

Passover and Jesus's re-birth was set on top of existing fertility-themed spring holidays that preceded them both. In fact, the very name "Easter" gets its name from tributes paid around this time to a goddess of springtime named Eostre spelled Eostre, Eoester, or Oster. Likewise, the Easter bunny, a cute character you might presume to be a modern invention by Cadbury, was, in its original form, a mythic lunar hare popular in Asia and pre-Christian France, a rabbit who served as a sidekick to the moon Goddess.

I understand that, just like watching sausage get made can spoil one's appetite for the meal, watching how Easter gets made can bum you out. The most important thing to remember is that those stories are only symbols of Easter's real celebration of renewal and life after a period of struggle, deprivation, or prayer. Maybe while we are in our secular lockdown, and little old me has decided, without any authority at all, to brazenly claim Lent is not over yet, we could see our cultural quarantine as a bit of a grace period.

I myself am kind of a Jesus geek. I was raised on and love the amazing story about Jesus, and the...well... inexplicable way his followers shifted from running scared at the time of his crucifixion to, starting on Easter, turn around to become brave enough that many of them became martyrs. That story, which did not fulfill itself until after Easter Sunday, is the real miracle of the holiday. There is, to me, no more moving story than Jesus's journey from the crowds to the cross to the tomb to the reports of his re-visiting his friends many, many times. Jesus was a brave, compassionate man working on a destiny that the grave could not contain. It just might be, as the phrase goes, "the greatest story ever told."

Easter wants to make big promises; the biggest promise, really – that, at least in a spiritual way, Jesus offers a way for life to have a permanent victory over death. I would love to – but don't – believe that is true. Easter's promise of life permanently triumphing over death is, to me, a promise no holiday can make. I think the more believable good news of Easter that we can all believe in, and work with, is that life is insuppressible.

Developing rituals and celebrations for the end of hard times is as natural for human beings as breathing, and that, I think, is the truth of Easter – not, as Erik Walker Wikstrom phrased it, “how the world works out there, but how it works in here” – my heart and mind.

The way it works – Easter can't make that promise. The truth that we can all see is that the way the world works is not that life triumphs over death; it is that life and death are inextricably interwoven, neither ever winning.

Usually, of course, at Easter – appropriately – we focus on only the upside. The other, harder truth, and the reason we seasonally return again to Lent each winter, is the obvious truth that Easter doesn't permanently cure death. Again, as we all can see, neither death nor life will ever win completely. Easter can never be so permanent as to end death and suffering. And because its celebration of renewal and new life is never final, I think Easter should end more with a comma rather than an exclamation point. The thread of miracle is woven into life; however, so is the thread of tragedy woven into life. That is just how it is.

When one places the Easter story in the context of the seasonal cycle from springtime through autumn to winter, I think it rings more true. From the story of the Phoenix dying in a blaze of fire only to spring up again, to the story of Persephone's descent into the underworld, the story rings the most true it can be when it has a cyclical quality to it.

Again, the message of both the Christian Easter and the pagan Eoester or Oster is that life is insuppressible! It is. Life arises in the darkest, most toxic hot ocean vents in the deepest parts of the sea where we never thought it could. Chernobyl, now only a few decades after the worst nuclear meltdown in history, has pockets of life. And yet, as we know, none of those amazingly adaptive creatures themselves will live forever.

As we all know, Easter – renewal – doesn't always happen; sometimes, as the coronavirus points out with its own exclamation point, things die. However, Easter tells us new life is always capable of happening. The question for you, as we await Easter, is do you need new life to happen to you? And, if so, what? Maybe right now, in your lockdown, is the time to take a look at that.

Back in the first century, for Jesus's status as a hero to be valid, he needed to have a miraculous birth and death attached to his PR efforts. We don't hold people to that standard anymore. We don't wonder today if Gandhi reincarnated, resurrected, and lives on intact in Nirvana or Heaven. Nor, likewise, do we ask that about Abraham Lincoln, the Popes, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, or anybody. We're done with that in modern times.

If we would never say that about today's legends, so might we liberate ourselves to believe or not believe in the resurrection, and have our spirituality rest on that position. Maybe it is time to give up that question and see what this extended period of Lent could bring you.

See, we celebrate Easter more passionately than the challenges that came before, for the same reason our Facebook pages are not filled with shots of us waiting in line at Walgreens or in a dental chair. The challenges of life and the patience required to do it well doesn't need a holiday to remind us of their truth. We gave the grind a month of mostly uneventful space we call Lent. We need Easter to remind us how insuppressible new life is.

It is our great temptation to avoid Lent and to have light without darkness, hope without an ongoing dialog with despair—in short, Easter without Good Friday. It will really be Easter when we don't have to stand six feet apart and wash our hands after touching every doorknob. As our own Darcy Carrol says, when we are together again, it will be Easter. Not yet, but soon. Hold on through this time. Suffer well.

Maybe you're not interested in personal questions this year. Maybe you're just trying to coast, or hold your breath, until you can go to the movies, dinner, the gym, or a bar again. Fine. Roll through it. But maybe you're starting to feel like you might be blowing this quiet time, blowing it not cleaning closets, blowing it not finding a home exercise routine, or maybe blowing a time for some self-reflection your gonna miss when your life starts up again, and you wonder, as so many of us do, why we are so busy.

If you can forecast forward, it might be helpful to ask yourself what you might regret not having attended to when this is all over, with what might feel like a break from your life, a vacation, maybe a chance to join Jesus metaphorically in the cave, to see what needs new Easter life, maybe to find something exciting enough beyond that stone blocking your way.

It's a great question. While you're trapped in this biologically imposed corona Lent, provided we basically come through – at least medically – unscathed, we might ask ourselves: What might you regret not doing? Ask yourself, What has been dead too long and needs to live again? Only you, in your isolated stillness, can know what questions are most poignant for you. Jesus would probably tell you his story. His memory matters most if you use it to come out of your tomb.

As Rev. Robert Hardies, the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., says, “As I see it, my job on Easter Sunday is not to convince you that the resurrection happened, but to remind you that it happens.” We, or nearly all of us, have times in our lives when all seemed lost, and then suddenly hope returned. We are all witnesses to these cycles of the seasons, and our lives are frequently cycles of Lent-like starkness and the reprieve and joy of Easter.

Some of us tuning in today are coming out of relationships that ended, or some weeks ago got freed up from the coronavirus itself. Easter is about heartbreak not being the final scene in the play, and the chance for something new. The truth is generally, more often than not, poverty, the loss of a job, an illness, the death of a loved one, or even contracting the coronavirus isn't the end for us. We get over death, digest it, find new loves, new purpose. On this Easter, even if we can't fully celebrate new life and spring like we normally could and would, we can embrace that newness and freshness is built into the world. Think about what's coming, enough to pull you forward.

Do your Lenten work. Like with your taxes, you were just granted an extension **Amen**