

Opening to Revelation: An Easter Sermon  
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Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Reading: from *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman Howard Thurman was arguably the most significant African American theologian in the 20th century, having mentored Martin Luther King and others active in the civil rights movement.

The crucial problem of Judaism was to exist as an isolated, autonomous, cultural, religious, and political unit in the midst of the hostile Hellenic world. ... In the midst of this psychological climate Jesus began his teaching and ministry. His words were directed to the House of Israel, a minority within the Greco-Roman world, smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy, haunted by the dream of the restoration of a lost glory and a former greatness. [Jesus'] message focused on the urgency of a radical change in the inner attitude of the people. He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it doesn't win the victory of the spirit against them. "To revile because one has been reviled—this is the real evil because it is the evil of the soul itself." Jesus saw this with almighty clarity. Again and again he came back to the inner life of the individual. With increasing insight and startling accuracy he placed his finger on the "inward center" as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people. ...

He recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of one's inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to one's destiny. ...

The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a path of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. "In him was life; and the life was the light of humanity." Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.

Our second reading comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his work, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Bonhoeffer was an evangelical minister who resisted the German Nazis and was arrested in April of 1943. In June of 1944, a year before he was executed, he wrote the following:

Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my prison cell poised, cheerful and sturdy, like a nobleman from his country estate.

Who am I? They often tell me I would speak with my guards freely, pleasantly, and firmly, as if I had it to command.

Who am I? I have also been told that I suffer the days of misfortune with serenity, smiles and pride, as someone accustomed to victory.

Am I really what others say about me?

Or am I only what I know of myself?

Restless, yearning and sick, like a bird in its cage,

struggling for the breath of life,

as though someone were choking my throat;

hungering for colors, flowers, for the songs of birds,

thirsting for kind words and human closeness,

shaking with anger at capricious tyranny and the pettiest slurs,

bedeviled by anxiety, awaiting great events that might never occur,

fearfully powerless and worried for friends far away,

weary and empty in prayer, in thinking and doing,

weak, and ready to take leave of it all.

Who am I? This man or that other?

Am I then this man today and tomorrow another?

Am I both all at once? An imposter to others,

but to me little more than a whining, despicable weakling?

Does what is in me compare to a vanquished army,

that flees in disorder before a battle already won?

Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, you know, O God. You know I am yours.

Sermon:

Most of us don't know just how much we don't know. I've shared with you before the member of the Cleveland church who urged his minister to market their Easter morning services with the tagline: Come worship with us for Easter: We don't know what happened. The only problem with this is that I think most of us believe we know what happened or didn't happen. We human beings, and especially we religious liberals, have a penchant for thinking the world is as we see it and experience it without recognizing just how limited our perception really is. Until we really stop and look and listen to someone else's experience and even more importantly, our own experience in the light of others, we are closed to new truth. And when suddenly a new profound way of looking at the world comes, it comes as revelation.

This month we are exploring what it means to take a path of revelation. I love what feminist theologian Rebecca Parker says, "Revelation comes to those who are radically hospitable to what they don't know." Most of us don't know just how much we don't know. Until we practice such radical hospitality to what we don't know, we shall remain stuck in our ways. But as soon as we realize it is more important to be in relationship than to be right, that humility trumps rigid certainty and smugness, then all sorts of revelatory insights and perspectives can be ours.

I grew up as a secular humanist, where it was important to be right. In the sciences, being right has a prominent place, but in the humanities and particularly in religion, trying to see everything in black and white ends up cutting out all color.

I also grew up Unitarian Universalist and was taught by omission that there wasn't much in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures relevant to my life. This thankfully isn't characteristic of all our churches, but in the congregation I was raised in, it was. And for years I was oblivious to the power and relevance of the liberation stories of Passover and Easter, especially Easter.

I could tell you as a young adult that when it comes to Jesus, there's very few things that scholars agree on. Jesus was a spiritual teacher who sought to reform the Jewish tradition and was killed, likely crucified, very well may have been thrown into a mass grave. He had a religious vision that spoke to people but he wasn't well known during his lifetime. Somehow, over the centuries, his teachings and growing stories about him spread throughout the world. Today, there are so many stories about Jesus--and layers of interpretation--that distort who he likely was and what it appears he likely taught.

It wasn't until I went to seminary that I learned Jesus' teachings in the context of his time and place in society, in a course on Howard Thurman, an African American theologian and founder of the first interracial interdenominational church in America. It was Thurman who got me passionate about Jesus. I hadn't realized that Jesus, as a Jew, was among an oppressed people, second class citizens with little influence in worldly affairs, that often suffered persecution, that his religious vision spoke to people who had their backs up against the wall. Any person, he taught, no matter their social standing, no matter their riches, no matter their health, any person can walk in the paths of love and fairness and forgiveness, and what this means is that each and everyone of us has the capacity to bring light to the world. And more than that, each of us, may cultivate a personal integrity when walking these paths, an integrity, a dignity, that cannot be taken away, even in death. Jesus called upon people to secure the keys to their own dignity and to come into community with others who committed to walk this mutually beneficial and transformative path together. Thurman's Jesus has largely been confirmed by the work of Jesus seminar.

Thuman's Jesus was a revelation for me. I realized that I could value the teachings of Jesus without affirming the teachings about Jesus. I so appreciated Jesus' life that I didn't care what his death meant. In other words, I found deep meaning with the pre-Easter Jesus rather than the post-Easter Jesus. But still I saw Jesus as a tragic figure. One who defied worldly authority and whose life was cut short because of that defiance.

It was the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that inspired within me a deeper appreciation of the post-Easter Jesus. Bonhoeffer was an upper class Lutheran Evangelical minister from Germany. When he studied theology at Union in New York City, he disdained the sloppiness of American theology. A friend took him to Ebenezer

Baptist Church. There, Bonhoeffer was riveted by the African American congregation in which he taught Bible study. There he encountered a faith community completely different from the one in which he was born and raised. He witnessed a deep spirituality forged in the fires of pain and struggle and loss. He learned a different language of compassionate witness, a language that served him as he returned to Germany just as Adolph Hitler came to power, a language that would inspire him to lead the Christian resistance movement. When it became dangerous for outspoken critics of fascism, Bonhoeffer's friends at Union secured a fellowship for him in the United States, and Bonhoeffer returned to New York City. After a few long days of soul-searching, Bonhoeffer decided to go back to his homeland against the advice of his friends and colleagues. Bonhoeffer couldn't abandon his countrymen who were resisting Hitler, and further he would have no claim in the reconstruction of the Christian community if he stayed away. Upon returning to his homeland, Bonhoeffer actively helped Jews to flee, and, after much inner turmoil and moral reflection, he took part in a plot to assassinate Hitler. When he was imprisoned for his assistance to Jews, he continued writing.

The questions Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed in his poignant poem plague me. Who am I? Am I what others say about me? or am I what I know myself to be, little more than a fearful weakling that struggles to be faithful to my convictions?

And when reflecting on the rampant violence in Kenya or the senseless deaths of the Germanwings flight or the brutal oppression and violence throughout the middle east and in too many corners of the world, I ask the question raised by this morning's hymn, Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, where are you? where is God? how can we have faith amidst our broken world?

This hymn was penned by Norbert Capek, a Unitarian minister who served a flourishing congregation in Prague, and who, like Bonhoeffer, actively resisted the Nazis, was imprisoned and executed at Dachau. Capek developed the flower communion that we celebrate in June, but in California, Florida, and warmer parts of the county where flowers are , Unitarian Universalist churches lift his witness and example on Easter Sunday. His love, his music, his rituals are all a part of who we are today. Capek and Bonhoeffer both are 20th century figures who transcended their lives. When Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for his assistance to the Jews, he continued writing. His letters from prison reveal a transformational shift in his theology. He no longer could believe that God was in fully in control. Yet the clergyman became ever more committed to the transforming love that he found in Jesus and his death.

He came to a horrifying revelation: that most churches had lost the essence of Jesus' teachings and saving love. He tried to understand why the vast majority of decent German Christians supported Hitler or at least refused to join the resistance. And despite the seemingly paltry influence he had against the overweening power of the Nazi state, he lived from a foundation of compassionate witness. And that clarity of vision of what is truly important sustained his unflinching resistance and commanded the

respect of others, even his prison guards. It also cost him his life. Yet he willingly submitted, for he knew there is far more to life than avoiding death or avoiding pain. After he died, his example and his writings inspired many--and continue to do so. Bonhoeffer embodied compassion in the face of overwhelming worldly power. His love and witness transcended his death. And therein lies, for me, the post-Easter Jesus. The essence of the resurrection.

Rob Eller-Isaacs puts it well, "Jesus did not live and die that we might all bow down and worship him. He lived and died so that, by his example, we might learn to live and die for love. The story begins when God puts on flesh and comes to walk among us. It ends, or perhaps it just begins again, when God's spirit is uncaged by death, when the one who walked among us dies an individual and is born again as a community. It's not so hard to understand. Easter happens every day. Easter, happens each time those who mourn rise up again to honor those they've lost by loving life more dearly. Easter happens every time we stand in solidarity with those who've lost all hope and say, "hold on, we're at your side." And Easter happens every time, in spite of woe and death, in spite of the multitude of ways we've turned away, in spite of our failures and denials we say, yes---yes to life."

What if we approach the resurrection of Jesus as ultimately a story of liberation? What if we understood the resurrection as a parallel to the Passover story? We might stop saying smugly "We Unitarian Universalists don't know what happened!" And instead say, "Come, come worship with us at Easter. we celebrate not the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but the love survives death, the love that calls us to live with the integrity and dignity that not even death can take away, and as we walk with others in this path, we invite the transformation of ourselves and the wider community of humanity.

And so we are. Even in the face of all that is broken in the world, we experience life as a journey of liberation, remaining ever hopeful, when we are in the winter of our lives, that spring will come. And my friends, the good news, is that spring will come. It is literally emerging around us, And in the coming of spring, we recognize yet an immediately present and tangible embodiment of the love of God in the beauty and tenacity of life. And amidst all the renewal of life and the symphony of spring, there is so much we don't know, and so much we don't know about what we don't know. But aware of this reality, opens us up to ongoing revelation.

May our path be our path of revelation, as we seek to ever articulate the source of our love and cultivate the ability to act on that love in ever expanding circles.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.