

Surprising Beginnings

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
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Many years ago when I was serving as the “summer preacher” at the Universalist Church in West Hartford, a visitor approached me following a service said, “I enjoyed your sermon, but I noticed you didn’t mention Jesus. Don’t you believe in Jesus?”

Since then, a handful of visitors, perhaps one a year, has asked the same or similar question. And my response has changed over the years. I used to respond by briefly explaining Unitarian Universalism’s Christian roots and how we came to be what some call a post-Christian denomination, drawing wisdom and truth from various sources including Christianity.

This sometimes led to a need to explain Unitarian Universalist polity and that we are bound together in covenant rather than through ascent to a common creed. Then I started responding by saying I believed in the religion of Jesus, that is, his teachings, rather than the religion about Jesus, the doctrines and creeds that make certain claims about Jesus have a dual nature.

My responses seemed to satisfy those observant visitor’s curiosity, yet, strangely, they left me wondering, what then of the empty tomb? The empty tomb from which, as Mark’s gospel tells us, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome fled from in “terror and amazement.” Can I, knowing that the a major religion emerged from the story of the empty tomb ignore or skip over that part? Can I claim this surprise beginning of the Christian faith doesn’t matter? Or is just an entertaining story?

I cannot.

The fact is if Jesus was simply a wise teacher or social prophet, he may or may not be known to us today and chances are pretty good a religion that changed the course of history would not have come into being. There had to be something else to him or his message it seems, and in particular, the Easter story, that has carried the life and teachings of Jesus beyond the confines of his lifetime into our own. But what is that something?

To find out, eminent Jesus scholars, John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg advise reading the Easter narratives as parable, noting, “seeing the Easter stories as parable does not involve a denial of their factuality. It’s quite happy leaving the question open. What it does insist on is that the importance of these stories lies in their meanings.”

In order to have a deeper appreciation of the significance of Easter, it is worthwhile to remember that prior to the start of the Easter story with which many churchgoers are familiar, Jesus had been engaged in his ministry, traveling about, speaking, teaching, and healing. Significantly, the start of this ministry in Mark’s gospel, from which today’s readings come, began with a proclamation, words you may know or have seen scrawled on a placard and shouted by a zealot on a city street corner ...“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”

The point: Something big is coming. Best get ready.

That something...the kingdom of God...is to be an alternative to the kingdom of humankind. This is crucial to understanding the meaning of the Easter story. Jesus is coming and he is bringing with him a vision or way of life profoundly different from the one established and maintained by the ruling powers of the kingdom of humankind.

In order to prepare themselves for the coming Kingdom of God people are told to... “repent and believe in the good news.”

Borg and Crossan point out, repent here has two meanings different from our contemporary understanding of the word. The first, from the Hebrew, means to return from exile or to start on a new path.

The second meaning, from the Greek, means to go beyond the mind you have, to open yourself to possibilities beyond what you already know.

So to repent as the proclamation exhorts means not only to choose a different path but to stick with it, to have faith despite the difficulties and unfamiliarity that will accompany it. Essentially it is a call to move beyond the familiar and embrace something new.

The Easter narrative itself begins with a procession, actually two processions. One is the “official” procession of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. This one isn’t featured in Mark’s gospel, but it would have been well known to the residents of Jerusalem at the time as a flashy, imposing display of wealth and

power, designed to keep the people in line, lest they think of acting up against their oppressors.

The other procession is a subversive procession orchestrated by Jesus, now commemorated in Christian churches as Palm Sunday. It is, as we know from Mark's account, a far more humble event.

These two processions are meant to illustrate two very different social structures or "kingdoms". Pilate's procession is a symbol of empire, a symbol of the way most of the world's societies including our own, are organized and function....what Borg and Crossan call, "domination systems."

According to Borg and Crossan, such "domination systems" share certain key characteristics including: Political oppression (that is, real power to shape and/or change a society/culture resides in the hands of a few politically well connected players.) Economic exploitation (wealth is inordinately distributed and concentrated in the hands of a few at the expense of everyone else). And religious legitimation (the interests and means of the powerful are deemed a reflection of some sort of natural order or reflective of the will of God.) Religious legitimation, it should be noted, may or may not include actual cooperation by religious authorities in promoting the interests of the powerful.) The defining quality of domination systems, regardless of their political form, is systematic injustice.

Jesus' procession is meant to illustrate an alternative or counter society, what the Bible calls, the kingdom of God. (and here, the kingdom of God doesn't mean, as is sometimes envisioned by ultra-conservative biblical literalists, the imposition of Levitical law across the land).

No, the kingdom of God, Jesus spoke about and lived into being, is concerned with justice. Justice which, recognizing our interconnectedness, calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, calls us to ensure everyone has their basic needs met. It is about peace, empowering one another towards cooperation over competition, and working to end war, as well as the spiritual violence perpetrated by poverty and oppression. The kingdom of God is about transformation, our own and that of the world in which we live from a life rooted in the ways of domination to one rooted in the ways of justice. Indeed, the defining quality of the kingdom of God, regardless of its political form, is systematic justice.

The two processions not only differentiate between two visions of earthly existence...the kingdom of humankind and the kingdom of God, they offer us an opportunity to pause and ask which kingdom or vision are we living into as individuals, which path are we taking as a society?

Sometime following these processions Jesus is arrested, tried, and brutally executed by the authorities. His crime? That he gave hope to an oppressed people. That he offered an alternative way of living here and now...not the promise of an other-worldly heaven to make up for it all afterwards, but new life now.

And he didn't call for violent political revolution, he instead called for a change of heart and mind. He instructed his followers abandon the path of the powerful and take up the path of love, justice and mercy. It was this message, the change of heart and mind he was encouraging and empowering people to live, that concerned the authorities. The person of Jesus may have been an annoyance to them, but it was his message that truly disturbed them. So they crucified him not imply to get rid of him, but to crush and make a mockery of his message.

And so when Easter arrives and three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb, they discover something utterly amazing...as they arrive at the tomb, they find the stone sealing the entrance to the tomb is rolled back, and Jesus "who was crucified", they are told,"has been raised; he is not here." The women are instructed to go and tell the disciples and Peter and that they will see Jesus in Galilee as promised. Now according to Mark's account, the women ran out of the tomb filled with terror and amazement and didn't tell anyone about what they had seen. But clearly the message got out. The encounter at the tomb offers clues as to how.

Jesus, who spoke truth to power was executed and sealed in a tomb by power. Yet, Jesus' followers, find the stone is rolled away and tomb empty. A symbol, Borg and Crossan contend, that the experience of Jesus and his ministry..his message... could not be contained.

Inside the tomb the women are told Jesus has "been raised" "he is not here." Jesus is not dead but among the living, alive in those who continue or carry his message forward.

The women are also told, he has gone ahead to Galilee, which, as Borg and Crossan note, some scholars understand as an instruction to return to the beginning of the story, to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and continue the work to live it into being.

Thus Jesus who lived and taught a new way of living in life continued to do so in the lives of his followers after death. The life affirming power of Jesus and his message proved greater than the death dealing power of the authorities who executed him. A message that is reborn again and again in the hearts and minds

of people around the world to this day who live the Kingdom of God into being amidst the kingdom of humankind.

And so to that question I've been asked many times over the course of my ministry, "Don't you believe in Jesus", I say, "Yes, I do." I do, for as I have striven to live by faith a different path, I have experienced along the way, life in the midst death... the power of a change of heart and mind in the face of injustice, personal transformation in the face of fear, beloved community in midst of an oppressive society, and surprise beginnings in the midst of seeming ends. Or, what this Unitarian Universalist calls, Easter.

Amen and Blessed Be