

March 16, 2008

Easter and Transformation

It was very early in the morning, just as the sun was rising. Three women set out to visit a tomb. They were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and a woman named Salome. They were frightened. Three days before, the leader of their movement had been brutally executed – nailed to a wooden cross and left to hang there to die an agonizing death. Most of his followers had scattered and were laying low, afraid for their lives. As they hurried along in the early morning cold, the women wondered – who would roll away the stone for them at the entrance to the tomb? When they arrived, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. And when they looked into the tomb, they saw a young man dressed all in white sitting there. And they became even more afraid! But the young man said to them: “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified yesterday, is no longer here; he has been raised.” And then he directs them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. The women ran away from the tomb, in terror and amazement. And they were so afraid, that they said nothing to anyone.

And that is the entirety of the Easter story as reported in the gospel attributed to Mark. Scholars tell us the Mark was the earliest gospel; it was written around the year 70 of the common era, just about the time that the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and some 40 years after Jesus’ crucifixion. So it doesn’t give us much to go on – an empty tomb, some scared women, a young man in white (presumably an angel, although the text doesn’t say that), and a message for the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. The women run off in terror and don’t say anything to anyone. There is no recounting of an actual appearance by Jesus.

In the three gospels that follow – Matthew, Luke and John – Jesus does make appearances in the world, but the accounts are all different. Scholars believe that Matthew and Luke were written some 10 to 20 years after Mark – that is roughly between 80 and 90 of the Common Era – and that the Gospel of John was written around the year 100, that is, some 70 years after Jesus’ death. In Matthew, there are only two women, Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary. In Luke, the number isn’t specified, in John, Mary Magdalene goes by herself. In Matthew, there is one angel; in Luke and John, there are two. In each of these gospels, Jesus makes appearances to his followers, but they are all different. In some, neither the women, nor the disciples, recognize him. In others, he appears mysteriously. In John, Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener when he first appears. At the end of the gospel of John, Jesus suddenly materializes in a locked room. He shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and feet, and he convinces “doubting” Thomas that it is really he. Jesus’ final appearance in John occurs by the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are fishing but catching nothing. Jesus tells them to put their net on the other side of the boat, and suddenly it is so full of fish that they can’t pull it in.

So – we have four different accounts of event of Easter itself – the moment when the stone is rolled back from the tomb and Jesus then appears in some form. The accounts differ – different numbers of women, different numbers of young men in white or angels, different encounters between Jesus and his followers. Certainly these

discrepancies are attributable to the fact that they were written two to three generations after the time of Jesus. In the meantime, the stories had been passed along orally among Jesus' followers and their new recruits. They were written by different authors at different times, to different audiences, for different purposes, and we don't know the actual identities of any of the authors. Each of the stories seems to suggest that Jesus continued to live on in some way after he had been killed and then placed in a tomb.

Today is Palm Sunday; next Sunday is Easter, when Christians commemorate these events at the tomb. How are we to understand these narratives, and what sense can we make of them today? One way is to try to understand them as history. But this poses obvious difficulties. The stories are quite different, they were written down long after the facts in question, and they do not include eyewitness accounts. So it is difficult to take these stories as being historically factual. Or – we can understand these narratives as parables, based on the model of the parables that Jesus told during his teaching. Parables are narratives that use story-telling and drama to convey a message that people can comprehend. A parable can be true – both truthful and truth-filled – without being factual. Or, to put it another way – the truth of a parable does not depend on its factuality or its historicity. It is meant to convey a meaning, not to present a factual, historical account.

So – let's treat these Easter stories as parables and see what meaning they might hold for us as 21st Century Unitarian Universalists. There are many ways to interpret the accounts of the tomb and the resurrection – the Easter story – but today I want to suggest that we look at them as stories about transformation -- transformation of individual lives, but also transformation of the world we live in. Jesus of Nazareth was one of many roving Jewish preachers of his time. Most of these have been lost to history. At the height of his influence, Jesus probably had no more than 1,000 or so followers. Fewer than 100 are likely to have accompanied him to Jerusalem for Passover; the journey that led to his crucifixion. The stories of the empty tomb and Jesus' appearances after the crucifixion transformed the story of this simple preacher into a movement that would influence the shape of human history for the next 2,000 years and beyond.

Jesus was a teacher, a healer, a prophet within the Jewish tradition, a mystic, and a social radical. He taught that people could have the ability to transform their own lives – by loving one another, by loving even their enemies, by living simply and not placing their faith in money, material things, status, and power. If people followed the model of how he lived his life, and if they followed his teachings, he seemed to suggest, their lives would be changed for the better. And Jesus lived and taught about a new social order – what he called “the Kingdom of God” – that would be based on love and compassion. People could transform their congregations, their communities, the world around them, if they followed his teachings. The possibility of such a transformed world is all around us, Jesus taught, but people don't see it. And why don't they see it? Because they are so caught up in their egos, in their materialistic desires, in their efforts to obtain power over other people, that they forget to live simply and compassionately.

And this, it seems to me, is the essential message that Unitarian Universalists can gain out of the Easter story – our community should be a community of transformation – transformation in our personal lives, transformation of this community of faith, transformation of the world around us. It is appropriate that Easter is celebrated

in the spring – the time when the world is transformed from the dormancy of winter to the vibrancy of new growth; the time of rebirth; the time of hope. Ancient peoples, of course, celebrated the return of the sun's warmth with spring celebrations such as the Celtic holiday of Beltane. Passover was and is celebrated in the spring, the time when lambs are born and plants begin to grow again. And of course the events of Easter took place in the spring because they happened when Jesus and his followers went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

What do we mean when we talk about transformation? I can think of no better to speak about transformation than to lift up the example of Mack Waggoner, whom we have so recently, sadly, lost. Mack epitomized transformation in so many ways. On a personal level, Mack grew and developed so much over the past several years. He questioned everything to do with religion and spirituality. He argued about questions of religion and spirituality. He was proud to be a heretic. And yet, he was open to new ideas, to new spiritual practices, to new ways of looking at the whole question of our connection to the transcendent. So, even as he questioned everything, he was able to plunge wholeheartedly into all aspects of our life together as a community.

And even as he was changing and growing himself, Mack was hard at work on transforming this Fellowship and also the world around us. Troubled by the fact that we often fail to retain people who come to visit us, Mack started an *ad hoc* group that began to meet to discuss how we can better nurture our visitors, friends, and members. We gathered without any particular agenda to discuss ideas about how to become a more open and welcoming community, how to be more nurturing.

Troubled by the challenges that global climate change poses for our bioregion and for our larger world, Mack was instrumental in forming our Eco-Challenge Committee that met throughout the fall to study global warming and that has continued to meet since to create and develop ways that we can all help to reduce our carbon footprint, as individuals and as a fellowship. In April, on the Sunday closest to Earth Day, the Eco-Challenge Committee will lead our service, and we will also introduce a carbon challenge program for the entire Fellowship to participate in. Mack understood that the challenge is daunting, but he prodded the rest of us to take on this important work of transforming our life styles to protect future generations.

As a congregation, this spring presents us with many opportunities for transformation. Each of us has the opportunity to grow and develop in our spiritual lives, and together we give each other support and nurturing. Some of us find the spirit in our wonderful music; others in joining together to meditate on Saturday mornings. Working with our children and youth provides a path of transformation for some of us. Each and every aspect of our life as a fellowship provides us for opportunities for growth and development, and together we are so much greater than the sum of our parts!

We are presented with a potential opportunity to acquire and to develop a piece of land for our eventual community home. What an act of transformation this would be for our congregation! And, with our base solidly established, we would be able to reach out to other organizations and faith communities, and so play an ever greater role in transforming the larger community in which we live.

So this year, as we celebrate the return of spring, the season of Passover, the Easter season, may we remember the essential message of transformation that we find again each spring.

May we find the strength, the wisdom, the clarity of mind and purpose, to continue the work of transformation in our own lives.

May we find the love, the compassion, the sense of beloved community, to continue the work of transformation in the life of this Fellowship.

And even as we grow and develop individually and as a community, may we recognize that we are also doing the work of transforming our world!