

“Hitchhiking with Jesus”

Rev. Sara LaWall – Sermon delivered at the Boise UU Fellowship, Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

I don't know about you, but I have always felt conflicted about Easter. It does not jive with my own theology so I have been struggling with how approach this sermon, which I have rewritten several times. I could give a sermon about the resurrection of the earth and springtime and how important it is to take care of our planet, but as Unitarian Universalists we are very good at that already. What we aren't so good at is diving into one of our own affirmed sources of wisdom, the Christian Scriptures, and exploring the Christian Easter story from that perspective. Which is what I want to do today.

But I have still been struggling to make the Easter story relevant for us Unitarian Universalists today. Especially today. For those of you who follow me on social media, you know I have been spending a lot of time at the Capitol these past two weeks, to witness and advocate for a variety of issues. I've been there with other local clergy, the Presbyterians, the United Methodists, The Mennonites, the United Church of Christ, all of us together. Several of you have been there right there with us. It seems the legislature here waits until the last minute to introduce the craziest, most offensive legislation as well as waiting until the last minute to make progress on the most critical and important legislation, like closing the healthcare gap.

We thought we were getting closer. I joined local clergy on behalf of the interfaith Alliance of Idaho to deliver a letter to the Governor, Speaker Bedke and Senate Pro Tempore Brent Hill. This letter was signed by more than 80 faith leaders across the state urging lawmakers to take action on the healthcare gap before the end of this session—to do the right thing, to act with equity, justice and compassion and put people before politics. Because people are dying. They did not act.

What they did do was waste time on wild, irrelevant, unsafe legislation that was more about campaigning than impacting the lives of our citizens. Legislation to attack Planned Parenthood, to deny religious freedom, to prevent local government from raising wages, to allow the bible in schools, and to make it easier to carry guns. There was next to nothing on healthcare, school funding, minimum wage, or protecting our beautiful land and natural resources. And just to be clear, these are solely my own opinions.

Couple this with the numerous terrorist attacks in Brussels, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Kenya and places we do not hear about and the ongoing refugee crisis with thousands of displaced people living in deplorable conditions and drowning at sea. Add to that the fact that this election season is making a mockery out of our democratic system and one likely nominee is breeding fear, hate, and violence with total disregard for civility and discourse.

It is so easy to sink into despair. To feel like we are descending into the darkness of cynicism. When I lament about the legislative political games I've witnessed this session, I can't tell you how many people have said to me, prepare to be disappointed.

So what does any of this have to do with Easter? And how might this story with theological

themes vastly different from our contemporary UU theologies, be useful for us today?

One of my colleagues suggested perhaps we are experiencing the crucifixion? This is our dark night of the soul, our death by a thousand cuts.

While the Easter story is a decidedly Christian story—their interpretation of the events just before, during and after the crucifixion focusing primarily on the resurrection and Jesus' divine ascension—let us not forget the historical Jesus, the one whose life's work sparked a movement and angered so many the only way they felt they could stop him was to crucify him.

Jesus of Nazareth was a zealot— fanatical and uncompromising in pursuit of his religious and political ideals. He was targeted by the Romans for **sedition, for treason** and ultimately crucified under the order of Pontius Pilate, a governor well known for his bloody reign, rooting out anyone perceived to be anti-Rome (sounds eerily familiar doesn't it). He was nailed to a cross to die (the public display designed to deter to any others with treasonous ideas).

So let's remind ourselves of the ideals to which Jesus of Nazareth was so committed, the ideals that branded him a seditious. Jesus stood on the side of the poor and oppressed. He believed that being faithful did not require payment to the high priests of the temple or following complicated, arcane laws. This was a time when the Jewish priests served the Roman Empire, when the tax collectors Jesus so abhorred, charged the people fees to exchange their money into shekels so that they could purchase an animal for sacrifice and receive a blessing from the priests.

Jesus said **NO** to paying for a blessing, **NO** to buying faithfulness. Jesus believed God favored the poor. According to author and historian Reza Aslan:

“If there's one thing you can really zero in on when it comes to Jesus' preachings it was his absolute hatred of wealth. This wasn't a man who was neutral about it. Jesus wasn't about equality. His preaching wasn't that the rich and the poor should meet in the middle. That's not what he preached. What he preached was that those who have wealth, that wealth will be taken away. Those who are poor, they shall be the inheritors of the earth. The hungry shall be fed, the fed shall go hungry. Those who mourn shall rejoice, those who rejoice shall mourn. This wasn't about we are all the same, this is about the reversal of the social order.”

If anything, Jesus believed those on the top and those on the bottom should switch places; that is what the Kingdom of God would look like. Aslan goes on to say, “That is enough to get you killed 2,000 years ago, it is enough to get you killed today.” Perhaps this *is* our crucifixion.

Perhaps much like the women who come for Jesus in the tomb, we are a bit terrified of the emptiness. It feels like we are entombed, full of darkness and despair, void of emotion, without clear air to breathe. Dead.

But story of the resurrection is the turning point. When Jesus died, according to the Gospel of Luke he had just 72 follows. 72! And look what happened, an entire movement was built.

The interpretation of this man's teachings, his life, and death created a whole new religion. I invite us to be open to the magic of that for just a moment and suspend whatever judgments we may carry about the Christian religion, and allow ourselves to see the power and possibility in a different interpretation. Because all religions have their blemishes and mistakes, even our own.

Now, back to the resurrection. While the Christian Scriptures tell us the resurrection only took three days, if we look at it through a different lens we might see that it actually took generations, perhaps even hundreds of years.

Ponder that for a moment. This resurrection may take us a while yet. I know when I stood with the democrats who left their seats in the final State's Affairs Committee Hearing to hold a press conference expressing their frustration both at the bill they were about to hear and about the GOP's utter refusal of bipartisan work—Truancy for Truth, Rep. Melissa Wintrow called it—I was inspired by their courage and clarity of conviction; by their zealous principles of equality and freedom, their uncompromising pursuit of democratic ideals.

These last months there have been times when it felt like we are just a raggedy band of 72 followers speaking out against the elite power brokers, the wealthy priests and tax collectors, trying to shine the light on the Samaritan by the side of the road, on the outcasts and marginalized, reminding them of the *least of these*, reminding them that the meek, the humble, the gentle, the poor shall inherit the earth—**SHOULD** inherit the earth!

I want you to know that I did not come here, to this fellowship in this state, in this capital city to be disappointed. I came here to make a difference (as naive as it may sound). I came here to shine a light on injustice and lead us to be a beacon of hope, love, justice, and truth for liberal religion—yes you heard me. For religion, our religion.

When I was 10 years old I attended a Presbyterian Church with my dad, stepmother and two half-sisters. I remember clearly one Sunday school class when I was in the fifth grade and our Sunday School Teacher told us that it was okay to hitchhike so long as we believed in Jesus as our savior because he would protect us. Having been raised by my prosecutor mother, I was the first to respond with, "But that's illegal!"

You can see, even at 10, there was a budding Unitarian Universalist.

Now before you scoff at this Sunday school experience, I want to tell you I loved this teacher. He was so cool. He was a "he" which you just don't get much in Sunday school and he was young and hip and so warm and loving. He did not shame me for my response, he discussed it with me and seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say.

I shared with him that I did not believe in salvation because my grandparents were Jewish (just like Jesus was) and doing so would mean that I subscribed to a theology that condemned them to hell for eternity – just because they did not accept Jesus Christ as their savior. I think I may have stumped him a little bit.

But since that day, and especially during Easter, I often ponder the concept of salvation. I have always wondered, who is saved? Like, for real? If I am not a believer, where does this leave me? Does it even matter? Perhaps the more critical might be, what does salvation ask of me in this life?

I have had this epiphany just this year, I do not have to be a believer to be a follower. Jesus would have stood with the hitchhiker because that hitchhiker would have been on the outside of society; destitute, downtrodden, looking for an out stretched hand. He would call on society to save the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the refugees, the broken and hurting not because their souls were in peril, but because he believed in universal kinship, in our shared humanity—that on some level we are all hurting and broken; we are all beloved children of God.

If I am beloved, then so are you. If you are beloved, then so am I.

The story of the resurrection *is* a story of salvation. The saving of lives more than the saving of souls. It is a salvation of our own making, creating the kingdom of heaven right here on earth, as I believe Jesus wanted to do. You, me, all of us, ***We Are The Resurrection***, we are the bearers of a new dawn. And I find such hope and inspiration in that interpretation.

The story of the Resurrection is one of light and hope and renewal; it is one of possibility that life can begin again and again and again. Like Rumi's poem suggests there must be a necessary dying, a crumbling in order for wildflowers to come up where you are. Weep and then smile. Very little grows on jagged rock.

My colleague in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the Rev. Jake Morrill shared these words: "Someone mentioned Leonard Cohen's song 'Hallelujah,' so that's now in my head, and it seems right--a weary voice, a minor key, a somber tempo, but still singing out, 'Hallelujah.' Maybe resurrection isn't a fancy new outfit at a well-outfitted church; maybe it's somebody who should have OD'ed last night, but woke up in the morning; or a country that seemed on the verge of tipping the whole planet into hell, but tipped back at the last moment, avoiding the final devastation. On Easter morning, those who loved Jesus were amazed. But they were still in trouble, Rome was still in charge, and they were still at least two thousand years away from glory, maybe more. Still: Hallelujah."

As another Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Dr. Richard Gilbert, [has written](#),

*A tomb is no place to stay
When each morning announces our reprieve,
And we know we are granted yet another day of living.
A tomb is no place to stay
When life laughs a welcome
To hearts which have been away too long.*

The resurrection story tells us we must roll back the stone again and again, crawl out of the tomb and lift our eyes upward to the light of hope, the light of possibility, to hear the call "Peace

be with you," and perhaps the hardest call of all, "Keep going. Don't give up. Seek the joy and the justice. There will be a resurrection. There will be a new day." Hallelujah!

May it be so, Amen!

BENEDICTION – words adapted from Kathleen Rolenz

As we extinguish the flame our chalice this Easter Sunday
We carry with us the light of resurrection and salvation for all
May we pour out our souls like rain
On dry, parched earth

Somewhere across the world
Ester is breaking
Not the Easter we may think of
With arms upraised and "he is risen" echoing from canyons
But a quieter, less dramatic Easter
Thrumming with pulse of peace, the pulse of love, the pulse of justice
Urging us to keep on moving forward
To keep on rising
To hold on to hope
Go in Peace