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Sermon  
**Resurrection**

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First Reading: Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Second Reading: Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week*. Pages 192-3.

When these stories are seen as *history*, their purpose is to report publicly observable events that could have been witnessed by anybody who was there. If you or we (or Pilate) had been there when an angel rolled away the stone from the entrances to the tomb . . . , we would have seen it happen. If you or we (or Pilate) had gone to the tomb, we would have seen that the tomb was empty.

. . .

To call these stories “history,” as we are using the word here, means that the events they report could have been photographed or videotaped, if only these technologies had been available then.

When you see these stories as *parable*, the “model” for this understanding is the parables of Jesus. Christians agree that the meaning of Jesus’s parables is not dependent upon whether they are historically factual.

. . .

The obvious insight is that parables can be true – truthful and truth-filled – independently of their factuality. Because of the importance of this insight, we state it again in only slightly different language: *the truth of a parable – or a parabolic narrative – is not dependent on its factuality*. And an additional obvious insight is that to worry or

argue about the factual truth of a parable misses its point. Its point is its meaning. And “getting a parable” is getting its meaning – and often there’s more than one.

### Sermon

About two months ago I was looking at my calendar and there it was. The same thing happens each year. It will not go away. It’s unavoidable. It’s Easter. And each year my immediate response is the same. I’m not sure what to do about it. It is a part of Unitarianism’s religious heritage. It is a part of my personal religious heritage. I grew up with the story of Easter, of the crucifixion of Jesus and how on the third day he rose from the dead. One can dwell on the details of the stories. Truth be told there are some contradictions in the Gospel accounts. They are almost always ignored. I could talk about them, but I don’t think that leads anywhere as I don’t think the inconsistencies are important. They do nothing to take away from the central claim of the story – the one that causes all the problems. Jesus was crucified – an excruciatingly painful form of execution. He was dead. Not dead in the sense of someone whose heart stops momentarily and is then revived never having been really dead, but dead. Really and truly dead. Stone cold dead. The body starting to decay. And then he is brought back to life. He is reanimated. As a child and a young man I heard the story, but I did not think about it until my sophomore year in college. The day I thought about it was the day I stopped being a Christian. I abandoned Christianity because I had been told over and over again that the story had to be taken literally. That was the only possible understanding of the story. It was a story to be believed or not believed. To think of it any other way was impossible because, as the Apostle Paul said,

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

All or nothing. On the day I thought about it I accepted that choice and declared my childhood faith had been in vain. It was many years later that I first discovered there was a third way.

The third way is this: It is look at the story and to think about it. Not believe or disbelieve, but to see the questions within the story. Most people believe religion is about believing. I disagree. I believe that is a corruption of religion. The true purpose and method of religion is to see and to think. With respect to the Easter story the question is this: Why would some people believe he was resurrected? It matters not whether you agree or disagree with that belief, the need to believe – especially the need to believe in something like resurrection –speaks to something deep within what it means to be human. It speaks to a hunger for life and a thirst for justice, a hunger and thirst so deep and so powerful that one would feel compelled to believe that even death cannot stand in its way. If it is only a story to believe or disbelieve, it’s not much of a story. Mary Shelley wrote a story about the reanimation of the dead. I don’t believe her story. I would be surprised to find anyone who believes her story. But it continues to capture the imagination of the world because people don’t believe it presents something to be believed or not. Rather, it gives us a question about life and death and what it all means.

Within Christianity there have been efforts to think of the Easter story in this way. Rudolph Bultmann, a theologian of the twentieth century, argued the resurrection was not of the body of Jesus, but something that happened within the hearts and minds of his followers. If that is true, then the resurrection – the real and genuine resurrection – was about hope transcending the life of any individual. That suggests one of the problems with a literal resurrection: It tends to create a cult of personality. It says hope resides only in that one individual. That is the orthodox position. One can be saved only through Jesus. There is no other way. Think of what that would mean in politics. The future would lie only in a politics that is based on a cult of personality or a rigid, unquestioning ideology – not on the rule of law, not on justice for all, not on equality, not on democracy – but on the personal authority of one individual, an individual who requires absolute personal loyalty or an ideology that says death to anyone who questions the least of its commandments. That, of course, is the political structure of a dictatorship. It is why – in a democracy – people sworn into public office are not asked to swear allegiance to the President or a political ideology, but to protect and defend the constitution.

Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said people should be judged not by the color of their skin, but on the content of their character. Should we judge people on whether they believe in a literal resurrection? Or should we judge them on the content of their character, on their honesty, on how they treat the most vulnerable amongst us? Should we – as a religious community – expect people to swear loyalty to any particular ideology or any particular individual, even one who has risen from the dead – or should we expect people, as the prophet Micah said, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with . . . [their] God?” In other words, should we have a religion based on a cult of personality and creeds or a religion of deeds?

That’s the question Theodore Parker addressed in the nineteenth century. Parker was one of the three most important Unitarian figures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was so radical for his time that most of the other Unitarian preachers wanted nothing to do with him. One of his most radical ideas was the notion that truth was not a matter of personality. Parker said,

Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God, who sent him into the world. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly.

What should we make of the resurrection story? Is there a moral or religious truth that lies behind the story or is there something intrinsic in the story itself? I am left to believe it is not the story itself, but what we read into it. I am compelled to believe that it is one’s response to the story that is most important. That is why, on reflection, I think it makes more sense to end the story not with a claim of resurrection, but with the image of the empty tomb. For me that has more power. It has more power because I think it is an image and a metaphor that almost all of us have experienced – an event or time in

our lives when we have looked and found life itself is empty, when life itself seems to be a void.

This was brought home to me just a few weeks ago. I had a chance encounter with a woman I've known off and on for almost thirty years. About fifteen years ago one of her children died. I don't remember why, but for some reason she started talking about it. She talked about how empty her life had seemed at the time, but that eventually she was able to reclaim her life. She told me that she could remember the exact day and hour and minute when she realized she was going to be able to go on living. I don't know if she believes in the resurrection of the man named Jesus, but I believe she found a resurrection in her own life. I have to believe she found her own resurrection in a confrontation with the empty tomb within her own life.

For me that's the power of the resurrection story. It's not the reanimation of a dead body. That's a topic for the Mary Shelley's of this world. I believe the challenge of the resurrection story is about how one should respond to the empty tombs of our lives. For the followers of Jesus it was how to respond to the death of the dream of freedom from Roman rule. But it was not just about politics. It was also about the death of the dream of a world that would be the kingdom of God, a kingdom ruled not by power, but by justice, a world in which might did not make right, but right would make might. I think Bultmann was right. The real resurrection was in the hearts and minds of his followers.

I think that's the kind of resurrection that took place after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. He had a dream, but the dream did not die with him. And his dream, the dream of a world where his children would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character, was and is more powerful than the reanimation of his body could ever be.

There is no denying the fact that millions of people believe in the bodily resurrection of the man called Jesus. Early Unitarians such as William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker believed in the resurrection. I suspect most of you do not. I do not. But whether one believes or not I would hope that there would be more time spent thinking about what it means, thinking about how we respond to the reality of death in our own lives, be it the death of those we love or the death of our dreams. I believe that is important because death is part of our reality, a reality in which life continues. The question is not whether life continues or not; the question is whether we will continue with it. The question is what is going to happen within our hearts and our minds. As I have said before, no one can know for certain if there is life after death, but there is life before death. A meaningful doctrine of resurrection should focus on life before death, it should focus on what goes on in our hearts and minds when we confront the shadows of our lives. It should focus on our ability to say yes to life in the face of death. That is why I find the passion that Jesus had for social justice to be more powerful than the passion that people have for making him a human sacrifice. It is why I find his words, "Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing" more powerful than claims that he was God. It is why I don't believe in the resurrection, but continue to think about it.

Amen.