

On this day of celebrating miracles, in this sacred time, in this holy month, during this blessed season, we gather to worship. To consider things of worth, together.

The stories of resurrection stretch back as far as our known histories go. These are the stories of second chances, a story we all long to live. Stories of journeys through darkness and despair that are so hard that death is the only possible ending, and yet somehow life springs up anew.

It is the story of the phoenix, who dies in a blazing inferno, reduced to a pile of ash, only to be born again. It is the story of Odin who sacrificed his eye and then hung on the great tree Yggdrasil (IG drug zil), for nine days and nights to receive the gift of wisdom. It is the ancient story of Inanna, the great Mesopotamian goddess of love, beauty, war, and fertility, and her descent into the underworld, found guilty and struck dead by the seven judges there, only to be brought back to life after the pleading of another goddess three days later.

It is the story of Jesus, dying on the cross, and resurrected through the love of God.

It is the story of the spring, when snow and ice melt and give way for new life once again.

And these stories are our stories, told on a grander scale certainly, but ours nonetheless. We all go through our own death and rebirth many times over in our lives. There is a reason that these stories continue to hold such power, that they call to the hearts of so many people.

And it's the resurrection that we long to get to, we don't want to dwell in that which comes before. Not the messy and painful process of letting go, of loss, of realizing that the path we are on isn't leading where we hoped. And these stories wouldn't hold the power that they do, they wouldn't have the impact, if the loss wasn't catastrophic. Because without that final, permanent, loss that death brings, it isn't a miracle.

Erik Walker Wilkstrom says

"Of course, these mythological stories exist not just to explain how the world works out there, but how it works in here. So these are also the stories of you and me. You and me when our relationships falter, or fail. You and me when worries about making ends meet keep us up at night. You and me when depression clouds our souls. You and me when concern for the world leaves us immobilized. You and me when one we love dies. You and me as we face our own mortality.

These stories of the coming of winter—these stories of death and despair—are not just stories from some far away people in some far away time. They are our stories. And while we may want to rush from cross to resurrection, from the first flurry to the first crocus, it is important that we spend some time here, for each of us has what Sarah Moores Campbell calls a “tomb of the soul” in which “we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, [and] worries.” To gloss over them, to ignore this place and this season, is not to rid ourselves of it but rather to ensure that we come back here again and again and again, like an injury left untreated that flares up each time worse than the last.”

And highlighting this need to heal, to transform, is not meant to glorify suffering and pain. We change and grow and reinvent ourselves all the time without the need for torment. It doesn't make us better people. We are not a people who believe that we need to freely suffer and freely serve to be good. To be worthy. To bring light and love into the world. We know that we are the light and love in the world.

But when we do find ourselves in this season of loss, in the metaphorical death, in the struggle, there is always a path to growth. To new life. When we don't allow ourselves the opportunity to contemplate our own despair, we also don't allow ourselves to fully heal from it. Instead of returning whole and healed, we come back bruised and battered, unable to complete the transformation.

And we have all undergone a kind of death together these last three years. Whether we want to admit it or not we are still dying. Dying in the literal sense, as over 200 people on average are continuing to die from COVID 19 every day, just in this country, but also dealing with the death of a way of life and a fundamental understanding of how the world works and our place in it.

We are the phoenix, still engulfed in flames, but watching the ash begin to drop and form the pile beneath that will in the future birth forth a new phoenix. But not knowing when that time will come or how we can continue to endure.

And still we struggle with how to process these losses. How to open ourselves up to the uncomfortable and unpleasant examination of the trauma we have experienced, together, and yet somehow in isolation.

These stories always have meaning, but this year, in this time, it seems to me to be even more important that we allow ourselves to open up to the miracles.

As UUs we sometimes have a tendency to want to look at everything in a logical manner, lifting up rationality as the greatest gift that we can have. Because, when it comes to miracles, there are, of course, so many other explanations. Explanations that are backed by science and reason. Explanations that are easier to understand and accept. Explanations that don't require faith or belief.

But what if we could, just for a day, allow ourselves to open up to the possibility of miracles.

The miracle that is the seed sprouting after the frozen winter. The miracle that is a baby born in the spring. The miracle that is the birth, enlightenment, and death of a teacher of great wisdom. The miracle that is the parting of the Red Sea that allowed a people to follow the path to freedom. The miracle that is a holy text given to a prophet. The miracle that is a stone rolled back to reveal the tomb of a beloved leader and teacher to be empty.

Erik Walker Wilkstrom goes on to say

“There is a promise here. And, as Martin Luther noted, the promise is written not just in books but in every springtime leaf. It's even closer than that. The question is not whether we believe in resurrection but whether we have known it —known it in our own lived experience, seen it in the lives of others, felt it in the world around us.

The promise of our Unitarian Universalist faith is the promise of the seasons and these stories—winter is not perpetual, the wheel will keep on turning, the tomb is not the end. We affirm the promise of rebirth, of resurrection; of life's ultimate victory over death; of hope's triumph over hopelessness—not just as some abstract concept but as the miraculous reality of our lives. This is what we celebrate today!”

And I think it's important to note that these stories don't end with the resurrection. When Osiris was killed by Set, and then resurrected by Isis, the story doesn't end there. He goes on to eternal life as ruler of the Underworld.

When the tomb of Jesus was found empty, that wasn't the end of the story. After that he appeared first to the women. Those who had stayed out of love, to tend to his body even in death. And when he met them he told them to not be afraid and to tell the others that he would meet them at Galilee.

Heide Cottam tells us that:

“Jesus brought his people back together. It wasn’t enough to offer them hope; he gathered them, affirmed their hope, then sent them out to share his faith of love and compassion. He promised to be with them.

Because it takes a village, right? That’s why we’re here. This is why we gather on Sundays in this sanctuary. It is why we gather at protests and rallies or family dinners or even in coffee shops.

Imagine that sense of wonder and renewal the followers of Jesus must have felt. Awestruck. Renewed. Transformed by the love of another.

We’re doing that all the time.

We’re doing that at every... (social justice) meeting, at every Sunday service, (at every event for children and families), at every small group ministry, and even at committee, team, and Board meetings. We invite that feeling—awestruck, renewed, transformed by love—when we spend time together, and believe in humanity...

This is what the story of the resurrection offers us—hope.

I think this is why the resurrection is one of the most important stories in the Christian tradition. I think this is why Unitarian Universalists celebrate Easter joyfully, even if it gives us some kind of collective identity crisis.”

So, what do we do with these stories? We believe.

We believe because these stories of resurrection offer us hope. They offer us the hope that love will prevail. Even in the face of betrayal and death, love will prevail. In the face of oppression and hate, love will prevail. In the face of hardship and loss, love will prevail.

I sometimes think we struggle with these stories because hope can feel hard to hold onto. There is a distance in disbelief that is easier than the vulnerability of hope. Because disbelief doesn’t ask anything of us. But belief, belief is asking us to let go of the control of a rational, logical view that we hold onto so tightly and to allow for the possibility of mysteries greater than we can explain. Greater than we can even comprehend.

But when we do let go, when we stop arguing with ourselves, and others, about the logical explanations for supposed miracles, when we allow hope in, that’s when the true

resurrection happens. That's when we are changed. That's when we can finally see, not just these stories, but ourselves, the people around us, and the entire world, for the miracle that it truly is.

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