

Resurrection After Empire: A Sermon by Emily Richards, CRE

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Jesus was born under the rule of Caesar Augustus, the first of the Emperors of Rome, although he himself would never use that title. The bloody and brutal civil war that broke out after the assassination of Julius Caesar saw the end of the Roman Republic and the rise of an Empire.

An Empire, that it could easily be argued, really began with Julius Caesar, who ruled with a near dictatorial authority, leading armies and conquering neighboring lands, expanding the reach of Rome to the Atlantic and into the British Isles.

Octavian (later called Augustus) was the adopted heir of Julius Caesar and his rule brought about a new form of government, a principate, where the republic was a facade and he himself had ultimate power and the Senate was subservient to him.

He gave himself the title of “first citizen” and could submit legislation, summon the Senate, veto anything he wanted, and compel obedience, and he had supreme authority over the military and provinces.

While he is held up by some as bringing an extended period of peace, in reality his rule saw an unprecedented imperialist expansion and warfare, doubling the size of the Empire and adding more territory than at any other previous period in Roman history.

He told the Romans that he could save them and they believed him.

The 500-year-old ancient Roman Republic had failed. Competitive annual representative elections, tolerance of different religions, checks and balances, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and movement were all wiped out and would never recover.

Replacing the Republic was the Roman Empire, an increasingly authoritarian system that saw state-sponsored persecution of artists, minorities, non-citizens, and dissenters, countless foreign wars abroad, and, eventually, state imposed religion.

This is the world into which Jesus was born. A world with the thin veneer of peace and prosperity, for the chosen few. A world of war and expansion. A world of violence and public executions that included crucifixion, being burned alive, thrown to wild beasts, drowning in a sack, and, for citizens only, beheading .

A world alive with the hope for something new to be born.

Jesus preached kindness in a world of cruelty.

He preached forgiveness in a world of punishment.

He preached to care for the poor in a world of strict divisions and hierarchies.

He preached generosity in a world obsessed with wealth. He preached love in a world of violence where power was the ultimate goal.

He preached hope.

His life was ended through state sanctioned violence, but the messages that he preached have outlasted the Roman Empire by 1500 years.

The story of Jesus' resurrection is the story of how hope lives on.

Rev. Benjamin Cremer wrote:

"I have to keep reminding myself that the resurrection was unexpected for all those first disciples in their very scary world. When they heard the news and saw him alive again, there was an immediate shift in hope, joy, and motivation to keep going.

I have to keep reminding myself that resurrection isn't just something we celebrate about Jesus, but it is a goal to pursue in our world. It is a way of life to practice here and now. It is the proactive insistence in a world of evil and death that love and life will have the last word over us."

Jesus and his disciples lived in a very scary world. Our own world has felt more frightening to me as of late and our republic has been showing signs of instability.

The US system of government is based on the Roman Republic, Rome had three branches of government that created checks and balances, the consul (executive), the legislature (Senate) and the judiciary, which was the citizen committee.

The US government isn't exactly the same, but it is based on that system. It was when those checks and balances started to not function, when Caesar Augustus, and Julius Caesar before him, began to strip those institutions of their power and consolidate it for themselves, that the centuries old republic began its death throes.

These were the leaders, and those that came after, who had numerous statues of themselves placed all over the empire, they had portraits hung, buildings covered with their names and the words of their decrees, huge ornate palaces (or ballrooms) built, they had their faces minted on the coins of the Empire. These are all signs of an authoritarian regime.

I look around and I wonder if this is the moment, the moment where hope once more needs to be resurrected into this world.

Rev. Benjamin Cremer goes on to say:

"I just can't help but think how Jesus would be treated if his earthly ministry were taking place in America today.

How he would be treated for weeping publicly and showing compassion for others. (John 11:33-35)

How he would be treated for taking the role of a servant and washing people's dirty feet. (John 13:1-17)

How he would be treated for riding a donkey into the city instead of a warhorse. (Mark 11:1-11)

How he would be treated for telling his followers to put their swords away and love their enemies. (Matthew 26:52-53; Matthew 5:43-48)

How he would be treated over his ministry being funded and supported by wealthy independent women who owned their own business. (Luke 8:1-3)

How he would be treated for empowering women and treating them as his equal.

How he would be treated for preaching about bringing good news to the poor, wanting to bring healthcare to the sick, to liberate the oppressed, and forgive debts. (Luke 4:18-19)

How he would be treated for overturning an entire weekend of good business, completely disregarding profit margins by driving out exploitative economic practices against the poor being carried out through God's house of worship. (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-18)

How he would be treated for preaching nonviolence and even being willing to die for his enemies out of love for them rather than kill them. (Luke 23:34)

In our world today, I think Jesus would be treated much the same way he was treated during his earthly ministry.

Those who use their religion and politics as tools of oppression over others and for self-serving power would see him as a "radical" politically. They would see him as "working for the devil" by how he challenged their theology.

They would mock him as a "weak man" and trade him in for a violent insurrectionist like Barabbas instead.

They would see him as a threat to their categories of power. That is because he is. Yet instead of choosing to follow him, they follow their categories of power instead.

I just keep asking myself, (for those who claim to be Christian), why on earth would they want to ascribe to a definition of politics, Christianity, or masculinity where Jesus wouldn't even measure up as a "real man" or a "true leader?" Are we defining our current categories by Jesus or defining Jesus by our current categories?

When you worship power,
empathy, compassion, and mercy will begin to look like sins.
They will begin to look like a compromise.
They will look like weaknesses.

Love will begin to look like a threat.

We want the war horse.
Jesus rides a donkey.

We want the bird of prey.
The Holy Spirit descends as a dove.

We want the militia.
Jesus calls fishermen, tax collectors, women, and children.

We want the courtroom.
Jesus sets a table.

We want the gavel.
Jesus washes feet.

We want to take up swords.
Jesus takes up a cross.

We want the empire.
Jesus brings the Kingdom of God.

We want the nation.
Jesus calls the church.

We want the roaring lion.
God comes as a slaughtered lamb.

We keep trying to arm God.
God keeps trying to disarm us.”

How would Jesus be treated if he were here among us today?

I saw one of those gotcha videos on social media recently where a reporter was speaking to a group of people protesting against immigrant rights and one of the people, a proclaimed Christian, literally said that if Jesus was alive today and wasn't here legally that they thought he should be deported.

Now, these kinds of videos are made to catch people saying things that prove the other side's point and to make people look foolish or hypocritical.

But, I don't think that statement is untrue for many in the Christian Nationalist movement because I don't believe that they would even recognize the value of the message that Jesus actually preached.

And what did he preach that was so threatening that he was executed for his words? What message had so much power that it has been resurrected again and again throughout the last two thousand years?

John 34:13 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus didn't want a Christian nation, he preached for the establishment of the church.

And while he was mocked during his crucifixion for being the King of the Jews, and it was even inscribed upon the crucifix that he was nailed to, he never attempted to gain political power, and in fact specifically rejected it.

I cannot help but wonder what he would make of the words and actions of many of the people in this country at this time who claim to follow his teachings.

The time in which Jesus lived was a time of death and rebirth. The death of the Republic, the birth of an Empire. The story of the resurrection offered the possibility of a new way of not only understanding God and the world, but our relationship to one another. It offered a faith centered on love. Love for God, yes, but also love for one another.

These messages of love spread far and wide because of the Roman Empire. It was uniquely situated in history with its vast reach across multiple continents, its extensive system of roads and ease of travel, and the speed at which correspondence could be sent to spread Jesus' words. You could send a letter anywhere in the Roman Empire and it would reach its destination within two weeks.

And so, ironically, the Empire that executed him would be the method for which the gospel was spread. An Empire that would, 300 and some years later, pass the Edict of 380, mandating Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire and effectively ending centuries of religious pluralism. Turning the words of Jesus ' disciples of love and tolerance into a weapon of religious persecution.

Rev. Cremer reminds us that

"Much like those first disciples, we live in a world where there is so much to grieve over and so much to be concerned about. In this world, the unexpected resurrection of Jesus confronts us

with a similar question as well: will we allow the things we are grieving and causing us great concern to lock us away in fear or will we continue courageously embodying the ways of Jesus in the midst of our grief, hoping against all odds that we may soon be surprised by the unexpected, redeeming, and restoring work of God?"

Our Unitarian Universalist faith was born out of the belief in the inherent goodness of every person and the all encompassing love of God for all beings. Our religious roots start 2000 years ago with the miracle of the resurrection. Whatever your view is of the Christian scriptures, or the current state of Christianity in the world today, there is no denying the impact that a Jewish preacher's messages of love have had on the world and our understanding of it.

Jesus offered the possibility of a new world, a world in which even death could be overcome.

Frederick Buechner wrote:

"Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing."

The fall of the Roman Republic was not the end.

Jesus' death was not the end.

Whatever comes next in this country will not be the end either.

We can take these messages of love, we can take all of the messages of love from different traditions and beliefs, and build a new world. As UUs we are called to do the transformational work of love and justice.

Resurrection is possible.

It is hope, personified in a carpenter who lived 2000 years ago.

It is a goal that we can pursue.

It is a way of life to practice in the here and now.

It is the possibility of building something new out of the ashes.

In a world without end, may it be so.