



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

How Do You Make Sense of Easter Today?:

Progressive, Mystical, Humanist

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As we approach my tenth anniversary of serving as your minister, it is also my tenth anniversary of becoming a Unitarian Universalist. Before UUCF, I was a pastor of two different Progressive Christian congregations for a total of nine years. And if the circumstances had been slightly different, it's possible I could have spent the rest of my career in Progressive Christian circles.

It may be helpful to share with you a little more about that journey on this Easter Sunday, as a way of speaking about the continuing meaning the Christian tradition can have today. Too often, theologically conservative voices are the loudest in the room. As a result, the word "Christian" is too often associated with being hypocritical and judgmental; with aggressively trying to convert others; with being anti-science and anti-LGBTQ. And if that were all the Christian tradition had to offer me, I would have left it behind a long time ago without looking back.

I was raised Southern Baptist in South Carolina, but by middle school, I was increasingly questioning both the disconnect of Southern Baptists spending a lot of time praising Jesus in the abstract (and very little time doing the radically transgressive acts of inclusion, mercy, and forgiveness that Jesus did.) Here's the thing: my Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders urged me to read the Bible back then, so I did. And that's where the trouble started. So much can open up from reading what the

Bible *actually* says, not what people *think* that it says. And the Bible gets yet more interesting the more you learn about the original contexts in which it was written.

In college, as a double major in religion and philosophy, the volume on my skepticism was turned up considerably, and my questions rapidly multiplied. Around that time, I began attending a congregation affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, a small denomination of around 140 congregations. But they are really interesting folks. And their approach to the Christian tradition resonates strongly with the Fourth of our UU Six Sources: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

I want to invite you to hear a part of the Alliance of Baptists' Covenant:

Guided by the Spirit, we commit ourselves to....

Hold the earth sacred, practice creation justice, and...

Cultivate relationships of mutual respect and accountability;

Act to dismantle systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and abusive power,

Raise prophetic voices for liberation and justice, and

Work to eradicate poverty in all forms;

Establish spaces of refuge and renewal with those who are wounded,

Listen to and follow voices that have been silenced, and

Break down barriers that divide us from each other and creation.

We seek to live in joy, humility, and gratitude, welcoming the realm of God.

The point here is not whether all that language works for you individually, but rather that there are many points of connection and alignment with our UU work for peace and justice.

If we had time, we could explore similarly progressive commitments in other mainline Christian denominations, such as the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. Indeed, one of our most frequent partners in social justice work here in Frederick is the Evangelical Reformed

United Church of Christ in downtown Frederick. And all of that is still barely scratching the surface of the depth and breadth of the Christian tradition.

So, even as my heart breaks at the harms so many people—very much including me—have experienced from Christianity over the centuries, I am also aware of how much benefit has also come from the work of open-minded, open-hearted Christians.

Because there can be such a wide spectrum of what Christianity looks like, let me share a little more fully about the deep structural differences that tend to distinguish a more theologically liberal Progressive Christianity from its more theologically conservative, orthodox forms. In particular, the historical Jesus scholar Marcus Borg identified three especially significant paradigm shifts:

1. Moving *from* relating to the Bible and various traditional theologies as being handed down from on high by God (and thus being viewed as infallible, inerrant, and immune to questioning, including explorations through scientific processes) *to* seeing the Bible and all theological and ethical reflection as the work of **imperfect humans deeply shaped by their historical contexts**.
2. Moving *from* interpreting the Bible as literally, factually, and binding on all people, places, and times, *to* **understanding the Bible’s historical contexts and applying its lessons more metaphorically, sacramentally, and archetypally**.
3. Moving *from* a focus on individual salvation in a next world *to* **building a better world for all people right here and now in this life and on this one Earth** (*The Heart of Christianity*, 15).

So we could summarize these paradigm shifts as:

Earlier Paradigm	Emerging Paradigm
<i>Divine</i> origins/authority	<i>Human</i> response
Literal-factual	Historical-metaphorical-sacramental-archetypal
<i>Other</i> -worldly	<i>This</i> life

Progressive Christianity also tends to emphasize gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and multi-faith dialogue, grounded in the conviction that Christianity is only one among many legitimate spiritual paths (ProgressiveChristianity.org). If you are curious to learn

more about Progressive Christianity, I could make a very long reading list for you, but if I had to limit myself to one book, one of the best and most accessible starting points is Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*.

frederickuu.org/UUChristians: top 15 list

I want to shift gears soon to give you two more angles for making sense of Easter today, but first let me give you one more example that has been on my mind recently, about the ongoing relevance the Christian tradition can hold. Whenever I hear discussions about forgiving student loan debts, one of the most frequent objections comes from those who have already repaid their debts. While I can easily empathize with that perspective, whenever I hear debates about student debt forgiveness, I can't help but think of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20.

Some of you will know this parable well. I'll retell it briefly. Jesus says that the beloved community is like an employer who goes out at 6am to hire day laborers for the going daily rate.

Three hours later, at 9am, he goes back into town and notices that there are day laborers who still haven't been hired by anyone yet. So he tells them to come and work for him, but, instead of formally agreeing to the usual daily rate, he says, "I'll pay you whatever is right." That's a little ambiguous. I could imagine being uncomfortable if I were in the day laborer's shoes if this guy's definition of "what is right" going to feel right to me? But I suspect they were also thinking that getting *any* pay would be better than returning home empty-handed.

As the story continues, the employer goes out again at noon and at 3pm, and each time he brings in yet one more crew of day laborers who otherwise would have been completely without work or pay that day.

At 5:00 p.m. he goes out a final time, and there are still day laborers standing idle, so he hires all of them too even though the workday was almost over.

Finally, at sunset, he begins to pay them in reverse order, from last hired to first hired. And here's the twist: The folks hired at 5pm received the full daily wage. So too did the folks hired at 3pm, noon, and 9am: they each were paid as if they had worked all day.

Everyone at the back of the line who had been working since 6am began to get excited as they saw those who worked fewer hours being paid so generously. They began to speculate: how much more will we get paid than we originally anticipated?!

But when they got to the front of the line, they too received the usual daily wage. As they realized that everyone got paid the same amount, they started grumbling: Why are we being paid the same as those who only worked one hour, when we have been toiling for twelve hours in the hot sun?

The employer replied: **"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last."**

This teaching can be difficult and paradoxical, and if we had time, we could explore a fascinating precedent to this parable in 1 Samuel 30, in which King David tells his troops that, "The share of the one who goes down into the battle *shall be the same* as the share of the one who stays by the baggage; *they shall share alike.*" There was a similar situation in which the troops who went into battle wanted to keep all the spoils for themselves, and Jesus's Parable of the Generous Employee may well have been inspired by this ancient Hebrew legend.

If we take a step back from both of these stories, we can read between the lines that the youngest and most able bodied were probably hired first at 6am in Jesus's parable, and selected first to go into battle with King David. So part of what these ancient Jewish and Christian stories might have been about is widening our circle of compassion so that everyone receives at least a basic living wage.

In addition, it's important to know that the usual daily wage at that time was a *subsistence* wage, so anyone who wasn't hired was likely going to go hungry along with his family that day. So we could reinterpret this story today as the Parable of a Living Wage. Or we could take it further to be the Parable of Why We Need a Universal Basic Income. There are some powerful resources in these ancient scriptures that can inform and equip us even in quite contemporary debates about fairness and student loan forgiveness.

Resentment is a natural human emotion one might feel at seeing student loans forgiven for others when you have already dutifully paid off all or most of your own loans. But can you also hear this parable as an ancient call to lean into *celebrating generosity*, to incline yourself to being excited about the possibility of a world in which fewer people are weighed down financially simply for seeking an education? Can you hear that good news? On this Easter Sunday it's pieces like this that continue to make me grateful for the time I have spent immersed in some of the best of the Christian tradition.

Now, having spent some time exploring the Progressive Christian tradition, there are other angles that can help us make Easter more relevant today: Christian mysticism and Christian humanism. Let's start with mysticism. I felt inspired to bring these more modern traditions up a few months ago following the death of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926 - 2022). I once felt prompted to read a new book by him that proved still very influential on me twenty-five years later. It's titled *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.

In 1997, I was a college freshman, pretty immersed at the time in finding my way through various theological arguments and debates, trying to find my way out of the constrictive theologies of my childhood, which often felt really tight to me, like a closed fist. But my experience of reading Thích Nhất Hạnh was like nothing I had encountered before. His approach to the Christian tradition was so free, so liberating—like a gently opening hand. His approach embodies that experiential shift we explored earlier—from a literal/factual place to a metaphorical, sacramental, and archetypal one.

I was also struck by the Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton and the Baptist preacher The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—feeling they had more in common with Thích Nhất Hạnh than they did with many other Americans and many other Christians (Hanh xiv). Hanh said the same was true for him: he felt like he had more in common with them than with many of his fellow Vietnamese citizens and Buddhists (4).

In regard to their respective religions, they shared in common that shift—from divine origins/authority to very *human* responses, and from other-worldly beliefs to *this-worldly* perspectives and actions. Hanh called his approach “engaged Buddhism,” and in January, for our next Martin Luther King, Jr. Day service, I want to tell you more

about the profound friendship and mutual influence of Dr. King and Thich Nhat Hanh upon one another.

In a very UU approach to the world's religions, Hanh actively encouraged people to "see the beauty and value of other traditions." That's not how I grew up. I was raised with all this anxiety around converting people to The One True Way, so they wouldn't go to hell. But Thich Nhat Hanh invited us to just sidestep all that. He used to say that different religious traditions are "just like cooking. If you love French cooking, it does not mean that you are forbidden to love Chinese cooking." Similarly, he says, "You love the apple; yes...but no one prevents you from also loving the mango" (Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 202).

If you are curious to learn more, another more recent book of a contemporary meditation teacher bringing a nondual, mystical lens to Christianity is Adyashanti's book *Resurrecting Jesus*.

As I move toward my conclusion, I want to end with one final piece for any of my Humanists out there. I want to invite you to hear an Easter reflection by my colleague The Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, titled "The Humanist Speaks of Easter." It's her attempt to discern the archetypal meaning canonical Easter traditions can still hold for us here in the twenty-first century—a shift that moves us beyond the shock of Jesus's death on Holy Friday to the silence of the tomb on Holy Saturday to the joy of Easter Sunday. Gibbons invites us to see that the question is not whether you believe Easter actually happened in a particular place a long time ago; rather, the invitation is to notice how those same very human dynamics play out archetypically around the planet again and again. She writes:

I don't believe that Jesus came back from the dead.

Neither did Martin, or Malcolm.

Neither did Viola Liuzzo, [*a Unitarian woman, one of our own, killed in 1965 for helping transport civil rights activists during the Selma to Montgomery marches*]

or Frozan Safi, the women's rights activist shot by the Taliban in Afghanistan last November.

Neither will dismembered journalist Jamal Kashoggi,

or Aleksei Navalny when he dies in a Russian prison.
Neither will documentary filmmaker Brent Renaud, or photographer
Maksim Levin,
both killed by invading armies in Ukraine....
I don't believe that the crucifixion is a story with a happy ending,
or that it was a one time event.
It happens over and over as the human journey unfolds.
It happens to us, and to the people we love;
It happens to the righteous, and the innocent.
Crucifixion happens, and it feels like the end of the world, every time.
It feels like nothing could matter any more, ever.
And then...
And then, inevitably and miraculously,
Something happens next.
Something happens. Of course it does.
Because the world hasn't ended, yet.
It's not always an empty tomb – how trite would that become?
Mostly, the beloved bodies just lie right there, peacefully decomposing.
But something happens, and whether we want it or not, a new chapter
begins.
Maybe the sun comes up, or the lilies do. Spring rolls around. That
happens.
Or memories come. Or someone needs you.
You eat food; that happens. You walk down the road, and share a
recollection.
Life happens, keeps happening,
The dead don't rise – but we do.
One day, it happens; you take a breath, and it doesn't hurt to breathe.
You start to see people again, really see them.
Hope rises. Community rises. You rise. We rise. Life rises.
Not because death isn't real; crucifixion is not just pretend.

But something else is just as real, maybe even more real.

Something happens next –

That is the other thing we know for sure.

Life rises. Outrage rises. Love rises. Faith rises. Tears rise. Hope rises.

As UUs, we believe in *deeds* not creeds, and that *behavior* is more believable than words. So this Easter, may we each, both individually and collectively, seek to discern how this ancient tale still calls us to turn our dreams into *deeds*.