



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
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## **Resurrecting Easter: The Communal Uprising We Need Today**

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The public theologian Brian McLaren tells a story, appropriate for Easter Sunday, of a time he was on a pilgrimage to what is known as the Holy Land in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. On this particular day, he was visiting The Church of All Nations, also known as the Basilica of the Agony. It is in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, next to the Garden of Gethsemane. And on the Tuesday of Holy Week, before Jesus's arrest by Roman soldiers, it was in this place where he is said to have prayed three times, "Remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:32-42).

There is so much more to say about this story: the various versions of what is said to have happened, what perhaps actually happened, and what all those different interpretations mean, both then and now. And for those of us who have studied the Bible closely, all of these variables can be swirling in your head as you approach a traditional holy site. So as Brian McLaren, who *has* studied this subject very closely, approached Jerusalem's Church of All Nations, he encountered an unexpected sign written in all capital letters posted outside the entrance: **"PLEASE: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH."**

That message can be taken as unintentionally funny. But this sign may also be helpful for a variety of reasons. Logistically, many people on pilgrimages come to The Church of All Nations to pray, which is hard to do if tour guides are constantly shouting historical lectures at a level sufficiently loud for everyone in their group to hear.

But there's another level on which we can also read that warning—and that is to keep your questions, debates, and theories *outside*. Inside, one could presume, is exclusively a place reserved for mystery, holiness, and faith.

Less charitably, one could interpret the sign to mean, “Check your brain at the door!” More charitably, there is a sense in which I can appreciate the encouragement to set aside all explanations, if only temporarily.

This more receptive point of view is connected, at least in part, to the collective anguish many of us experienced seeing the horrifying images earlier this week from Paris, of Notre-Dame on fire—a sense of deep loss that a centuries-old site of transcendent beauty might potentially be lost altogether. Thankfully, the damage, although extensive, is not as severe as originally thought.

Let's take a step back to consider our theological options from a few different angles. On the one hand, if you find yourself in a Unitarian Universalist congregation on Easter Sunday, I suspect I am safe in surmising that none of us here this morning share the medieval Catholic theology that created the Notre-Dame in the first place.

After all, the groundbreaking for the gothic cathedral that became Notre-Dame was in the twelfth century—and construction continued for almost two hundred years before being completed (at least in its first iteration) in the fourteenth century. At that point in time, even the earlier Unitarian half of our heritage would not begin in earnest for almost another two centuries, emerging during the early Sixteenth Century as part of the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation.

We would have to fast-forward two more centuries to reach the eighteenth century Age of Reason—the Age of the Enlightenment—that also strongly influenced our UU tradition. We are an Enlightenment people, a people of explanation. **We are people who explain in church!** Our openness and encouragement to ask—and live in—the hard questions, even—and especially—in churches! is embodied in our UU Fifth Source: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

At the same time, Unitarian Universalism is a big tent, and it is worth noting that our UU First Source is “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to

the forces which create and uphold life.” Furthermore, our UU Fourth Source is explicitly about the “Jewish and Christian teachings” honoring both halves of our Unitarian Universalist heritage which were originally rooted in liberal Christianity— even as we are centuries now into being open to all the world’s religions balanced with the insights of modern science.

And I invite you to consider also that it is our UU First Source—“direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder”—that for many of us was part of our anguish at learning the news of the fire at Notre Dame. Even if you long ago left behind medieval Christian theology (or never had it in the first place), there is still an aesthetic and spiritual capacity within many of us for awe and wonder in a transcendent sacred space such as a gothic cathedral. Indeed, I suspect that this same attraction to transcendent sacred spaces is part of what draws many of us together into this space, this sanctuary, week after week. It’s part of why we have a tradition of our choir singing Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” on Easter. **Even if we do not literally believe the lyrics any more than we believe the medieval theology that inspired Notre-Dame, we believe these pieces of culture are historically fascinating, beautiful, transcendent, and well worth revisiting.**

So while I am all for asking questions in church, there are also times and places for setting aside explanations—and simply allowing your heart and soul to be open. This shift from head to heart reminds me of an old saying that, **“Tourists pass through a place, but pilgrims allow a place to pass through them.”** At its best, that distinction is behind that sign, “PLEASE: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH.”

For those of us with an inclination toward playing the role of the tourist, the historian, or the scholar—all of which are vitally important roles—that sign can be read as an invitation to experiment with occasionally setting those cerebral roles aside to discover what happens if you allow a place like Notre-Dame to pass through you, to allow the spirit of Easter Sunday to pass through you, to open your heart and spirit to “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” within a universe that is much larger than our mere human capacity can fully comprehend.

Relatedly, a little more than a week ago, I completed teaching a course at Frederick Community College (as part of their Institute for Learning in Retirement) on

“What Did Jesus Really Say and Do—*According to Matthew?*” Over six ninety-minute sessions, we went through the Gospel of Matthew, studying what scholars sometimes call “Matthew’s Jesus,” which, as many of you likely know, is not a one-to-one correlation with scholarly conclusions regarding the historical Jesus. Among a few different reasons, Matthew was written approximately fifty years after the death of the historical Jesus. That course, for the most part, leaned toward the perspective of the scholar, the historian, the tourist. But we also occasionally explored connections to the more transcendent pilgrim perspective.

Moving at the pace of 3 to 4 chapters each week, we only made it through 23 of Matthew’s 28 chapters. But for the final slides, especially since Easter was approaching, I couldn’t resist giving them at least a brief taste of the material in Matthew’s final five chapters that we didn’t have time to cover; on the final slide, I shared with them three verses from the twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew that are quite different from what many of us have been told Easter is all about. And honestly, that’s basically my *modus operandus* when teaching the Bible: I point out all the weird, fascinating stuff that has been there all along, even though most people—including most preachers—pay far too little attention to it, perhaps striving for a doctrinal consistency which doesn’t exist.

So on this Easter Sunday, I invite you to hear these three verses from Matthew 27:50-53, which “according to” Matthew, are what happened at the end of the crucifixion:

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 **The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.** 53 After his resurrection **they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.**

Setting aside the question of what actually happened, what Matthew is discussing is pretty interesting—and quite different from what I learned in the theologically conservative congregation of my childhood. I was always told the Easter story was solely about the (alleged) miracle of Jesus’s resurrection. But all along there was this

passage in Matthew about many additional people being raised: that not only did Jesus have post-Resurrection appearances, but so too did these other allegedly raised saints “appear to many.”

As a side note, I am by no means trying to avoid the question of what actually happened on the original Easter Sunday. I’ve addressed that explicitly from a number of angles in previous sermons that are all available in our [website sermon archive](#).

For now, I would like to invite us to approach Easter from the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian tradition, which is equally fascinating and different than the Roman Catholic -tradition more familiar to many in the West.

If you want to go deeper, I recommend the book [Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision](#) by the renowned historical Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan and his wife Sarah Crossan, whose incredible photographs are included throughout the book to provide visual examples of how the differences between West and East are seen not only in texts, but especially in *art* and *architecture*.

A natural response to becoming aware of the differences between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity is to ask which one is correct. But over the years, I have increasingly come to understand that truth is much messier and more complex than that. In the case of understanding the various Christian traditions, there is rarely one true and correct version or interpretation. Much more often, multiple, competing and overlapping stories, emphases and interpretations emerge from the very beginning.

Regarding the Resurrection, there is support in text, art, and architecture for the stories of both the *individual* resurrection of Jesus and the *communal* resurrection of others. But the individual resurrection of Jesus has been almost exclusively dominant in the western Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, whereas Eastern Orthodox Christianity has far more prominently preserved the tradition of communal resurrection (22).

And it is from that less well-known Eastern Orthodox tradition that there potentially is wisdom for us this Easter — wisdom that questions the urging of individuals to embrace an arguably tenuous notion about Jesus, and thus to pray the

so-called “Sinners Prayer” so that they might be individually saved, a practice, from my perspective, which deeply misses the whole point of Jesus’ life.

The historical Jesus was not interested in whether people two thousand years after his death believed in whether or not something magical happened one morning to him, individually. Rather, he was always pointing beyond himself to the everyday possibilities that could happen in any time and in any place through what he called the “kingdom of God”—which modern-day prophets like The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have reinterpreted for our time as the beloved community.

Along those lines, it is notable that the word translated as “Resurrection” is from the Greek word *anastasis*, where we get the name Anastasia. Notice that prefix *ana+* (“up”) when added to the root *+stasis* (related to our word for “inactivity”) **literally means “up-rising”** (14). Therein we can glimpse the larger significance of the resurrection. The Roman Empire thought they had settled the matter of Jesus’ life and teachings when they executed Jesus on the cross. Nevertheless, people continued to have “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” through what became the Christian tradition.

There are other related ways that “The Empire Strikes Back,” so to speak, and that the Christian tradition becomes corrupted and compromised over the years. Nevertheless, as is the case in other religious and spiritual traditions, even when compromises almost inevitably happen, some of the original authenticity remains—some of that original spirit of resurrection, of *anastasis*, of “up-rising.” And as the Eastern branch of the Christian tradition reminds us, that uprising is not merely about an *individual* long ago, but a *communal* insurrection against injustice that can happen in any time or in any place.

In that spirit of Easter uprising—of new hope, new life, and new community—that can arise on the other side of despair, death, and isolation, I’m reminded of a Mexican proverb that feels quite significant for our own society’s needs for rebirth today: **“When they tried to bury us, they didn’t know we were seeds.”** That’s a resurrection—an *uprising!*—that many of us can support here and now in the twenty-first century.