

“The Newness of Life”

5 April 2026

Easter Sunday/Passover

Take in these words from *The Gospel of Luke*:

Now, there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, of Arimathea, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan to crucify him. This man went to Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned home and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath day they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, and the men said to them, “Women, why do you look for the living among the dead?”

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“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

It is the incredulous question at the very heart of Easter.

Why do you—why do I, why do we—
look for the living among the dead?

Why do we search for hope amid despair,
assurance in the wake of devastation and loss,
faith in the face of doubt and fear?

Why, when we’re brought to our knees,
do we yearn for the abiding promise that life abounds—
for the confidence to believe,
even when all has seemingly been lost,
that life, somehow, goes on?

The way the story is told in the closing chapters of Luke's gospel suggests,
with more than a hint of derision,
that the women who came to his tomb
to give Jesus a proper burial
were unaware of the great miracle that had taken place.

And so they were.

They had come, at first light,
after what was surely a sleepless night,
to tend the body of a loved one they had seen executed
on a cross by Roman authorities two days before.

Stricken by grief, they had come to give him
the burial they felt he deserved—
an honour that had been impossible to provide
as the sun set and the Jewish Sabbath began
on the day he died.

Sent from heaven or not,
what I think was lost in the question the two angelic beings
put to the mourning women, was the recognition
that it was actually life itself that day
that had drawn them to the grave.

Why did they look for the living among the dead?
Because it is what we do.

Not always immediately.
Not always with ease.

But after the long night, more often than not,
we humans gird ourselves for what must be done
and rise to affirm that life goes on.

The journey those women made to the grave that morning
was a great labour of love,
an affirmation of their deepest devotion,
an outward sign of their enduring commitment and connection
to one who had deeply touched and transformed their lives.

To this day, it remains a remarkable testament
to the resilience at the heart of being human.

They could have stayed, after all,
hunkered down in their beds.
They could have left well enough alone,
deciding the hasty burial he'd received would have to suffice.
(Besides, it had already been two days.)

But they resolved instead to affirm the bonds of their love.

Making their way to the tomb,
they were compelled by a connection
that would not let them go.

And so, it was all they knew of Jesus,
still alive in their hearts,
that drew them back to that garden of grief.

There in that cemetery, they were searching
for what they knew of the living Jesus.

Much in the same way, I imagine, so many of us
have made our own way to the graves of loved ones
seeking out what connects us still to those whom we've lost.

Now, obviously enough, the Christian tradition
makes a much more miraculous claim
about what happened that day.

It is, after all, a physical resurrection being proclaimed and celebrated today
in most of the churches of Christendom—
though, it must be said, quite a few people
in both the pulpits and pews of those churches
harbour some deep doubts that they keep mostly to themselves.

In scholarly circles, though,
regarding the question of bodily resurrection,
it's long been clear that the Greek verb translated as "raised"—as in "he is
risen"—most frequently meant someone had "been lifted up."

This verb was also typically used more as a metaphor than not.

Which is why there's a helpful distinction to be made, I think,
between resurrection and resuscitation.

And while that debate is really for another sermon,
it's worthwhile to recall that it was over
the more orthodox claims made about the meaning of Easter
that Unitarians historically diverged from the dominant Christian story.

The focus in our tradition has long been on Jesus
as teacher, guide, role model, and moral exemplar.

We have, by and large, followed the pattern set by Thomas Jefferson,
who while President of the United States,
cut and pasted his copies of the Christian gospels
to reflect his own Unitarian understanding.

Late at night, in his White House study,
with a razor and glue, he compiled what, today,
is called *The Jefferson Bible*.

In his final version, all the miracles were tossed out,
including each of the accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

He also removed most everything that might be called supernatural,
including the angels heralding Jesus' birth,
the long biblical genealogies,
and any references to Jesus being divine.

What was left was a collection of his teachings,
told mostly through parables,
and a rough narrative of his earthly and very human life.

And while I deeply appreciate the work
Jefferson did to boil down the gospels—
arguably to their Unitarian essence—
I feel something precious is lost when we jettison the bits
that make us uncomfortable or confused.

Now, to be absolutely clear,

there is much in the resurrection narratives
that goes beyond what I, and I suspect many of us,
can or care to believe.

Yet there is also in these complicated and conflicting gospel accounts,
a deep and tender display of humanity to be found.

Again and again,
there are stories that point to the ways we grieve,
and to our feeble efforts to make meaning out of our heartache.

There are stories of fear and doubt and outright disbelief, as well.

When the women were asked
why they were looking for the living among the dead,
the two angelic figures—
told them, “He is not here, he is risen!”¹

When they returned to share the news with Jesus’ disciples,
no one would believe them,
thinking they were talking nonsense.

But the text then says:
“Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb.
Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves,
and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.”²

Apparently, not willing or able
to take the women’s word for it,
he had to see for himself.
And yet doing so left him baffled still.

In the last chapter of *Luke* is the poignant account,
later that afternoon, of several of Jesus’ disciples
walking the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

All it seemed that they could talk about on the journey
was this unsettling news they had just heard.

¹ *The Gospel of Luke*: 24:5.

² *The Gospel of Luke*: 24:12.

How were they to make sense
of all that had happened over the past few days?

In short order, they had seen their friend and teacher
take up his ministry in Jerusalem,
only to provoke the authorities in the process,
be sentenced to death,
and swiftly executed as a criminal.

And now this strange possibility that he was, somehow, alive.

They were understandably bewildered.

And they were so caught up in their conversation,
they didn't even notice Jesus walking alongside them.

It was only when they stopped for the night
and sat down to eat, that they recognised Jesus
in the breaking of the bread.

And, yet, as soon as they did, he vanished from their sight.

The gospels contain several more stories
of Jesus being seen by those who had followed him.

Suddenly, he'd appear in a room with locked doors
or along the shore of the lake while they were out fishing.

The stories are odd and defy all that we know
of logic—or physics.

Rather than getting tripped up, though,
it's better to suspend our disbelief and take in the message
that the disciples knew in a powerful way
they were somehow in Jesus' continuing presence,
and that his death had not been the end of the story.

That they found to be true Jesus' promise that:
“where two or three are gathered in my name,

I am there among them.”³

Or as he says in *The Gospel of Thomas*,
a text lost for most of Christian history,
“Split a piece of wood, and I am there.
Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”⁴

Each of these passages speak to me
of what endures beyond the grave.

Of how our connections can be sustained—
and can sustain us—despite the distance of death.

Whatever we might think about bodily resurrection,
I’m pretty certain Jesus wasn’t speaking literally
when he promised to be found by splitting wood
or looking under a rock.

Rather, all of this speaks, to me,
of what it means to live on in the lives of others—
for the connections of the heart to be a tie that binds us,
even to those who are gone.

Obviously enough, Easter can be a complicated day
for us as Unitarians.

As I said earlier, the more miraculous claims
are where we have typically parted ways
with mainstream Christianity over the centuries.

In the words of Theodore Parker,
we’ve historically been much more interested
in the religion of Jesus than the religious about Jesus.

And, yet, we have not come together today
to declare what we don’t believe,
but to affirm what it is that we do.

³ *The Gospel of Matthew*: 18:20.

⁴ *The Gospel of Thomas*, Sayings 30 and 77b.

I don't know whether the sermon, thus far, has helped,
but, perhaps, the following story will.⁵

A group of friends of various religious denominations were seated in fellowship
discussing the true meaning of Easter one Sunday when the Baptist said:

"I believe we place too much emphasis on chocolate bunnies,
rainbow-coloured rabbits and Easter eggs,
instead of the spiritual aspect,
which is the real meaning of Easter.
That's what I believe," said the Baptist.

"Me, too," said the Methodist. "Me, too," said the Lutheran.
"Me, too," said the Catholic. "Me, too," said the Anglican.
And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is that Christ
died on the cross for our sins," said the Methodist.

"Me, too," said the Anglican. "Me, too," said the Lutheran.
"Me, too," said the Baptist. "Me, too," said the Catholic.
And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter
is the triumph of Jesus over the grave," said the Lutheran.

"Me, too," said the Catholic, the Anglican,
the Baptist, and the Methodist.
And the Unitarian was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter
is not only what each of you has said,
but also that all people who believe
in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus
are cleansed of original sin through baptism
and are restored to the favour of God to share in eternal life,"
said the Anglican.

"Me, too." "Me, too."
"Me, too." "Me, too."

⁵ Adapted from a telling of this story by Jim Wallace.

And the Unitarian was silent.

“I believe the real meaning of Easter,
in addition to what has already been said,
symbolises that the bodies of all people will be resurrected
and joined to their souls to share their final fate,” said the Catholic.

“Me, too” was heard again from them all.
And the Unitarian was silent.

The group then turned to their Unitarian friend,
whom they all recognised as a little strange, and said,
“Your silence is a mystery to us.
Just what do you believe as a Unitarian
is the real meaning of Easter?”

And the Unitarian said:
“I believe the real meaning of Easter
is the appreciation of life’s renewing cycles
and that for all things there is a season.”

“I believe the real meaning of Easter is the acknowledgment,
with its accompanying sadness, of a very human Jesus
who was forced to die on the cross
because of his radical religious views.”

“But most important of all,
I believe the real meaning of Easter
is the celebration of thanksgiving
for the presence of the sacred
in each and every living person and thing;
for the presence of the sacred in the birds that sing;
for the presence of the sacred in the flowers which sway
and the grasses that rustle in the gentle breezes of spring.”

“This is what I believe to be the real meaning of Easter,”
said the Unitarian.

“Me, too,” sang the birds.
“Me, too,” waved the flowers.
“Me, too,” rustled the grasses.

“Me, too,” sighed the wind.
And all the rest were silent.

Friends, on this bright Easter morn,
let us summon the strength and courage to be silent no more.

Let us lift up the bright, bold strains of Hallelujahs,
affirming that this life is precious and good—
and that the hope of Easter is in trusting
that the worst thing is never, ultimately, the last thing.

Let us sing the triumph song that proclaims love endures,
and that we live on in the hearts of others.

And with great and grateful joy,
let us celebrate the newness of life all around us,
and with it, the resurrection of our own hearts.

Hallelujah!, and Amen.