

“An Easter Hope”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar
at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009

I want to tell you how Jesus was resurrected. It wasn't just 2000 years ago that he was placed in a cave and left for dead. No. It happens all the time.

For Judith, it happened like this. As a girl, Judith's family didn't go to church. So, she really didn't know much about Jesus or the Bible, except what she heard from other children on the playground or saw in movies and on TV. That's not completely true, because Judith also heard her parents making fun of certain followers of Jesus from time to time. For example, she remembers one time while driving, her dad saw a bumper sticker on a Cadillac that had a Jesus fish on it that said: *This fish won't fry, will you?* And her dad said, "I feel like pulling up beside this guy and asking, *Hey buddy, when the rapture comes, can I have your car?*" Then, there was Judith's favorite uncle who had a bumper sticker on his car that said: *Dear God, please protect me from people who actually believe in you.* The only time she ever heard her father say the name Jesus Christ, was when her brother ran over her father's golf club with the lawnmower.

By the time Judith was an adult, she had a pretty healthy aversion to most things Christian. At one point in her life, the word *Christian* was synonymous for her with words like *hypocrite* and *idiot*. Suffice it to say that she had no interest in Jesus, and so she buried him in a dark cave and rolled a big heavy stone over it to keep him there.

Zack, on the other hand, had a different experience growing up. His parents and grandparents were very religious Christians. As a matter of fact, they were so religious that he went to church at least twice a week. He was familiar with eternity, because that's how long the services seemed to last. The idea of eternal punishment was particularly terrifying since, to him, three hours of church on Sunday felt like torture enough. He figured, after all that church, he deserved a reward in the next life. When he was young, Zack learned to love Jesus, but as he grew older and started to become more curious and mischievous, he started to fear him. The Jesus he was taught about could be quite judgmental, and so, he learned, were some of the people who followed him. Zack tried hard to be good and do the right things, but he often found himself in need of forgiveness and redemption. Sometimes young Zack would lie awake at night, afraid he was going to be punished eternally by God.

Zack especially disliked the fact that he was expected to witness to others about the love of Jesus. When he came to church on Sundays, he was asked if he had shared his faith that

week, and when he had not, he felt guilty and like he wasn't good enough. By the time Zack grew up, he stopped attending church, and he could not get far enough away from all things religious. Zack sometimes missed the church music and the sense of being part of a community, but he felt liberated from the feelings of judgment, fear, shame and guilt that seemed to come along with the church package. Zack buried Jesus as well, and placed a gigantic boulder to seal the tomb. He didn't pick up a Bible, go to worship or even consider himself a Christian anymore.

Wendy, however, had a wonderful experience of church growing up. She loved the Christmas pageant every year, the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, the church Easter egg hunts and summer camps. For Wendy, Jesus was the most loving and compassionate presence in her life. His love had truly blessed her and she gladly praised his holy name. Wendy could feel Jesus in her heart and she never wanted to let him go or let him down. But by the time Wendy grew up, the minister from her childhood had retired. The new minister seemed a bit more formal and strict. She couldn't tell if it was the minister, or if it was just that she could understand a lot more about what the church was teaching. As Wendy studied and read more about her church history and theology, she started to question some of the things she had been told about Jesus and the Bible.

Eventually Wendy found herself in a dilemma because her love for God and Jesus was still very strong and very real to her, and yet she now realized that Jesus was not exactly the Jesus she had been taught growing up. There was a kind of battle between the Jesus she loved with her heart, and the historical and metaphorical Jesus she was discovering with her head. Wendy went on a search to try and reconcile the Jesus of her heart with the one she was getting to know with her head. Wendy did not want to give up her relationship with Jesus, the Bible, or the church, but she no longer believed the Bible literally and she had become much more open-minded in her views.

Well, guess what happened? Judith, Zack and Wendy all ended up at All Souls in Tulsa. And over time, each one eventually went back to the cave where they had buried their ideas and impressions of Jesus, and rolled away the stone. When they looked inside, the Jesus they knew was not there. He had risen, in their consciousness, and each one came to see and know Jesus again in a new and different way. He was no longer dead to them, and his story was not over. He had come back to life – at least back to their life in a new way.

In that sense, All Souls is an Easter church. It is a church where we do not focus all of our attention on the ancient accounts of Jesus' resurrection. Rather, most of us share the common experience here that, in various and substantial ways, Jesus has been resurrected and re-presented in our own lives in a new way and a new form.

In that vein, I want to tell you how Jesus was resurrected for me. By the time I was a young adult, I had no real interest in Jesus, the Bible, or Christianity. They seemed to be focused on rules, rigidity and repentance. And I was more interested in wine, women and whiskey. Eventually I realized that underneath the lasciviousness and longing, was a deep yearning for spirituality and substance. I first turned to Buddhism and all things Eastern. It was exotic, it made sense, and it held no cultural baggage to get in the way. Still today, much of my practice and principles are influenced by Buddhism. However, I found that my Buddhist teachers had a great respect for Jesus, and it made me take a second look at the prophet from Galilee.

I realized that I had been judging Jesus on the basis of his most fervent, fanatical and fundamentalist followers, rather than on the merits of his character. When I went back to read and research what is known about Jesus, I found that, if nothing else, he was an amazing teacher, storyteller, healer, activist and political revolutionary. And that his essential teachings were not at all about judgment, rules, and sending people to hell in the hereafter. They are about love, forgiveness and bringing heaven here to earth. And that is how this practicing Buddhist, this skeptic and scholar and activist, has come to roll away the stone in my heart that had kept Jesus shrouded and in the dark.

The Jesus who I rediscovered is the embodiment of radical love and inclusion. He, and his followers, like a good story – just like we do. He strived to change the culture of his society to be more just and loving, just like we do. He demonstrated with his life that *all* people are included in God's love, by befriending tax-collectors, prostitutes and Samaritans, both rich and poor, and creating the most inclusive community the world had ever known, just like we are doing. He critiqued and debated and sought to reform the dominant religion of his day, just like we do.

So, if you are among those who have Jesus dead and buried in a damp, dark cave on the outskirts of your life, this Easter I invite you to roll away the stone and allow Jesus to return to life. To *your* life, in a way that is truly meaningful to you.

But there is one more way in which this is an Easter church. Since becoming a minister I have learned a powerful lesson about resurrection. Not Jesus' resurrection, but our own. I have the privilege to be with people as they struggle to pull themselves out of their own deaths of the spirit, brought on by alcohol and drugs, depression and despair. And I have witnessed, time and time again, people opening the tombs of their own soul, and watched them come back to life in a new form. And this morning, as my wife Anita and I brought our third child, Lyla, before you to dedicate her, I am reminded of my own journey of renewal and rebirth.

It was as if we had died, when we lost our beloved daughter Sienna. I would rather be nailed to a cross myself, and left in the sun to die, than lose a child. For awhile, I was so depressed and angry about the fact that I could not resurrect her, that I failed to realize that ultimately it was *my* life that needed to be resurrected. Finally, I understand that the best way to honor my daughter is to remember her, and bring the love and joy she gave me into as many aspects of my life as possible. To live life fully and completely. And through the love of this congregation and my family, and the blessings of the living God, I have discovered the power of resurrection and renewal of the human soul.

For me, that potential for resurrection lies in each of us, despite the greatest losses and pain. No matter how terrible the storm may be, the sun will rise again. That is an Easter hope, and that is what we celebrate today. All the rest is commentary.

Happy Easter!

I love you!

Amen.