

“What is our relationship to Christianity?”
Sermon for April 5, 2009
By Rev. Felicia Urbanski
Unitarian Fellowship of London

Reading

A Remnant of Resurrection – a poem by Joyce Rupp

the time for daffodils has come
bunches of six, ten, or twelve,
with tightly wrapped buds,
arrive from warmer lands.

like sentinels of invitation
they keep my wintered heart
leaning into Spring.

the directions say to cut
at least a half inch off the stem,
then place in water and
wait for the surprise.

behold, in the early hour of dawn,
I see resurrection on my kitchen table,
every yellowed daffodil hurraing the morning,
stretching outward in the etched-glass vase.

but what captures my attention
is one small, thin remnant,
voluntarily discarded,
beneath the smiling daffodils.

this dry, transparent cover,
a cast-off tube of protection
once concealing a fragile bud,
conveys the price of blooming.

I pick up this remnant of resurrection
and hold it for a long, long, silent time,
wondering what soul-shroud of mine
needs to be unwrapped,
before I, too, am blooming.

Sermon

Did you like that poem? Did it speak to you? I personally love the way the imagery begins with Joyce Rupp's, the poet's, title for her piece, "a remnant of resurrection". One thinks it may start off being one of those sappy, overly-"religious" types of poems, filled with Mel Gibson-esque reminders of Jesus' crucifixion and ending with some evangelical call to *believe* something specific about the meaning of all of this for your eternal soul.

But no, the poem goes right into looking at these daffodils – a sign and symbol of imminent and early spring. A spring, like this one, that may have been a *long* time in coming, but that which comes, nevertheless.

Then the poem, like many poems, takes an unexpected twist. Just when we think we're all comforted by the lovely and joyful presence of blooming daffodils, we notice that funny little thing. Now, I'm not a horticulturalist, and I have no idea what this thingy is called, this shield, this thin layer of brownish matter that we forget all about once the flower has burst forth from its bud.

Ah, but *this* is what the poet is referring to in her title; "a remnant of resurrection" of this little daffodil head – yet a profound literary allusion to a story that all of us growing up in the Western world probably know all too well. It is of course the story of Jesus' resurrection, at least the account in one of the synoptic Gospels, when there is nothing left of him but the burial shroud, sitting there, shriveled up on the ground.

The poet never dwells on this long-ago story, though. She goes straight for *our* story, for each of our individual stories. She asks of herself as participant with us in this poem about daffodils and about Jesus, I'm "...wondering what soul-shroud of mine needs to be unwrapped, before I, too, am blooming".

That's profoundly theological, don't you think? The story of course goes that Jesus emerges from a tomb on Easter Sunday and lives, as we too, in all our human struggles and "dying to self" and letting go of stale, childish dreams. Perhaps we too can unwrap that little thingy, that "soul-shroud". And we too can bloom, and we too can truly *live*.

I chose this poem for our Reading today for a reason. First of all, because in the Christian churches today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, when by the traditional gospel accounts Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem and initiated the sequence of events that led to Good Friday, and then to Easter. I also chose this poem because I think it achieves something very gently, yet powerfully, and that is to engage us a little bit in a process I like to call "re-framing". That is, re-framing how we view the Christian story, and how it might relate to our own stories. Perhaps Christianity is not what we used to think it was.

Of course, there is the *individual* experience and there is the *collective* experience. Individually, each of us probably comes to a Unitarian Universalist congregation from a

certain religious background, although there are a few who may have grown up in this faith. But statistics show that 90% of us come from other religious backgrounds, most of these Christian.

Through my years of experience with leading an adult curriculum called “Owning Your Religious Past”, I’ve concluded that everyone who wrestles with and questions the faith of their past – whether they have “come out” of another tradition or have always been a Unitarian Universalist – one inevitably brings something with oneself from that past, and can somehow re-frame it in a useful, positive way. We’ll get a chance to go through a bit of this process of “owning your religious past” sometime during this coming fall.

But until then, let’s look today at a bit of our collective history of how Unitarians and Universalists have related to Christianity, and see how this history could inform each of us individually.

I know that the history of this Fellowship is a fascinating one. We may think of “history” being only what happened ten or twenty years ago, or we may think “history” has to do with founding the current manifestation of the fellowship in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, or we may think “history” is the very earliest Unitarian church in London, back in 1831. In reality, *all* of this is your collective history.

The more recent past is what we engage in and honour during this interim period. Doing this allows you to move forward into a new direction with your next settled minister, which will come to fruition in about a year’s time.

Further back, there is that amazing time of energy, verve and excitement which resulted in the founding of this fellowship over 50 years ago. Some of you remember this special time.

I know that during this period of time there was a great need for individual freedom of belief, and rightly so. You strongly identified theologically in a particular way. Your children, those growing up in the 1950’s and 60’s, were all expected by the society around them to attend Sunday school, yet for families where the young parents were not identifying with a Christian church, there was a great need to form an association where freethinkers, humanists, agnostics, and even atheists felt completely welcomed and affirmed. This was quite the cutting-edge group at the time! Hence the Unitarian Fellowship was born here in London. This was a religious community which did not even have to be “religious” in the traditional sense of the word! With the “fellowship movement” in our denomination going full swing, you didn’t even have to have a minister. You were independent, thoughtful people, with a Sunday school during that baby-boom which was bursting at the seams. Many of you could tell this history much better than I can, with all the wonderful, heart-warming and humourous stories.

But today, I’d like to go even *further* back in time. To a period not in anyone’s living memory. But, you may say, the UFL was not even founded yet! Ah, but your earliest records show the existence of the what was called the Universalist Church of London

way back in 1831. Then a Unitarian congregation was founded in 1904, for which they dedicated “Chapter House” in 1907. Both religious communities died out – I haven’t researched all the reasons why yet – but then religious liberals had their own kind of “resurrection” again in 1953. Nevertheless, there was such a community in existence here in London those 178 years ago!

And it was way back in those days that the North American Unitarians and Universalists, primarily between 1790 and 1820, were solidly liberal Christians. They weren’t the freethinkers, humanists, agnostics or atheists of the later manifestation. Yet, what happened in those earlier decades paved the way for new generations of Unitarians and Universalists to create their own mode of religious freedom. Let’s look at a bit of this history together.

I am greatly indebted to Rev. Tom Mikelson for his research into and his preaching on this earlier North American Unitarian history, as he explained it in his sermon called “Jesus and the Unitarian Universalists”.¹ Some people here today might be surprised to even hear the name of “Jesus” spoken in the same breath as “Unitarian” or “Universalist”. So let’s unpackage some of this today.

As I mentioned earlier, that first generation of Unitarians and Universalists, our ancestors in faith, between 1790 and 1820, were definitely liberal Christians. They believed in God. They valued the Bible and the religion of Jesus. They identified, religiously, artistically, and intellectually with the long history of Christianity. Although they viewed Christian history as their roots, they objected to many of the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, especially the Calvinist theology which held people in fear of an angry God and an eternity in hell, as well as a dismal view of human nature as depraved, decadent and powerless. These early Unitarians and Universalists wanted to change what they saw as the false attitude that religion and salvation have little to do social transformation and betterment. Instead, they believed that humans were indeed capable of love, nobility, and goodness and could help to make the world a better place. They believed that Jesus was a magnificent teacher, a God-filled human being, a fully human saviour whose life was redeeming. Jesus was, for them, the teacher of teachers in human history, closer to God than any other.

Now some of you may recall that about a month ago I preached on Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists. What is significant about Emerson is that in his famous address to the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School in 1838 – preached just a few short years after Universalists founded a church here in London – Emerson shocked everyone by placing Christianity on a par with other world religions, and by placing Jesus on a par with other great prophets in the history of the world. To Emerson, Jesus was a human – that is, a splendid, *quintessential* human.

The orthodox Christians of Emerson’s day showered their disdain on him and several of his friends, calling them “radicals”, and even some Unitarians took offense at how Emerson had demoted Christianity. Over the years, this created quite the controversy!

¹ “Jesus and the Unitarian Universalists” by Thomas Mikelson, March 6, 2005.

So much so that a crisis ensued in 1865. The occasion was an attempt to form a National Conference of Unitarians in the U.S. Several of the Transcendentalists and their supporters resisted attempts to make reference in Conference literature to “the Lord Jesus Christ”. The debate was intense. This new association of churches was proposed to be named “The Liberal Christian Church of America”, but that motion failed. It is significant that because of this Conference, Unitarian congregations were finally brought together in one larger institutional affiliation, forming the base for a cohesive denomination. Yet, the ongoing tension from that meeting in 1865 was that we never figured out exactly the place and the meaning of Jesus and the place of Christianity within our religion.

Now the Universalists in the 19th century were less affected than Unitarians by the controversies about Jesus and Christianity. Still, in the 20th century, tensions about Christianity among the Universalists came out in the open. By the 1950’s, the Unitarians and the Universalists sounded very much alike, especially with many Universalists convinced that all religions are important as human expressions, the Bible as a marvelous collection of *human* writings, and Jesus an amazing human being and spiritual leader, but that he was not a God. For many of the traditional Christians in the early 20th century, and for many of them even now, the Unitarian and Universalist views of Jesus were and are *heresy*.

So here we are now, at the beginning of this 21st century, almost 200 years later. Our earliest North American founders’ vision and the liberal Christianity of which they spoke is part of our history, yet it doesn’t reflect the current reality. We still struggle with this question of what *is* our relationship to Christianity, both individually and collectively. Many may argue that Jesus has nothing to offer here. But yet, if we truly want to be true to our stated intention to seek wisdom from all the world’s religions, to our stated intention to heed the words and deeds of the modern-day prophets who challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with the transforming power of love, then with open hearts and minds perhaps we should ponder and celebrate the life of Jesus.²

Now I’m not talking about the death of Jesus, or the suffering of Jesus, but rather the *life* of Jesus. For that is what our earliest religious ancestors drew their wisdom from, and perhaps today there are even more reasons to take a serious look at the religion *of* Jesus, rather than the religion *about* Jesus, as Marcus Borg would say.

Chris Bell tells us that

Fortunately, there has never been a better time to investigate the life of Jesus. A host of scholars, many under the auspices of the Jesus Seminar, have made remarkable insights into the life of the historical Jesus...[such as] the work of John Dominic Crossan, Bart Ehrman, and Elaine Pagels...Marcus Borg...speaks specifically about the differences between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ that many people find compelling....[There are available to us today]

² From “Palm Sunday”, a sermon by Chris Bell, preached April 4, 2004 at First Parish in Cambridge, MA.

ancient writings such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary... which were later decided to be unacceptable to the orthodox.³

Today, the meaning of Jesus and the role of Christian churches is changing rapidly throughout the world. Christianity will never again be what it was even a hundred years ago. Cultural pluralism has developed quickly and has spread far. Interpretation of Jesus today, even among Christians, is often contentious and diverse, even divisive. There are actually many different views of Jesus and conflict among those views is intense. Religious historians have done amazing work to create a deeper historical understanding of the person, Jesus, and of the historical period in which he lived. The result is a much more vivid Jesus, a much more human and earthly Jesus, a more ruggedly spiritual Jesus, and a more complex social and political period that defined his life and activity.⁴

Now while this new scholarship creates controversy among the Christian churches, it actually has had a positive effect on Unitarians and Universalists! For we have welcomed these changes as few other religious movements have, and those changes have affected our way of seeing and valuing Jesus. For us, those changes have not undermined any image of Jesus as the one and only Son of God and the one and only Saviour of the world. Instead, these changes have made it possible for Unitarian Universalists to look at Jesus more closely, with enthusiastic new interest, even with new commitment. The amazing reinterpretation of Jesus in the past 75 years, and especially the past 40 years, has made Jesus' values more compelling, his time closer to our own time, his experience closer to ours, and his faith, as it is *now* becoming known, more credible and inspiring.⁵

If we here at the UFL want to explore some of the many discoveries of these scholars, I would love to do that together. There are many books, study guides, and videos readily available. In the recent past, I have greatly enjoyed engaging with Unitarians and Universalists in this kind of open-minded, questioning exploration.

As cultural pluralism continues as it has been, no longer will any of the world's religions be able to claim the only truth or to claim supremacy. It seems inevitable that religions of the future will be more modest, more open to interfaith cooperation, respect and neighbourliness. We are on a religious threshold that already is changing the lasting image of Jesus and the relationship between Jesus and the Unitarian Universalists.⁶

I have set up a small table at the back with items from the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship (www.uuchristian.org), an organization which I belong to, which began back in 1945 and is thriving today. You are welcome to take any of those items for free, as there are informative newsletters and scholarly journals available to anyone who wants to read them.

Perhaps, like the poet Joyce Kilmer, who by the way is Catholic, we can look at the symbolism and the stories around Jesus in an entirely new way. Perhaps that soul-shroud

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Jesus and the Unitarian Universalists", Mikelson.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

covering our eyes is made up of all the old, out-dated and rejected ways in which we see Jesus and Christianity. What can happen if we gently unwrap it, and feel the possibility of blooming in an unexpected, new way?

May it be so.