

## Contemplating Easter ©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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In planning for today's service it became evident early on that finding an appropriate and meaningful Story for All Ages was going to be a difficult task. That might seem odd since there are a lot of children's books on Easter. I read quite a number of different books before I found the one Sandy shared with us this morning.

The books tended to fall into two distinct categories. One category focused on the secular traditions and customs associated with Easter—things such as bunnies, beautifully decorated eggs, the advent of spring and the beginning of new life. The other category, as you might expect, focused on the religious story that is the reason Easter is a holiday. As I looked over books in the first category it seemed they just wouldn't do for today. There needed to be more substance than these books seemed to offer. Although I must admit, when I read the Charles Schulz book, *It's the Easter Beagle, Charlie Brown*, I was tempted to try to make it work. I know we UU's tend to be drawn to concepts that are outside of the norm and a book about the Easter beagle, well that offered some enticing possibilities for exploring alternative perspectives on the Easter tradition. After a few minutes of discernment, seasoned with a dash of good judgement, I knew I needed to keep looking.

As I read book after book based on the Biblical story of the last days of Jesus' life I thought about what it would be like to be a child hearing that story for the first time. The story is filled with treachery, violence, immense suffering, death and then a miracle. I imagined myself as a child feeling the emotions this story might elicit—emotions like fear, sadness and hurt. And while hearing the story I would be confused and have times when I wouldn't know what to believe. Again, my discernment and judgement let me know these stories just wouldn't do for this morning. So I kept looking. I kept looking hoping to find a story that would offer elements of the Biblical story of Easter as well as aspects of what many people today associate with Easter. The more I looked, the more I felt compelled to find a story that contained at least some elements of the Biblical account of Jesus' last days on Earth. I felt compelled because I believe it is important for our children to have the opportunity to learn about what is at the root of this holiday. From personal experience I know it is quite possible that they will someday encounter someone who believes the story of Jesus' death and bodily resurrection is the absolute and literal truth. Before they do, I think they deserve the chance to consider and question whether the story of the resurrection is something they can accept. So when I finally found *Easter in the Garden* it seemed I had found just what was needed. A tale that a young child could listen to without becoming overwhelmed. A tale they could find interesting and identify with without losing their rational thinking ability. And a tale they could ask questions about that could further their exploration and discovery about where Easter originated and what it represents.

And now, with an attitude of exploration and discovery, I invite us all to contemplate Easter—to think about what Easter means to us today. I ask that we look beyond the Easter baskets, the chocolate bunnies and the colored eggs. You can eat the ears off the chocolate bunnies later. For the next while I suggest that we take time to

consider what we think about the Biblical account of the first Easter. Some of you may be very familiar with the story and others of you may not know it very well. The Biblical account tells us that Jesus was condemned to death because people in positions of power perceived him to be a threat. He was considered a threat by the leaders in government as well as the religious leaders of his time. He was considered to be a threat because he was espousing ideas that were radical.

Jesus was telling anyone who would listen that love was the most important commandment. He was telling people to love one another, including not just your neighbor but your enemy as well. He was telling people to treat everyone with respect. He was telling people to give of what they had to help the poor, the widows and the orphans. And he was acting in ways that were consistent with the message he was sharing. He was known to regularly associate with people who were at the bottom of the social structure—those who were considered to be unclean, coarse or crude, and even those who were generally despised. He wandered the countryside with a bunch of fishermen. He would share a meal with a tax collector. He even offered protection and forgiveness to a woman who was known to have broken one of the Ten Commandments—Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Jesus clearly was speaking and acting in ways that were outside of the cultural norm. But what made Jesus such a threat was that people were listening to what he was saying. And people were putting their hopes in his message—a message of love and caring for all. Such a message was in direct contrast to those who were in positions of power. Many who were in power back then used fear, coercion and intimidation to keep the people under their control. Today, just like in the time of Jesus, there are leaders who are fanning the embers of fear to turn one group of people against another. It is an age old strategy to divide people, to conquer people and then to control people. But as we have seen many times throughout the course of history, fear, coercion and intimidation only work for so long.

As more and more people were drawn to hear the message Jesus was sharing the authorities decided they needed to act to eradicate the threat he posed. To this end, they had him put to death in a manner that was very painful and very public. A way that they were certain would send a clear and powerful message to anyone who might have become interested in what Jesus was teaching. They thought killing Jesus would end the threat. That is what they thought but they were wrong. You see, the people wanted hope, they needed hope and hope came with a story that began to spread three days after he was put in the tomb. The story claimed that Jesus had conquered death. It was told that he had been resurrected, body and all, that people had seen him and heard him speak, and that he would now live forever at the side of God.

This is where I have a good deal of trouble with the Biblical story. I must admit that I am unable to accept the proposition that Jesus is still living in the body he had over two thousand years ago. That is just too far outside of my experience to hold a place in my belief systems. Yet while I don't believe he is still sitting or walking around somewhere I have found a way to make peace with the last sentence from *Easter in the Garden*. If you don't recall, here is that sentence. "And Micah couldn't wait to tell his family the best news of all: "Jesus is alive!"

At this point there is a possibility that some of you may be confused, bewildered or even in disbelief. How, you might wonder, could I possibly have come to peace with

the statement, “Jesus is alive!”. I think the best way for me to explain is with a story—a true story. A story about something I witnessed right here in Bozeman not long ago.

Some of you will recognize this story because you were there. Like me, you were present at the Temple Beth Shalom a week ago this past Tuesday for the Talking with Neighbors presentation. The topic of the discussion that day was the Jewish holiday of Passover. There were four religious leaders on the panel that day. As you would expect, one of them was of the Jewish faith, Rabbi Ed Stafman. The other three included a Roman Catholic priest, Father Leo Proxell, a Presbyterian minister, Rev. Jody McDevitt, and a person of the Islamic faith, Dr. Ruhul Amin, a leader of the Islamic Center of Bozeman. Rabbi Ed began the presentation by sharing about the history of Passover and one of the primary teachings the holiday holds.

It makes sense that a Rabbi would be speaking to the significance of a Jewish holiday. But you might wonder what relevance a Jewish holiday would have to a Roman Catholic, a Protestant and a Muslim. The relevance relates directly to the primary teaching that Rabbi Ed shared about. That teaching is to respect, honor, welcome and even to love the stranger. Each of the other members of the panel then spoke clearly and directly not only to this teaching but also to how Passover is significant in their religious tradition. Rabbi Ed pointed out that Jesus was a Jew. Father Leo and Rev. Jody shared that according to the scriptures the last supper was a Passover meal. Dr. Amin spoke about the Passover tradition of the “fast of the firstborn” and how Islam honors this specific element of the holiday with a two day fast.

As each member of the panel spoke, I heard the same message. The message of how each of these three religious traditions calls us to respect, honor, welcome and even love the stranger. And as I heard this message again and again I thought about the work each of these people of faith has been doing to further that message. You see, these four people do more than just talk a good line, they walk their talk. Every one of them has a significant connection to the work that is being done by the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association to make it possible for refugees of the war in Syria to come to Bozeman. Everyone of them supports work to assist migrants as well as those who are homeless.

As I sat there listening to these people of different faiths share, I was moved and inspired by their message—a message of respect, a message of compassion, and a message of love for the stranger. And I became keenly aware that I was hearing the same message that Jesus shared with anyone who would listen. It was as if Jesus the Jew, Jesus the Christ in Christianity, and Jesus, one of the recognized prophets of Islam, was speaking to those who had come that day. With that thought in my mind I could comprehend and accept the statement, “Jesus is alive.”

The people in power over two thousand years ago thought they had eliminated what challenged their authority and their control. They killed the messenger. But they couldn't kill the message. Fear, coercion and intimidation can end a person's life—but they cannot kill love. As long as love survives, the message that was Jesus' life lives on as well. For this I say...

Blessed be.