

Easter in Paradise¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

As we gather this Easter morning, I offer you the words of the poet Diego Valeri²:

You who have an eye for miracles
regard the bud now appearing
on the bare branch of the fragile young tree.
It's a mere dot, a nothing.
But already it's a flower, already a fruit,
already its own death and resurrection.

May our eyes be opened and our ears awake.

Stones: A Ritual for All Ages at Easter

When you came in, the ushers gave you a stone. If any of you did not receive a stone, they will bring you one now, if you raise your hand. This stone is a symbol of what we carry in our hearts, the burdens that feel heavy. Our stone might be a sorrow, or a worry, or a regret—it is whatever might weigh us down. I invite all of us to hold our stone, close our eyes for a minute, and think about what heavy feelings we might be carrying in our heart today.

--It might be grief because someone we love has died.

--It might be worry over a friend or loved one who is sick or in trouble.

--It might be disappointment because we did not get something we were hoping for.

--It might be regret about something we have done that hurt another.

--It might be anger at someone who hurt us.

--It might be fear about the future

--It might be sadness about the big troubles of our country

When you know what is in your heart, imagine that you are putting it into the stone.

One message of Easter is that we do not have to be trapped by the stones in our lives. We can roll away the stone, lay down our burdens, and find new life. I invite you to open your eyes, if you haven't already. We often need other people to help us to lay down our burdens. We have a community here, a community of love that helps us with our burdens, and helps us to find new life. This bowl of water represents our community of love, represents the spirit of Love which holds all of us. Love can work miracles in our lives.

Now, I invite all of you to bring your stone, to bring what weighs you down, and put it in our bowl of water. As you do so, walk quietly, and imagine the community of love receiving that burden. You don't have to carry it any more. *(Congregation comes forward to place stones in water, in silence, with instrumental music.)*

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² # 625 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.

Sermon

Imagine that you are coming into a room for worship. All around you, you see pictures of flowers and trees. There is a beautiful mosaic at the front of the room, with a deep green meadow under a blue, blue sky. In the center of the meadow is a tree, with four rivers flowing from its roots spreading out over the land. There are sheep in the meadow and a figure of a man who is the shepherd of the sheep, with a kind and radiant face turned toward you. Several other people are represented in other mosaics along the walls, men and women, all with radiant faces, and each one holding in their hands the laurel wreath crown of victory.

Each week as part of worship, after the readings and hymns, after the sermon and prayers, there is a communal potluck feast for all the members of the church. As people sit down together, those of the upper class are sitting next to workers and servants. Special attention is given to widows and their children, and to all the elders. In fact, there is a staff person who later will quietly make sure that they have enough money to pay their rent and buy food for the next week. At this holy communion meal, all bring what they have to share, and partake of its bounty together.

According to a history published by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, this scene I have described is likely to have been the experience of many Christians gathered for worship in the early centuries of Christianity.⁴

³ From *Blessing the Bread*.

⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, (Beacon Press, 2008)

Most people at that time were unable to read, so the images on the walls would hold the greatest significance. Not only were they beautiful to look at, but the symbolism would be immediately apparent to people of that era. The worshippers were looking at a representation of the Garden of Eden, the original Paradise. The tree in the meadow was the tree of life described in the book of Genesis. The four rivers were said to flow out from that tree, and to water the Garden of Paradise.

At the center of this early Christian worship was the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. He was pictured as a radiant man tending sheep, the Good Shepherd, a living presence in their midst. They believed that by his resurrection, he had restored the original paradise, once lost by the sin of Adam and Eve, and reestablished the presence of the divine spirit within the whole created earth.

The Christian community was the living embodiment of this paradise, and each Christian was a child of this paradise, a human image of the divine creator. In the midst of a world controlled by the harsh realities of the Roman Empire, they came together to celebrate a new earth, imbued with the beauty and grace of divine blessing.

It wasn't just about beautiful pictures and stories and symbols in worship, however. The Christian community was an oasis of care and connection. Its vision of radical equality undermined traditional social status, and it operated a vast social welfare program that offered transformative options for the poor and enslaved. When someone became a Christian, they dedicated all of their material belongings to the community. (It went way beyond our modern stewardship campaigns.)

To sign the membership book was to sign over all of your separate individual wealth, and to join in the family of believers. Christians were not allowed to kill or become soldiers in the army. If they were soldiers, they had to do penance for any blood they had shed. They were striving for utopia, we might say. Life in Paradise.

Now, I want to acknowledge that of course there were problems, there were divisions and disagreements. I don't mean to romanticize the early Christians. People were people. One of the things I love about reading church history is how much it casts away any simplistic ideas we may have been taught about doctrinal harmony or continuity. People have been arguing about Jesus for two thousand years. They were arguing back then, too. But one thing that Brock and Parker did not find, in the visual world of the early church, was any representation of Jesus being crucified on a cross.

Early Christians acknowledged the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Many of them had probably seen actual crucifixions, since the Romans carried out this brutal form of execution in public places, to terrify the populace and reinforce their imperial control. But for the followers of Jesus, the church itself—their communal gathering—was not a place to be filled with images of torture and cruelty. It was the place to remember that love was stronger than empire, and that heaven was possible here on earth.

It was only much later—nine centuries later—that the church first created images of Jesus on the cross. Christianity, once persecuted by the authorities, had by then become the official religion of emperors and kings. By the middle ages, paradise had been relegated to an afterlife attainable only after much suffering, and the worship love feast had turned into a terrifying reminder of judgment and damnation. The story of the death of Jesus took center stage away from the story of his resurrection and living presence among them.

In the 11th century, Bishop Anselm of Canterbury created the theology of atonement. This story said that humanity's sins had so offended the almighty God that it required the sacrifice of his son Jesus on a cross, to bear the punishment for all of our sins. We have heard this story so often, that many assume this was the viewpoint of Christians from the beginning. But though it still haunts us today, it only assumed importance one thousand years after the death of Jesus.

It was at that time that the churches began to be filled with images of death and torture—Jesus on the cross, the fourteen stations of the way of the cross, the martyrs depicted in their death agonies. Worship was no longer a haven of peace and harmony, but visually and ritually punishing, intended to stir up fears of future horrors. The priest at the communion table was said to be re-enacting the death of Jesus at each Mass, and this sacrifice was an indictment of all humanity.⁵

This death-focused theology found its natural counterpart in the Crusades. While up to then, Christians had been forbidden to shed blood without doing penance, now the boundary line was drawn at the church doors. Soldiers were promised heaven if they died in battle killing Muslims, Jews, or heretics. Their sacrifice was compared to that of Jesus.

On Good Friday in the year 1096, a man called Peter the Hermit preached in the cathedral at Cologne, Germany under the shadow of the Gero Cross, a life-size depiction of Jesus being crucified—the very first such carving. After hearing his message, crusaders went out to force the Jews to repent and convert under the threat of death. This was the first Christian pogrom against the Jews—that spring they killed about 10, 000 Jews in the Rhineland, nearly a third of the Jews in Europe.⁶

How did these changes happen? How did a peace-loving community become a murderous one? Brock and Parker asked, “Why did Christians turn from a vision of paradise in this life to a focus on the Crucifixion and final judgment?”⁷ In their book, entitled *Saving Paradise*, they trace the complex changes—century by century—that could account for such a development.

One story in particular was deeply moving to me. Their trail of clues led to the 8th century, when the Frankish King Charles the Great, better known as Charlemagne, attempted to conquer and annex the Saxon people's lands along the Rhine River. The Saxons had practiced a hybrid form of Christianity, a blending of the Christian story with their earlier pagan practices—Thor and Woden and Jesus were all acknowledged, and their worship was held in sacred groves of oak trees or around holy springs.

The Franks justified their expansionist assaults by claiming that the Saxons were not true Christians. They cut down the sacred oak trees, and deforested the whole countryside. They baptized the Saxons under threat of death. The Saxons kept rebelling decade after decade, but ultimately lost the wars. It was their descendants who eventually carved that first crucifix, and carried out the pogrom against the Jews.

Why do these stories matter to us today? And especially, why do they matter to us as Unitarian Universalists, when only a few of our number identify as Christian?

⁵ Brock & Parker, pp. 263-270.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 224ff.

For one reason, our UU history emerges out of the wider Christian history, and many of our personal journeys have their beginnings in Christianity. We are influenced by tradition, even when we disavow the practices and beliefs of our ancestors. Part of our task as Unitarian Universalists is to acknowledge and glean from our traditions the truths that are life-giving for our paths today.

For another reason, 73% of Americans currently identify as Christian and our society is deeply influenced by the struggles within Christian theology.⁸ There is, today, a division more important than mere denominational variety; this division is between a Christianity which is centered on the death of Jesus, on judgment and its repercussion for the afterlife, versus a Christianity that holds an inclusive vision for community and justice here on this earth, based on a Jesus who is a healer and teacher of love. Unitarian Universalists are less than 1 % of the population. Those inclusive Christians can be our natural and necessary allies as we seek to live our shared values.

We also need these stories because many of us have been personally wounded by the death-and-judgment form of Christianity. Our spiritualities may still be haunted by a punishing and vengeful deity. We need to know that these ideas did not come from Jesus, but originated in a troubled age, accompanied by violence and destruction and the making of empires. We need to know that there were alternative stories from the very beginning. We need to hear about the Christians who worshipped a living Jesus along with Woden in their sacred oak groves, and Christians who shared joyful potlucks and practiced non-violence, and saw their community as a true Garden of Eden.

Most of all, we need these stories because we are facing unprecedented challenges on earth today. We are facing environmental destruction that may have catastrophic repercussions for all life on earth. We are facing economic troubles that are rooted in the utter disregard by some for the common well-being of all humanity, and our dependence on the gardens beneath our feet.

If we wish “to walk with care on this earth,” (as we say in our church mission statement) we must remember that our problems with the environment are spiritual problems. When paradise was relegated to a future afterlife, the earth was laid open to exploitation and destruction. Brock and Parker invite us to re-imagine that treasured garden once again, already present here in our midst.

Now, some Unitarian Universalists may have difficulty with a resurrection-centered Jesus story: too much miracle and not enough science, some may say. But I am talking here about the power of a story—not trying to debate its factuality. I don't think it matters whether or not we believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead. What matters is whether we perceive some sort of divine incarnation or living sacredness in our relationship with each other and the earth. If human beings can once again feel the sacredness of each other and of the earth, we can find ways to bless the earth with our care.

Sometimes UU's can get caught by our reactivity to the destructive elements in Christianity, and lose out on the possibilities for healing and redemption that might be gleaned from that tradition. The early Christians painted Jesus as a healer and restorer of the garden. We can invite that Jesus into our sanctuary, to be an inspiration and resource for our own journey of transformation.

⁸ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

Our Universalist ancestors chose a similar message of healing in the face of the fire-and-damnation preachers of the 19th century. The Universalists preached a Jesus who was our brother and our friend, a Jesus who opened the gates of paradise to all people, and damned no one to hell. The most common images to be found in the stained-glass windows of Universalist churches were Jesus as the good shepherd or Jesus with the children.

I am remembering a man back in my church in Brewster, Massachusetts many years ago. His name was Ted, and he has since passed on. He made a deep impression on me during the time I knew him. Ted identified as a Christian, and when he began to come to our Unitarian Universalist church, he wondered whether it was the right place for a Christian. He talked to one of his earlier pastors, and that minister asked him whether he thought Jesus would feel at home in our church. That was the right question for Ted, because he believed Jesus would be delighted with our church. According to Ted, our church was practicing the values that Jesus taught more than any other church he had attended. What a powerful testimony to live up to!

Here at A2U2, we believe in the work of creating a paradise on earth. We say we are growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love. We may not fully succeed in our quest, but we seek to welcome each other as family, to affirm our equal dignity, beyond rich and poor, beyond black and white, beyond male and female, beyond gay and straight, beyond whether or not that dignity is affirmed by our wider culture. We believe in the cause of justice and peace.

At the end of their work, Brock and Parker warn against a perennial self-defeating Protestant temptation—to grow nostalgic over a pristine past, dreamy about future possibilities, and judgmental about the present.⁹ We might also do well to heed their caution. Let us not put our hope so much into the future that we fail to recognize the paradise already present in our midst.

Paradise does not mean a life without struggle. They write: “Paradise is already present. We have neither to retrieve it nor construct it. We have to perceive it and to bring our lives and our cultures into accord with it.” For this, we need “strong communities, rituals [that awaken our] perception, and beauty to hold us and give us joy.”¹⁰

And so today, on this most ancient of Christian celebrations, let us open our eyes to the beauty already present in our midst. Let us honor our hope, and affirm our work for justice, but take this day to pay attention to the joy and harmony already radiating from every new leaf and flower. Let us give thanks for our circle, which includes pagans and Christians, Buddhists and Jews, mystics and scientists, joined together in one community of shared potlucks. Let us pay attention to the garden that surrounds us in every moment, which we are privileged to tend. Let us give thanks for our own Easter paradise.

Closing Words

May our souls wake up and our hearts be lifted.

May we see the mystery of each moment, and the sacredness of each garden.

May we bless the world with our living.

⁹ Brock and Parker, pp.415ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 418.