

**Resurrecting Religions**  
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**Readings**

1. *[From Resurrection](#)* (1899) by Leo Tolstoy, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude:

Though hundreds of thousands had done their very best to disfigure the small piece of land on which they were crowded together, by paving the ground with stones, scraping away every vestige of vegetation, cutting down the trees, turning away birds and beasts, and filling the air with the smoke of naphtha and coal, still spring was spring, even in the town.

The sun shone warm, the air was balmy; everywhere, where it did not get scraped away, the grass revived and sprang up between the paving-stones as well as on the narrow strips of lawn on the boulevards. The birches, the poplars, and the wild cherry unfolded their gummy and fragrant leaves, the limes were expanding their opening buds; crows, sparrows, and pigeons, filled with the joy of spring, were getting their nests ready; the flies were buzzing along the walls, warmed by the sunshine. All were glad, the plants, the birds, the insects, and the children. But men, grown-up men and women, did not leave off cheating and tormenting themselves and each other. It was not this spring morning men thought sacred and worthy of consideration not the beauty of God's world, given for a joy to all creatures, this beauty which inclines the heart to peace, to harmony, and to love, but only their own devices for enslaving one another.

2. *[From Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire](#)* (2008) by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker:

We can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth...

We reenter this world as sacred space when we love life fiercely and, in the name of love, protect the goodness of earth's intricate web of life in all its manifold forms. We feast in paradise when we open our hearts to lamentation, to amplitudes of grief for all that has been lost and cannot be repaired...

Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth.

**Sermon**

Today is Easter Sunday.

But allow me to travel for a moment from Easter Sunday back to Good Friday...*Good* Friday, which always confused me as a kid. Crucifixion. Horrible, violent death. The seeming victory of the bad guys. This is *good*? And yes, I was told that Good Friday was probably a variant on an earlier phrase *God's* Friday, but that didn't really help much. It hardly seemed like God's finest moment, with his son crying out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And then I was told that this Friday was *good* because of what Jesus' death meant for sinners and most especially because it pointed toward the victory over death on Easter Sunday, the hope that arose from seemingly-utter despair.

And let me say that, for me, the story of Easter that Christians celebrate each year *can indeed* hold hope. And let me tell you why I think that the traditional notions of Good Friday--the ones that I am familiar with--why I feel that they have the potential to distort that hope. Because, woven throughout the whole tragic, violent story of the death of Jesus, this story that makes one want to cry out against the inhuman brutality, there is the equally powerful Christian interpretation of it that says, "*It had to happen this way.*" It had to happen this way.

As a child, I felt the underlying conflict that this caused.

I wanted to enter the story, as children do, and I wanted to convince Judas to reconsider his actions. Give back the silver coins, alert Jesus to the plot against him, continue as friends... I wanted to somehow stop the soldiers from mistreating Jesus....but at the same time I couldn't *really* want to convince Judas or stop the soldiers because...it had to happen this way.

I wanted to enter the story, as children do, and I wanted to urge Pilate to listen to his wife's dream, to heed his own intuition. I wanted to somehow plan Jesus' escape....but at the same time I couldn't *really* want Pilate to let him go or Jesus to escape because...it had to happen this way.

I wanted, simply, to stop the violence...but at the same time I *couldn't* really want to stop the violence...

I am not suggesting that Christian theology of the cross is *meant* to support violence. I am suggesting that pairing violence with inevitability, with fulfillment of prophecy, *can* inspire a dangerous resignation to violence at least and can be used to *justify* violence at worst. It supplies a subtle and deadly endorsement of violence to fulfill a purpose.

Whenever news of wars or violent conflicts throughout the world came up in conversation among my extended family someone would inevitably refer to a Bible verse, always the same verse, and because of the frequency of these types of conflicts it may be the single most-quoted Bible verse in my experience:

"There will be wars and rumors of wars..."

There will be wars and rumors of wars. The context for the story comes from the gospel of Matthew: Jesus is asked by his disciples what signs will precede his second coming and the end of the age. He says, "...you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet" (Matt. 24:6).

There will be wars...this *must* take place. But do you see how this operates within a conversation? Did you read about the awful thing that happened, the number of people killed, the lives devastated? "Well, you know what it says, there will be wars and rumors of wars..." "It's like the Bible says..." "It's just like Jesus said..."

And listen, these were not heartless people...they most decidedly were very compassionate people. They *did* care. But the waging of war in lands across the oceans, even and especially when instigated by our own government, gives us a feeling of powerlessness. And the Bible is used here to provide a way to transform that unsettling feeling of powerlessness into a satisfying feeling of recognizing the fulfillment of prophecy. And rather than staying with our initial resistance to war and sympathy for its victims, feelings that leave us restless and dissatisfied with our options, we can move into an acceptance of war as inevitable, indeed even a *welcoming* of violence as the necessary step toward the second

coming of Jesus, just as Good Friday was a necessary step toward the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday. Suddenly, it is not only explained but *sanctioned* by religion.

And I realize that this is theology that may not be relevant for many of you. It seems like a particular discussion about a particular interpretation of Christianity. So why does it matter?

For me, it matters because I believe—my Universalist self passionately believes--that we need religions, *all* religions and philosophies and ethical traditions, now more than ever, to speak clearly, compassionately, and courageously to oppose violence and oppression and the unjust distribution of resources. I am using a story from Christianity because it is the religion that I am most familiar with through my own experience, and I am using it because it is Easter today, and I am using it because it is the tradition that gave us the powerful story of the Good Samaritan and I am using it because, given our roots in the Christian tradition, there is much that we can legitimately challenge and also much, *like* the story of the Good Samaritan, that we can draw from...

Easter, at least in part, is about certainty overturned; finding hope precisely where we believed there was no hope. And one of the messages of hope that Easter brings to me that often gets lost is the powerful example of resistance to state-sanctioned violence and religious oppression. Though they had experienced the brutal execution of their teacher, this understandably-frightened group of disciples and followers experienced something else that allowed them to not only come back together, but to bravely spread the teachings they had been given even in the face of oppression and fear. They had already seen what could--and likely would--happen to them in the execution of Jesus, but, without much *reasonable* hope of succeeding, they chose to resist and persist nevertheless. That was their response to terror; to violence.

What is our response to violence? What is the religious response to violence across the world today? Why is it so muted? Religions, ideally and inherently from their own teachings, should nurture the courage to resist violence rather than supply the excuses to enact it. They should help to give their adherents the resources to face it squarely and to move compassionately toward healing its victims and to work for preemptive peace, not war.

The Good Samaritan story, both the one in the Gospels and the revised version we enjoyed today, is at least partly about our response to violence, to the victims of violence. What does the Samaritan/the homeless man do? How does he respond? He moves quickly to ease the pain of the one who's been hurt, ensure his safety and comfort. That is a natural human response that must be nurtured and affirmed by religions against the temptations to distance ourselves from one another.

I understand the tendencies to assume; to explain; to justify; to *walk by*...Religion should challenge those tendencies, not sanctify them. We shouldn't use Jesus' words about the poor always being with us as if that provided some moral smokescreen for the obscene gap between the richest and the poorest in our nation and the world. We have to help one another, *practice* helping one another, and religion should provide the gateway to a greater openness. If it only provides assumed certainty about the way things are and have to be it can never strengthen us to explore the possibility of what *could* be. If it, too, is locked in the system of division and oppression and self-interest...what then?

And keep in mind though I have used the Christian story, this resignation toward violence finds its way into many religious and ethical traditions, sciences and philosophies under various guises. It can appear in the Buddhist's acceptance of all that is; it can appear in the Jewish claim to the Promised Land; it can

appear in the Muslim call to jihad; the Hindu call to duty; it can appear in our attitudes toward politics and history (you know, those people have been fighting for thousands of years, that's just the way they are); it can appear in the Darwinian clothing of evolutionary realities regarding the human species (people have been fighting one another for millions of years, that's just the way we are); it can appear in the postmodern anthropological language of cultural relativity (who are we to judge?) Wherever and whenever it appears, it must be challenged.

And what resources can we Unitarian Universalists bring to challenge it? How might we connect with the hope of Easter, this ancient Springtime celebration?

I've mentioned this cartoon that William Schulz, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and former director of Amnesty International, referred to in [a Berry Street Address](#):

*[T]he wayside pulpits of an Episcopal church and a Unitarian Universalist church were both visible on a street corner. It was Easter, and the title of the Episcopal rector's Easter sermon was "The Truth and Power of the Risen Christ" while across the street the Unitarian Universalist [minister] was preaching a sermon entitled "Upsy-Daisy."*

I used that to gently poke fun at the Unitarian Universalist tendency to substitute a rather frail celebration of Spring for the powerful message of Easter. But here, as so many times before, I feel that I was mistaken, that I underestimated the importance of our deep and abiding respect for the interdependent web of all life and the power of noticing what is.

Leo Tolstoy's novel, *Resurrection*, is a novel about seeking redemption. During the course of the book, the main character discovers a vast underside to the society in which he has managed up to this point to feel so comfortable and oblivious, and realizes that he must take some share of responsibility for the way that this society has inflicted misery and desperation on so many people. But what Tolstoy starts out with is a description of Spring coming--regardless of the many ways that humans had devised to keep it from coming--and he plants here (so to speak), early on in the book, a recognition of the devastating effects on the grown-ups who choose not to notice the Springtime, who concentrated rather on "their own devices for enslaving one another," who fail to share in the gladness that the plants, the birds, the insects, and the children share.

For us, as for Tolstoy, the strength to challenge oppression, to oppose violence, to restore the outcast, to expand our compassion comes, not from some far-off promise of Paradise, but from the Paradise that exists all around us if we but notice. We can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth...We seek to restore beauty because we have seen it; we seek to spread peace because we have experienced it; we offer comfort because we have felt comforted.

The resurrection that matters is not the one that was or the one that will be but the one that is possible right now; the one that bears fruit in our actions as well as our minds and spirits; the one that frees us from the tomb of resignation and apathy. The hope that it offers, that all religions and philosophies and ethical traditions must offer, is a challenge to look deeper into ourselves; to reach farther than we thought we could to help another; to stand stronger than we would have believed possible to oppose violence and injustice.

A Gnostic text from the second century called [\*Treatise on Resurrection\*](#) says this:

The resurrection is different.

It is real,

it stands firm.

It is a revelation of what is,

a transformation of things,

a transition into newness...

This brings goodness.

It is beauty we celebrate. It is hope that we nurture. It is goodness we seek.