



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Easter Transformations”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*For I remember it is Easter morn, and life and love and peace are all new born.*

Alice Freeman Palmer

*Awake, thou wintry earth – Fling off thy sadness! Fair vernal flowers, laugh forth*

*Your ancient gladness!* Thomas Blackburn, “An Easter Hymn”

*Celestial spirit that doth roll, The heart's sepulchral stone away, Be this our resurrection day,  
The singing Easter of the soul. O gentle Master of the Wise, Teach us to say: “I will arise.”*

Richard Le Gallienne

### Homily

Can you believe it's Easter? It doesn't feel like spring has arrived though it's nearly the end of April. We say the seasonal wheel inevitably turns, but this year we might doubt that truth.

The calendar has turned to Easter, at least. Today we celebrate new beginnings and new life after death, be it the little death of winter in nature, in our spirits, or the very big death that comes after the loss of a loved one. And we

welcome signs of new life during this Passover time, when Jews celebrate the miracle of freedom from enslavement in Egypt and the ancient's hope for new beginnings in a promised land.

Sadly, the Promised Land is not yet here. We mourn with those in the Kansas City area who are suffering because a lone gunman filled with hate tried to kill Jews and a sniper randomly shot at cars on highways. We mourn here in Athens because we know we are connected to that community, and therefore their loss is our loss, as our Seventh Principle affirms. Together as one community we pray and hope for more love and less hate.

Persecution contributed to the events during Passover in Jerusalem over two thousand years ago. As Morgan told us, the Jewish and Roman authorities didn't like what Jesus had to say. They

found him guilty of crimes and put him to death to silence him and maintain their own power. But it didn't work. Jesus has not been silenced. We aim to follow his teachings because they're teachings based on love.

The Passover and Easter holidays provide life-affirming messages of hope and love, even in the face of difficult times. But unlike Passover's miraculous triumph over human injustice, Christianity's Easter is not as easily embraced by Unitarian Universalists. Christmas is easier. At our Christmas Eve services we read the gospels and celebrate the birth of a special baby who greatly influenced the world. And we preach that every night a child is born is a holy night because each child *is* holy and special, and any child could be a messiah, a savior who brings peace. Christmas is warm and fuzzy, easily embraced.

Death on the cross is anything but warm and fuzzy. And bodily resurrection in defiance of natural law? How do we embrace that idea?

Not so long ago many UU congregations would completely ignore the story of Jesus' death. We found it more comfortable sticking with the warm and fuzzy symbols of ancient cultures: painted eggs, fluffy newborn chicks, and cuddly bunny rabbits. These symbols brought little theological baggage for rational humanists. Although many of us still identify as religious naturalists and rational humanists, myself included, I think it cowardly to totally dismiss the Christian Easter story. There is a worthwhile message no matter what we believe about its source events.

Dr. Stephen Patterson, a religious historian at Willamette University, offers a useful interpretation of the gospels. He writes:

I have become convinced that in ... interpreting Jesus' death, the followers of Jesus were in fact drawing attention to his life. His death mattered to them because his life had mattered to them. They spoke of his death in ways that affirmed his life, and reaffirmed their own commitment to the values and vision stamped into his life by his words and deeds. To the followers and friends of Jesus, his death was important in its particularity - as the fate of him who said and did certain things, who stood for something so important ~~to~~ **him** that he was willing to give his life for it. That something was the vision of life he called the Empire of God. They too believed in this vision of a new empire. And if this vision was indeed God's Empire, then the bearer of this vision was not dead. No executioner could kill what he was. To kill Jesus, you would have to kill the vision. This is what [dying on] the cross could not do. (From "Killing Jesus," Patterson, Stephen J., page 77, in *The Future of the Christian Tradition*, R. J. Miller (ed), Polebridge Press, 2007)

To dismiss the story as meaningless because we dismiss the supernatural interpretation of the gospels is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Baby Jesus did grow up to be an incredible role model. His life mattered because he challenged the status quo and offered a vision of a world filled with peace, justice and love.

When he died, Jesus' friends mourned his loss and nearly gave up their cause. But they began having their own visions of how they could carry on. Jesus empowered them to continue teaching

about inclusive love for stranger and friend. They were transformed and began anew, traveling the world to spread their message. We know this message has been abused over the centuries, but the responsibility lies with the perpetrators, not with Jesus or his teachings.

Jesus' death was terrible, as were the shootings in the Kansas City area. But we can rise above these events. The Easter story shows us we can find new life and new meaning for ourselves even after the death of those we love. And Jesus lives when we follow his life and teachings. We live when we act on our beliefs and values, values shared by Jesus, such as being kind to strangers and caring about freedom and justice.

Jesus' message has saved lives, as has our message of love and inclusivity. It has saved mine and I know your engagement here has changed you; perhaps saved you. I have seen many of you blossom because you embraced opportunities to learn and grow here.

May you continue to find renewal during this season of Spring, Easter, and Passover. May you break out of shells, break out of tombs, and out of the rich earth to become all that you can be. May together we make a peaceful world. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Does springtime renew your spirit or make new endings/beginnings easier to handle? Please reflect on or share such a time.
2. Have you been surprised to learn that a person, event, or thing changed in a way you didn't expect? Please reflect or share how this affected you.
3. How do you typically respond to change in people or things you are attached to? Is this a growing edge opportunity for you?