

**4 9 23—Who Did Jesus Love?**  
**UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi**

Our Soul Matters theme for April is Resistance, so as “Nature wakes from seeming death,” let us reflect with song, poetry, observation, and analysis on what resistance might mean in our lives, in this season of intense religious practice—a time of Easter, Passover, and Ramadan—as we take a journey together this morning.

I always find delivering an Easter sermon difficult. I have not been a Christian for a long time, and yet it is a holiday about which I have good memories—a new dress and shoes when I was young, elaborate lamb dinners with lots of friends as I grew older. I love hard-boiled eggs and chocolate bunnies, too. And in Buffalo, NY, we have butter lambs. Yum! But, the theology of Easter, I struggle to embrace it. And as a Unitarian Universalist, I don’t necessarily have to. Yet, when I consider the religious convergences this week—Easter, Passover, Ramadan—I see the struggle of hopeful peoples trying to find renewed faith in a time of viciousness and violence. And so, I am called to get beyond the chocolate bunnies and butter lambs to something more expansively meaningful.

We live in violent times, even though statistics show that violence has been steadily declining through centuries, if you consider violence simply to be to be bodily harm from beating, stabbing, shooting, and bombing. And while some politicians gin up our fears about potential bodily harm supposedly rampant in urban centers, statistics also show that actual bodily harm follows reliably understandable trends, with specific populations of people much more at risk than others. In other words, random harm to strangers is rare, outside of war itself. Women are more at risk of physical violence from domestic partners than from any other source. As the newly revealed though not unknown scandal in the Catholic Diocese of Maryland shows, children are at risk from supposed trusted adults in positions of authority. Let me be clear that clergy abuse of children and adults is not limited to Catholicism; it happens in all denominations, in all structures where some people have more power and then make a decision to use their power abusively. But horrific as this clergy abuse is, the violation to body and spirit both, gun violence is currently the leading cause of death among children. Not childhood diseases or accidents. In urban areas, children more often than not die of homicide. In rural areas, the death is more often than not by suicide. Horrific violence and violation in either case. Let us just hold that horror together for a moment.

Why talk about this today on Easter, a day that our Christian siblings sing hallelujah and alleluia, for their god is risen from the dead after his brutal killing at the hands of the Roman authorities? For Christians, destruction turns today into renewal, rebirth, renewed promise for good in the world. Yet the violence of state-sanctioned murder on what is known, for some reason, as “Good Friday,” is necessary for getting to that place of redemption. Jesus died on the cross to become the Christ. Jesus suffered so that human sins could be forgiven. That is what substitutionary atonement means, that is what redemptive suffering means. That is the Christian creed, the belief that sustains the Christian spirit. Violence leads to redemption. Violence is necessary for redemption. Christian Nationalists really love this suffering in

violence and violation. It justifies their own hateful violent acts against those who think differently from them.

Such a belief makes it much easier to say that suffering violence and violation has a good side, that it can lead to healing and beauty. I don't know about you, but I have never been able to think that. I have resisted that notion in large and small ways. I do not see martyrdom as saving, and I have not found a way to worship, to follow a theology, that puts one person dying by violence for the sins of others at the center of religious practice. In the words of Rita Nakashima Brock, "Christianity is haunted by the ghost of Jesus. His death was an unjust act of violence that needed resolution. Such deaths haunt us. Rather than address the horror and anguish of his death, Christianity has tried to make it a triumph." The one long-ago act of violence toward the body of Jesus has morphed into volumes of words advocating violence in the name of peace.

Many liberal Christian theologians work hard to shift the violence in this image, the cross paradoxically both the sign of their religion and the instrument of Jesus' death by the Roman Empire. Diana Butler Bass, an Episcopal theologian whose perspective I generally admire, re-inscribes the vertical and horizontal pieces of the cross as a sign of divinity "meeting at the birthing place. Birth is hard. It is a suffering love. Yet, this is the central encounter of Christianity, this crossbeam of new life that is the mystery of God." I find that interpretation almost as horrifying as I find the crucifixion itself. In the words of Brock and Parker, something here is undeniable: "At the center of western Christianity is the story of the cross, which claims God the Father required the death of his Son to save the world. We believe this theological claim sanctions violence." And not just at the center of Christianity, but at the center of Western civilization, of our fundamental outlook on life. The way of peace is not much in evidence, with notions of pre-emptive war, mass incarceration, demonization of the different, and a tendency to re-victimize victims.

I believe we Unitarian Universalists, along with Brock and Parker, "seek a different theological vision." Which begs the question: why pay attention to Easter Sunday at all? For one thing, wrestling with the potential meaning of Easter enables us to consider our contemporary relationship to the roots of Unitarian Universalism, a reality we can't simply ignore. We emerged from two Christian heresies—one god, not three and salvation for all with no damnation. But where does that leave us, especially if we are not Christians? For another thing, if we have indeed turned away from the violence of substitutionary atonement, with Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, do we dismiss Jesus altogether, irrelevant to our current religious practice? Well, then we risk cutting ourselves off from the roots of a faith that sustains us now. That could be considered a form of violence, even as some of us rejected our childhood religions, because the doctrines made no sense or the practices wounded us in horrible and lingering ways. Still, most of us encounter Christians every day, people we care about. It might be helpful to be able to voice an alternative vision of Jesus, one that honors our legacy and makes the room we need for different beliefs.

And so we ask Brock and Parker's questions this Easter morning: "What words tell the truth? What balm heals? What proverbs kindle the fires of passion and joy? What spirituality stirs the hunger for justice?"

We seek answers to these questions—not only for ourselves but for our communities and our society. What are the ways of being with one another that enable life to flourish, rich with meaning? When violence has fractured communities, isolated people, and broken hearts, how can life be repaired? What renewal is possible?

Marcus Borg was an American New Testament scholar and theologian. He was also a fellow of the Jesus Seminar, a group interested at uncovering the historical Jesus from the metaphysical one. Incidentally he was born in Fergus Falls and raised in North Dakota. Here is what he had to say about the matter in his book *The Heart of Christianity*: “‘Why was [Jesus] killed?’ The historical answer is because he was a social prophet and movement initiator, a passionate advocate of God's justice, and radical critic of the domination system who had attracted a following. If Jesus had been only a mystic, healer, and wisdom teacher, he almost certainly would not have been executed. Rather, he was killed because of his politics.” We Unitarian Universalists are not so good with words like “Lord” and “Praise the Lord,” with singing the ritual of “Alleluia” or the excited praise of “Hallelujah.” But we do understand about being passionate advocates for justice, we do understand a political stance for values we hold dear. We might even feel some sweet joy for a Lord of a diverse and multi-layered reality. We might be willing to prepare the way for a Lord whom we ask to guide us in the paths of justice.

The Rev. William Ellery Channing, an early Unitarian forebearer, set us on the path to understanding Jesus as an exemplar of morality, of right action, rather than as a god to be worshiped as he suffered to save us. So, what did Jesus do to act as an example? Jesus confronted unjust authority—the moneylenders in the temple, the Jewish authorities drawing lines to limit who could be included and thus cared for. And Jesus spoke to, moved with, and ate with the outcasts of his time. Women—women accused of adultery, women who made a living as prostitutes, women who had the nerve to have opinions about religious practice, like the Samaritan at the well or Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Outcasts—poor people, sick and dying people, mentally ill people, those considered unclean—like lepers or bleeding women. Even those part of the system of oppression, like tax collectors, who not only worked for the Empire but were often thieves and swindlers, and warriors who ask for help and trusted the help even if it came from a rebel.

Jesus, the exemplary man of compassion and justice, his words and deeds enact the dream of people taking care of each other without coercion and without regard for the differences among us. And as Unitarian Universalists, we seek the “life-giving communities that foster knowledge of spirit, awareness of presence. We know that, at their best, healthy communities practice the right use of the powers of life and lead people to experience wholeness, right relationship, and beauty. When this happens, such communities teach us to know ourselves and the world as sacred and sustain an ethic of appreciative care for life.” And we know that UUFM is such a community, collectively and individually seeking to bring care and compassion to the outcasts of our time and thus moving in the paths of justice for a better, less violent world. And so in our time, we seek to align ourselves with the outcasts—with those impoverished by low wages; with those driven out of affordable housing; with those formerly incarcerated, who have paid their debt but still are denied the right to vote; with those who practice religion differently; with the addicted and the ill, often unhoused and in deep despair; with our tender

and vulnerable children, trying to find their way in a violent time, filled with threat, climate crisis, and unsteady public institutions; with our trans siblings and our queer siblings, whose lives are once again at significant risk for their expression, for their sexuality, for their identity. We are with the outcasts, that no one may any longer be cast out, that all may be included.

We live in a world full of violence. But we need not act in violence with thought, word, or deed. May we focus ourselves instead always on the actions for good, loving words of compassion for each other, both action and words resisting the seemingly incessant call to hatred and hardened hearts. We call upon the “Spirit of Resistance. Help us to stick up for what is right, even when we are tired or afraid. Help us to dream of the world as it should be and act to bring that world about. Help us to find hope each day.” Help us “resist and redress violence by acting for justice and by being present: present to one another, present to beauty, present to the fire at the heart of things, the spirit that gives breath to life.”

Let us be “restless for respectful and loving companionship among human beings, whose presence invites people to be themselves without fear.” All the outcasts outcast no more. All with a place in the Beloved community. Let us be a community “of people who seek to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly [ . . . ], who call on the strength of soul-force to heal, transform, and bless life.” May “our spirits soar and sing,” may “our hearts leap with the spring” in renewed commitment, as you remember, today and every day that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”

Brock, Rita Nakashima, and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

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