

**Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan**  
**Andrew Frantz, contract minister**  
**April 12, 2020**

### **Making Meaning of Easter**

On this Easter Sunday I have a message that I hope will appeal to Christians and non-Christians alike. I want to talk about the meaning and symbolism of Easter, to offer you its hope if you're ready to receive it, and also to talk about two other holidays being celebrated at this time of year.

I was raised as a Christian, but I think you could call me more of a cultural Christian or a secular Christian, not a theological Christian. I sometimes went to church as a kid. But when I think of Easter Sunday, I don't have strong memories of going to church. Instead what I remember is going downstairs on Easter morning and on the dining room table would be a note from the Easter Chipmunk. Or sometimes it would be the Easter Squirrel or the Easter Hedgehog—all friends and helpers of the Easter Bunny, of course. And this note addressed to me and my sisters would contain a clue leading us to someplace in the house, where we would find another clue, and then another, and then another, that eventually led us to where our Easter baskets were hidden.

I bless the spirit of the Easter Chipmunk and the joy that he brought to my childhood.

But you can see that Easter wasn't really about Jesus for me as a kid. Easter did not feature the story of Jesus rising from the dead. I grew up to become a Unitarian Universalist, and my theology today is Religious Naturalism, not Christianity. Still, I find a positive and helpful message in the teachings of Jesus. I simplify that message to say that Jesus is love. The one passage from the Christian Bible that I can paraphrase from memory is from the Gospel of John, chapter 13, where Jesus says to his disciples: "I give you this new commandment: love each other as I have loved you. By this you will be known." Christians, in other words, are to be a community of love.

My friends who are Unitarian Universalist Christians agree that the core message of Christianity is: Jesus is love. Just as the Buddha embodies wisdom, Jesus embodies love. Whatever theology you may have, I say that all of us in this moment, on this Easter Sunday, would do well to embrace the teachings of Jesus embrace him as a symbol of love.

I'm going to come back to Easter and say more about it, but first I want to say a bit about two adjacent holidays. The first one is Ostara. The word Ostara has two meanings: first, it refers to the Pagan goddess of fertility and rebirth. And Ostara is also the name of the Pagan holiday celebrated on the spring equinox, which occurred last month. It is no accident that the word Ostara is similar to the word Easter. You can see that there's a similar message or theme of renewal and rebirth in the two holidays. Historically, when Christians came to power many centuries ago, they wanted to suppress the pagan religions—so they banned and outlawed pagan practices in many cases. And they also co-opted Pagan holidays and rituals. So in that way Ostara became Easter, and Yule became Christmas, borrowing some of the same symbolism and rituals.

Another holiday that is happening now is Passover, or Pesach. Last Wednesday I was honored to be invited to a virtual Passover Seder that included 25 people in several states. Passover began on Wednesday and it goes for a full week. What's amazing is to reflect on the fact that the holiday of Passover is about the time when the Jewish people, the Israelites, were enslaved in Egypt and they were trying to win their freedom. And the Jewish god, whose name is Yahweh, visited ten plagues upon the Egyptian people in order to make them suffer, so that they would be willing to free the Israelites from slavery. And the last of these ten plagues was that the angel of death would come to each household and kill the first-born child. Yahweh told the Jews to

slaughter a lamb and splash the blood of the lamb on their doorposts as a sign, so that the angel of death would pass over those houses and not kill the first born child in the houses of the Israelites.

It's a holiday about surviving a deadly plague!...in this time of surviving a deadly pandemic.

I wanted to mention those holidays because some of us as Unitarian Universalists are Jewish (or were raised as Jewish); some of us as Unitarian Universalists are Pagan; some of us as Unitarian Universalists are Christian, or have Christian roots. And there are many other theologies and religious traditions that are represented in our over-arching Unitarian Universalist religion.

But today is Easter, and I want to say more about this holiday and how I've been reflecting on this moment in history. In the Christian tradition, this is the most holy story, this miracle: Jesus is killed on Good Friday, and on Easter Sunday he comes back to life. It's a miracle and it shows his divinity and his special-ness. Whether you believe in that literally or whether you see that as a metaphor, I want to explore the way that cycle—from death on Good Friday to rebirth on Easter Sunday—parallels the cycle that we're going through in this pandemic. And I feel like a lot of us are not to our Easter Sunday moment yet in our experience of this pandemic. We're more in the Saturday place. What's going on on Saturday? Jesus has been killed, his disciples are mourning his death; maybe they hope or believe that he'll be born again—but they don't know. So Saturday is the dark place, the place of death and mourning and doubt—and many of us are in that place with this virus, with this isolation. And of course that's different for different individuals: many of us are going to experience this differently. It's different for different countries, and cities, and counties, and states, because the arc of the pandemic is different in those different places.

I think that many of us are in that place of waiting for hope. Not yet ready to say, "Hallelujah! Rebirth! Hope! Life again! It's all good!" And that's OK. I got an email from the Reverend Derrick Jackson this week which was titled, "It's OK not to be OK." I give myself permission, and I give all of you permission, to be where you are. If it's despair and sadness and grief, that's OK. I'm not trying to force anybody to say, "Hey it's Easter now, you have to swallow this message of rebirth and hope and light." But maybe you're ready for it, and if so—great.

Because this is the symbolism of Easter: that there is a cycle of death and rebirth. In my way of belief, those who die do live on. Certainly in our memory, and in our conversation as we talk about those who have gone before. Our ancestors live on through us. So I believe in life after death: we may not understand it, but we feel that those people who have died are with us in spirit. In that way, the spirit of Jesus is with us, even though he died a long time ago. And if we can benefit from that, why shouldn't we?

So my blessing in closing for all of us today is: when you're ready for this message of rebirth and hope, it's there for you. If the daffodils bring hope to you, the springtime and the flowers coming back, embrace that hope. If you're not ready for it today, still hope will come, and rebirth will come. May the spirit of Ostara, of spring equinox and the earth blooming again, be with you and bless you. May the angel of death—in the form of this pandemic plague—pass over you and spare you and your loved ones. May we all embrace the lesson of Jesus who embodies love, who healed the sick, who fed the poor and hungry, and who challenged the powerful—may we all, whether we are Christian or not, benefit from his example and gain hope and wisdom from that example.

And my everyone be blessed by the joy of the Easter Chipmunk, the Easter Squirrel, and the Easter Hedgehog, on this Easter Sunday.

May it be so.