

“The Universalism of Easter”

a reflection

by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church

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Many of you have heard my personal Easter story – the story of how this decidedly unchurched young man found his way to a Unitarian Universalist church on Easter Sunday, 1982, and – in the course of one morning – laid down his churchphobia, and joyously became a born-again Unitarian.

Many of you have also heard – and been witness to – the story of my ongoing spiritual awakening, here at Heritage Church – where, not in one morning, but in the course of seven years of ministry with you, my journey has taken me to a place where I can truly say I now consider myself an equally born-again Universalist.

And many of you were here, two Sundays ago, when – right about there – Louise Lawarre’s grandson, Sean – his excitement and anticipation of this day unable to be contained any longer – asked his grandmother, loud enough for most of us, myself included, to hear, “Is it Easter yet?”

My response to him was this: “It is always Easter.”

This morning, I want to expand on that idea – the idea that it is *always Easter* – because that moment, that innocent question – helped to crystallize, for me, my full embrace of Universalism.

But first, let’s dispense with some theological baggage. When I converted to Unitarian Universalism that Easter Sunday, now 27 years ago, I must admit the main attraction in it, for me, was what it was not. It was *not* a church where fire and brimstone, judgment and damnation were preached. It was not a church where the message was one of guilt and sin, and God’s *conditional* love. It was not a

church where Jesus was the *only way*, where resurrection from the dead, and other supernatural beliefs were pushed as doctrine or dogma.

In short, it was not a Christian church – not *my* understanding of a Christian church. And that, to me, was the most important thing.

Since then, of course, I have developed a bit more nuanced understanding of Unitarian Universalism, of Christianity, of the Bible, and of Jesus. I have come to see Yeshua ben Yosef, as he was undoubtedly known in his lifetime, as one of the first great preachers of Universalism – of the unbounded, *unconditional* love of God.

Therefore, each Easter – and in fact, each day, for as I told little Sean two weeks ago, *every day* is Easter – I recall the words of Rev. Arthur W. McDavitt, who said to his congregation, the St. John’s Universalist Church in Muncie, Indiana, on Easter Sunday, 1926, “The question to ask on this day is not ‘Has Jesus risen?,’ but [rather] ‘Is he rising still?’.”

In other words, are we experiencing – are we *able* to experience – the true meaning of Universalism – can we feel the limitless love of God, in our everyday lives? And if so, are we then able to become *instruments* of that Love – to minister to the least among us? Are we able to feed the hungry, care for the sick, welcome the stranger, embrace the outcast – for *those* are the acts of salvation – salvation for the receiver, and salvation for the giver.

Yet I fear we too easily shrink, from such a calling – perhaps because we shrink from the very notion of an all-loving, all-powerful God, almost as easily as we shrink from the idea of a judging, wrathful, all-powerful God. Maybe even *more* easily.

Perhaps the most compelling distinction I have ever heard drawn between these two very different kinds of God, came in what was probably the most moving sermon I have ever heard. This past November, I was lucky enough to be in attendance at the First Universalist Church of Rochester, New York, when their former senior minister, Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, returned to deliver a sermon bearing the following provocative title: “Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven.”

In this reflection, Morrison-Reed recounted his own journey to a full embrace of Universalism – a spiritual migration that, much like mine, occurred only after being called to serve a UU church where the *Universalist* roots run very deep. He described, in vivid detail, a moment he had experienced, several years earlier, at the New York State Convention of Universalists. “The sanctuary..., with its stained glass, carved beams, and large choir loft evoked a sense of sacred

space,” he said. “I sat half-looking, half-listening [to the sermon], until ... [suddenly the preacher offered] a graphic, prosaic picture of the *very last sinner*, being dragged – by his collar, I imagined – kicking and screaming into heaven.

“*What kind of God was this, I wondered?*”

Morrison-Reed went on to answer his own question. This was the kind of God, he said, “who, dismissing free will and embracing the saintly and despicable alike, created both Mother Teresa and Saddam Hussein, supported both Obama and McCain, loves both Bush and Bin Laden, and drags Hitler into heaven as well. This is a truth almost too shocking for us to assimilate,” he concluded, “but... it was the unrelenting tug of this reality – which I [have come to] know as God – that I gladly submitted to, that long-ago day.”

I’m gonna let all that settle and sink in for a minute, because it certainly had to, when I first heard it...

...Mark Morrison-Reed flat out says that any God worthy of that name, would have room in heaven not only for Mother Teresa, but for Hitler. And he flat out says that only such a God, would be worthy of our reverence. Ever since that bitterly cold, November morning, in that stately old Universalist sanctuary where I heard Morrison-Reed utter these heresies, I’ve given his words a lot of thought – and I’ve come to an inescapable conclusion: I agree with him.

It is only we humans, who divide people into *us* and *them*, who pass judgment on others, who draw lines in the sand, who draw lines on the very same globe that – when seen from outer space – has no lines, at all.

Life itself – and the Spirit of Life – is boundless. It is we who are limited. Limited in our perception. Limited in our knowledge. And limited in our very existence. Despite all our skillful means of denial and tools of distraction, despite all our protestations to the contrary – we are limited creatures. Mortal creatures. We are born. We die.

And in the time between, we desperately try to make sense of this truth, to place a frame of meaning on this reality – yet in the end, too often the gods we create, reflect little more than our own petty jealousies and judgments, inadequacies and insecurities.

But Easter, as always, offers us the chance, to start anew. And so, this morning – this Easter morning – I ask but one thing of you. Imagine a God – a *Universalist* God – that, like Life itself, like the Universe, to the extent that we can comprehend it – includes *everything*, embraces every one – every bird and tree, every river and every asteroid, every Jesus and every Judas.

Such a God, my friends, would *always* be rising.

Such a God would make, of every day, an Easter.