

Telephone Jesus

March 27, 2016
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First Parish in Brookline

“The resurrection language of the gospels is literal nonsense.”

Yes that’s right.

I said, “The resurrection language of the gospels is literal nonsense.”¹

Actually, I didn’t say that; John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopal Bishop and religious commentator said it. But say it he did.

It doesn’t take much research to prove the truth of his words. The four gospels that tell the story of Jesus—his program of social and spiritual resistance and reformation—are inconsistent and contradictory. As with many parts of the New Testament, the resurrection story is told differently in each gospel.

We tend however to group them all together and call it the story of Easter. And then, we decide, often categorically, whether or not we believe it. As Unitarian Universalists, many of us say that we do not believe it.

I want to challenge that today. Not the historical validity but rather the significance of the Easter Story. I believe it holds great value for the human story, both collectively and individually. It is a story for Unitarian Universalists, too.

Let’s look at what meaning this story offers us. I turn to theologian Thomas Hoyt who writes about the resurrection story in *Stony the Road We Trod, an African American Biblical Interpretation*. His interpretation comes out of the Gospel of John. Hoyt points out that in this version of the story, Mary comes to the tomb near sunrise, the night sky not fully gone. In this darkness, the empty tomb represents “bad news and a sign of hopelessness and death.”² When the sun does come out, illuminating a new perspective, the women have the power to live on.

That’s the human story. Going from darkness to light. The story we all know of being in the tomb, the dark, the depression, the unknowing, the powerlessness, the grief, the anger. The dark. And then... the light.

In that place of darkness, in the tomb, we wait for someone, something to roll away the tomb stone. When living in that state it can feel like it will never change.

¹ Spong, Shelby, John; “Jesus for the NON-RELIGIOUS Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human”, Harper Collins e-books,

² Hoyt, Thomas Jr., *Stony the Road We Trod, “Interpreting Biblical Scholarship”* pg. 36, Fortress Press, MN, 1991.

I hope, you have also experienced the light. The moment, fleeting or long lasting, when we say. *Look. I have risen. The darkness is gone.* The laughter, it is my own...again. The joy, the peace has returned.

That moment, that time when we realize that hope has sprung anew. *That is the resurrection story.*

Why do we humans have to go through the darkness. I don't know. But I do know, that by doing so, and surviving or resurrecting, we are stronger, we are humbled, we are part of the human race. Hoyt writes: “the extent to which we share in the experience of darkness enables us to appreciate the light.”³

A friend of mine, who is pastor, puts it this way. He says “It’s crazy...right...this Easter Story. A woman comes to the tomb looking for some dead dude and he’s gone. She turns to see him standing there in the light. Blinded by light, disbelieving it could be true, He says to her, I am here. She realizes it’s true. The darkness did not win out. Light did. Love did. Hope did.

“It’s CRAZY, right.... It’s crazy ‘till it happens to you.”

So let’s not give in to the temptation to say this Easter Story has nothing to offer us. Yes, like the old game of telephone, we do not know what really happened. The story changes even as it is written in the Bible.

But listen...to Naomi Shihab Nye’s words that we read earlier this morning. “I feel sorry for Jesus” she writes. People believe they can tell his story. “...they tell you what He wants and doesn’t want as if they just got an email....”

The Easter story is about hope and love presiding over darkness. That is a story that we can relate to. It is a story that we fight for, and that we turn to, whether we realize it or not.

Every time that we are sickened by the news media, and we want to give up, but we don’t. We’ve turned to the Easter story.

Every day that we get out of bed and try again when it hurts so bad, and we feel so alone. We turn to it.

That day when this congregation hung our “Black Lives Matter Sign”, you turned to it.

As Unitarian Universalists, as people of hope in this day and age, we need the Easter story. We need to believe again and again that light will prevail, that together we stand on the side of love.

Amen and Blessed Be. Happy Easter, Happy Spring.

³ Ibid.