

An Extreme Easter?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
at The North Parish Unitarian Universalist, North Andover, MA
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Thank you to the Choir- it's beautiful to have so many *Alleluias* on Easter. We need to soak up all the beauty and joy we can find these days, right? We need reminders to sing some Easter *Alleluias!* Amen? It turns out that even the Evangelicals are going to extremes to get folks' attention at Easter.

In an article this week in *Christianity Today*, Megan Fowler shared some of the creative strategies that churches are using to get folks to services today. It's projected that people in our nation will spend about \$24.9 billion on Easter this year,

but most of that isn't going to churches!
And you can't spread your good news without folks in the pews!

So a church in Alabama tried something new yesterday, Holy Saturday. That's the day in the Christian tradition that commemorates the day Jesus's body lay in the tomb. Anyone here grow up observing Holy Saturday? What kind of day was it? "An in-between day."

Well, this church in Alabama took a different approach. They rented a helicopter that dropped 20,000 eggs yesterday- I presume plastic ones, not real. Kids could hunt for eggs while church members cooked thousands of hot dogs for visitors. The pastor said, "*We do this to let the community know we want something for them, not something from them.*" He continued, "*We have found these events make it attractive for people to want to know more. As long as we are pointing them to Jesus when they want to know more, then we see life change out of it.*" Well, ok.

This Alabama church is not alone.

A church in California held their Easter egg drop at a local sports stadium on March 28th.

Their helicopter dropped *100,000* eggs and even included a skydiving Easter Bunny!

We can't compete with that! *100,000 eggs and a sky diving bunny!*

And I thought having a person-sized bunny and a trumpet was special!

(Matt, you are very special!)

Does it strike anyone else as pretty wild that Christian churches are going all-in with the pagan fertility symbols to try to get folks to come worship on Easter?

You have to admit, the pagans were good at outreach!

Other churches are staying more on message in their outreach events. 20 churches in Tennessee put together an ecumenical Easter drone show, sponsored by the local Christian radio station.

The host church has a 100-plus-foot white cross on their property and on Good Friday, hundreds of illuminated drones soared above the cross, visually telling the story of the Resurrection.

Good Friday seems a bit *early* for the Resurrection, but who am I to judge?

Viewers could tune into the radio to hear the story narrated.

And once that was over, there were fireworks! *Fireworks!*

Not to be outdone, there's a coalition of Texas churches that put together a nightly drone light show that's been going since March 27th, drawing in 6,000... 10,000 people per night!

For ten nights, they've had 300 volunteers working; that's ten Red Bow Fairs!

They had a nightly rotation of worship leaders and speakers, and at the end of each night, a narrated drone show telling the story of each day in Holy Week.

On the 27th there were 5,000 drones, but by tonight, there will be 10,000!

Talk about an awesome spectacle!

We can't compete with that either. Then again, maybe we don't want to.

I understand the desire to share the good stuff of church with other people, and the frustration of how hard it is to get folks in the doors.

But there's another part of me that wants to say to these folks,

"You might wanna check yourself before you wreck yourself." Right?

Is entertainment and voyeuristic spectacle *really* what Easter is about?

'Cause you know who was *really* good at mass entertainment and voyeuristic spectacle when Jesus was alive?

The Romans!

And who had many, many stories about gods becoming human and human beings become gods?

The Romans.

When you're living in a time of Empire, I just think you have to be extra careful.

Empires can get into your head,

and mess with your ideas of true and false, right and wrong.

They can mess with your religion, co-opt its clergy, even spread the idea that the Empire's leaders are sent by God!

They are good at distraction and can numb people to casual cruelty.

Jesus and his followers lived in a time of Empire-

and that seems not only important to the story but worth reflecting on today.

What are the particular challenges for individuals or communities living under Empire?

What choices do we have when surrounded

by a culture and politics of distraction, entertainment, cruelty and death?

How does a person stay true to their faith, their ethics, or simple compassion?

How does a person find gratitude, love, joy amidst the doom and gloom?

This is the historical context of the Easter story.

In their book *Saving Paradise*, the Reverends Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock note that

at the time of Jesus, the imperial Roman Empire made the self-aggrandizing claim that it controlled the whole world.

They were deceiving themselves.

But the Empire *did* serve an elite and powerful few while leaving most destitute.

That elite controlled the masses through charity- among other things.

They gave them *just* enough grain for *just* enough bread to barely survive- for which the poor were supposed to be *grateful*.

Distribution of Roman grain was a method of domination.

No doubt, the Roman regime was rife with corruption, cronyism and incompetence.

It also embraced *necropolitics*, the politics of death.

The Roman military industrial complex used strategies of war, torture, state terrorism, violence and extortion to maintain power.

And the *epicenter* of Roman power in occupied Palestine was the Temple in Jerusalem.

This was the context in which Jesus and his followers lived.

It was in this context he preached the imminent apocalypse and the embodied, present Kingdom of God, primarily around the remote Sea of Galilee.

He only went to Jerusalem at the end of his life.

(If you're not Christian and you're curious about how Jesus was turned from an apocalyptic Jewish preacher in Galilee into God over decades and centuries, I recommend the writing of Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman. But that's another sermon.)

Back to the Empire.

It was under the conditions of Empire that Jesus and his followers answered some of those perennial questions about how to live.

They formed an alternative community.

They refused to believe that the *Emperor* was sent by God, and instead, said that *Jesus* was.

They ate together- and boy, is there a *lot* of focus on eating in the gospels!
Food is *very* important before and even after Jesus dies!

Jesus is always organizing spontaneous suppers;
some scholars say it was his primary way to teach his followers
to embody the Kingdom of God.

So it makes sense that after he dies and his disciples experience these odd encounters
with strangers who turn out to be him,
several of those encounters center on eating together.

The point is, the body and the spirit were connected for these folks!
Having enough food, being healed, breaking down social barriers, collective learning
all seem to have been hallmarks of this Jesus community- along with gratitude.
They gave thanks for their bread, *not to the Romans* but *to God*.
Their loyalty was to a reality far more powerful than Empire.

Now like all such empires, the Romans did not like any opposition
that spoke to people and what they knew in their hearts,
that woke them from complacency or spoke to their suffering.
So they were heavy handed in putting down any type of revolt.
Reverends Parker and Brock note that crucifixion was a tool used
to terrorize and punish those who joined dissident movements
as well as those who tried to escape slavery, those who tried to escape military
service,
or those who did acts of magic.
(Very dangerous to do magic in the Roman Empire!)

Often there was no trial; it was more like a lynching than a formal state
execution.

And since crucified bodies were left on the cross,
the identity and personhood of the deceased was utterly erased- in full view.
Crucifixion was such a humiliating death that families *did not speak*
of loved ones who were crucified.

As Parker and Brock say, "*It functioned to fragment communities,*

tearing even the strongest bonds of connection and commitment.”

To me, this is what makes the Jesus movement remarkable- and others like it. His crucifixion was supposed to be the end of the community.

It was supposed to fragment the Jesus followers,

break their strong bonds of connection and commitment.

Briefly, it seemed like it might... *but then it didn't.*

His followers didn't let Rome or Jesus' death have the last word.

It seems they experienced a sort of contagion of courage and came back together. They re-gathered.

They said his name out loud. They shared fish and bread.

They turned the tables so his crucifixion humiliated and dehumanized the *Romans-- not Jesus, not them.*

It seems they created the kind of community he had spoken of and tried to create when he was alive.

In the Book of Acts, which talks about a huge gathering of his followers, one can read, “*A sense of awe was everywhere...*

All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common...

with one mind they shared their meals with unaffected joy.” (Acts 2: 43- 46)

They held everything in common? That right there is a gift economy!

They shared their meals with unaffected joy? That's living into abundance, not scarcity!

They identified as followers of Jesus, not just Roman subjects?

That's the best kind of identity politics!

They gathered despite their differences in class, origin and ethnicity?

That brings a whole new understanding to “taking care of one's own.”

A sense of awe was everywhere... not terror, despair, or resignation?

That's refusing to let the Empire regulate one's emotions.

That's participating in collective resilience, illegal and life-giving joy.

These people were opting out of the Roman economic system.

They opted out of the Roman political domination and charity system.

They opted out of the Roman game plan to isolate and demoralize them,

out of the Roman psychological strategy to keep them cowed or complicit. The Empire did its worst, and they *still* refused to let it win.

It appears the early Christian church continued on this path. In their book *Saving Paradise*, Revs. Parker and Brock note that images of Jesus suffering on the cross- or images of his body in death- did not show up in Christian spaces until the 10th century. In earlier centuries, the dominant image in Christian sanctuaries was Paradise- but not an *otherworldly* paradise, a *this-worldly* one.

Mosaics show pastoral landscapes, meadows of flowers, orchards full of fruit trees, waters teeming with fish. They show starry night skies, deer, birds, and lots and LOTS of sheep. These are visual images of the abundance of this world, the goodness of life on earth... and a love for it all.

This alternative way of gratitude, this recognition of abundance was also central to early Christian communities.

Guess what the main ritual of the early church was?

Yes, food.

It was a communal feast, a celebration of life.

This eucharistic meal was an experience of abundance, of shared joy.

There was always bread- again, with gratitude to God, not the Roman elite.

People would also bring many kinds of fruit-

one list from the 2nd century of food that was blessed includes

grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, pears, apples, mulberries,

peaches, cherries and plums- as well as almonds, olive oil and olives,

fresh milk or cheese curds with honey, grilled fish and salt.

The vegetarians among us will be happy to know there was *never* red meat- for this was to be a “bloodless” meal.

This potluck at the center of Christian ritual was a celebration of life and sustenance, an outpouring of gratitude and a filling up with blessing,

a lived practice of mutual generosity and care,
even in an Empire imposing trauma, death, and grief.

Depending on who you are and your position in society,
there are all sorts of ways to live under an Empire, even a crumbling one.
Most of us drift from one way to another over the course of a week, a month, a year.
We can keep our heads down, focus on survival,
just take care of ourselves, our immediate families-
which, believe me, is sometimes all that we can handle!
We can distract ourselves with entertainment.
We can rake in benefits from Empire politics, the Empire economy, despite ourselves.

And some- the vulnerable, the poor, the working and middle classes-
will suffer from policy violence or physical harm.
Some will find families and communities fractured.
Some will unwillingly sacrifice their children to the Empire's wars.

We do have choices.
We can isolate *or* congregate.
We can spend money on spectacle *or* the sacred.
We can become numb to necropolitics *or* we can let our hearts break,
and then turn to community, to trusted sources of life and love,
to heal over and over and over again, making our hearts stronger.
We can refuse to be cowed into silence.
We can lean on one another and offer shoulders to lean on.

We can share whatever we have in abundance!
Maybe you have strawberries, figs, fish, books.
Maybe you have time, money, skills, stories.
You might have inner peace, strong convictions, or might meditate or pray.
Some among us might have candy to share, or crayon drawings, stickers, laughter...
quiet walks, singing voices, hugs, attention,
food, love, joy.

Whether we are Unitarian Universalists, Christians, theists or atheists,

Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, pagans or other kinds of lovers of this earth,
we are invited today, and every day to remember, to notice,
to be grateful for the abundance of the earth, of life.

We're invited to respond with gratitude, generosity, joy.

That doesn't require fireworks, or drones lighting up the sky,
or money spent on helicopters.

An Extreme Easter might not be what most people need, what we need this year.

Perhaps what we need most is to turn to one another,
to share our bread with strangers.

Perhaps we need to recall that ordinary people, time and time again,
have refused to let Empires and destruction have the last word.

Perhaps we simply need to take heart, and choose again another way of living,
a path of loving kindness, justice and joy.

Some of you won't be surprised that I'd like to end this Easter sermon
with words, not from the Bible, but from an indigenous scholar,
Robin Wall Kimmerer, one of my mentors.

She writes this: *"Even a wounded world is feeding us.*

Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy.

I choose joy over despair.

Not because I have my head in the sand,

*but because joy is what the earth gives me daily
and I must return the gift."*

She goes on to say,

"The sacred lies in life, and in keeping life going,

in all of the ways that light has turned into life and into biodiversity...

*Isn't it our sacred responsibility- and I think our joy-
to safeguard it, to help nurture it?*

I just can't think of anything more important and soul-filling

than to do that work, to have that sacred purpose, to keep life going.”

So I ask you this morning, shall we choose to do that work,
to safeguard and nurture life in the days ahead? *Shall we?*
Shall we stay true to our faith, our ethics, and simple compassion? *Shall we?*
Shall we choose gratitude, love, wonder and joy today?!? *Shall we?*

Then, my good people, it IS a Happy Easter! Alleluia! And amen.