

# *Easter and "The Passion"*

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**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

**April 11, 2004**

## **Reading:**

"Some things will never die" by W. Edward Harris (ed. Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris), from *Celebrating Easter and Spring*, Anne Miniver Press

The story of Easter and a resurrection, while [for me] not literally true, does point to a profound truth about life. That truth is that the darkest of times in the human spirit are succeeded by the renewal of life. Spring returning brings us that message.

Just as there is loneliness, abandonment, brutality, cruelty, hate, selfishness, fear, trembling insecurity, suffering and awareness of our mortality, so are there values and principles that cannot be killed. They may appear to be dead, but they rise again. We see it in individual lives and in the lives of nations. Countries crushed under the oppressor's heel rise up to claim freedom and self-government.

Justice may be denied, delayed, twisted and corrupted, but it will rise again to be born anew in the hearts of people.

Truth may be crushed by tanks, armadas, official silences, but it will live again as it is kindled in the hearts of men and women who will live by no other standard.

Beauty is fragile. It may be surfaced over by highways or massive developments, but beauty rises to shine through to drive out the tawdry and ugly. Beauty cannot be killed.

Love may be buried beneath selfishness, cruelty, arrogance, and hatred, but the stone will be rolled away and love will rise again to walk with us, to inspire us.

Courage may be imprisoned in dank cells or the darkest of tombs, but courage springs up anew in the hearts of all the oppressed.

The power of human love to redeem human suffering and misery, to overcome fear and selfishness, to reach into the grave and beyond does not die. Beauty, Truth, Love, Justice, Courage live and inspire others and redeem human life when they are manifest in us and truly risen in our lives.

Some things will never die.

## **Sermon:**

I am going to begin this sermon with a confession. I have committed to preach in part about Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," with almost no intention of going to see the thing. I feel badly about that. I do feel like if anyone among us should see it, I imagine it should be me, but I just couldn't do it. You see, I have this rule: I refuse to see any movie in which people, under normal circumstances (so not "Lord of the Rings" settings, etc.), torture or do cruel things to other people. I learned long ago that such movies stick in my psyche and the images haunt me for months afterwards. So I don't go see them.

Having said that, let me say that I want you to know I would sit with you in a hospital room through the worst physical suffering of *your* lives and hold your hand and endure it with you. It's not that I am afraid of witnessing suffering. I just won't seek it out, and certainly not in the name of entertainment or even cultural literacy.

So excuse me. I didn't see the movie. You'll have to excuse the fact that part of this sermon is second-hand opinion-making, a reality I hope not often to be repeated from this pulpit, but having said that ... let the sham begin!

How many of you here have seen the movie?

Well, you'll have to weigh in at the service's end because I'd like to get some first-hand reflections.

I think all who have seen it and most of us who have read about it know the general plot and famous excesses of the movie. The movie covers the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, from the Garden at Gethsemane to his capture, trial, death on the cross and, of course, a brief vision of his resurrection two days later. This is not the first time this chapter in Jesus' life has been depicted in film. Nikos Kazantzakis does so in "The Last Temptation of Christ," Pier Paolo Pasolini did so with his "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." Even Monty Python has taken on this subject. In fact, for centuries this particular part of the story, called the Passion, was the subject of yearly theatrical productions called passion plays.

One dangerous part of this history of passion plays is that they in particular, and Holy Week in general, have historically been associated with the greatest outbursts of violence against Jews. Gibson's movie, in that sense, would have aroused concern no matter what. He, however, seems to have lived up to some of that concern by his re-writing of history and his stereotypical portrayal of Jews in the movie. Jesus is a handsome Italian boy in the film while the other Jews look like they were picked by Central Casting out of some medieval stereotype. Their bloodthirsty temperament is also out of medieval caricatures of Jews. Gibson's portrayal of Pontius Pilate as a passive and easily swayed leader under the influence of Caiphas the Jewish high priest is also patently absurd. We know from the first-century historian Josephus that Pilate was notorious for his brutality and once crucified more than a hundred men after a rebellion, only stopping because he ran out of trees from which to make the crosses. Finally, Gibson includes the infamous line from Matthew called the "blood curse" in which Pilate literally washes his hands of the crime and asks the Jews in the crowd if they will take responsibility, to which they respond: "His blood be upon us and on our children." Under pressure, Gibson removed the translation of that line from the movie, but more than one scholar of Aramaic has pointed out that the line stands *untranslated* in the movie nonetheless.

I am not sure where Gibson's own branch of Catholicism stands in the Catholic Church or whether it is even recognized. What is clear is that he breaks even the Catholic Church's own 1988 rules about how passion plays should be written. According to those rules, all passion plays must avoid caricatures of Jews and must not falsely oppose Jews with Jesus. Gibson does both. So, in the name of a little plot tension, Mel Gibson has played

into an ugly historical precedent, whether or not that precedent plays out in any overt acts of anti-Semitism.

Perhaps more even than the concerns about residual anti-Semitism, one of the most common observations made about the movie has been about its graphic, almost lascivious portrayal of violence against Jesus. More than one person has remarked to me after seeing the movie that if any human being endured just the scourging that Jesus is shown to endure in the movie, he or she would surely have died from blood loss. Indeed, the omnipresence of blood as a visual image is one universally mentioned. Leon Wieseltier in the *New Republic* writes of the movie: "The Passion of the Christ' is intoxicated by blood, by its beauty and its sanctity ... The fluid is everywhere. It drips, it runs, it spatters, it jumps. It trickles down the post at which Jesus is flagellated and down the cross upon which he is crucified, and the camera only reluctantly tears itself away from the scarlet scenery ... [There are] frenzies of blood. When Jesus is nailed to the wood, the drops of blood that spring from his wounds are filmed in slow-motion, with a twisted tenderness."

Of course, that intoxication with blood, its beauty and its sanctity, is not accidental. For Gibson and men and women who share his theological perspective, there *is* beauty and sanctity in this blood. His is the church of the bloody Christ on the Cross, where the suffering of Jesus is a pivotal theological moment. Indeed, the movie is *intended* to remind the viewer of all that Jesus suffered. Why? Because this is the Man-God Jesus whose suffering and death was not just his own, but took up our sins as well. Seeing how much he suffered for each of us is designed to bring us each into a deeper, more grateful and loving relationship with the Jesus who saved us.

If that's your theology, then my hat is off to Gibson for bringing it home so powerfully. Of course, I still think any parents who bring their young children to this movie should be arrested for child abuse, but Gibson has executed the enviable feat of translating his theological beliefs effectively onto the big screen. We should be so gifted with respect to our own tradition.

The problem for me and for most of us Unitarian Universalists is that this theology is, by and large, not our own. Our heritage gave up Original Sin centuries ago. It did so when our movement restored human goodness and redeemability without the need to appeal to a godly act of human sacrifice. Instead, we believed in a God who loved us enough to offer us salvation without the magic of vicarious atonement or the horrors of Jesus' death on the cross.

Once that issue was dispensed with, Jesus for UUs has become important for different reasons. It has been the *life* and *teachings* of Jesus on which we have focused our attention. If Jesus saved us, it had nothing to do with how he died, and *everything* to do with how he lived and the example he set for us. His legacy for us were the parables about loving one's neighbor, the courage of a man who stood by the prostitute and had the wisdom to demand that only those without sin cast the first stone. He was a man who was the champion of the downtrodden, who tried to turn the scales of justice and compassion toward the meek, the orphan, the widow, and yet still had the righteous anger to turn over

the tables of the money changers who defiled the temple. Here was a full-blooded prophet, priest, healer and teacher. It was his *humanity*, fully realized, that we focused on and held up for discussion and emulation.

Does this mean that the Passion of Jesus is meaningless to us? No. But it does mean our take on the story of the Crucifixion and the Easter miracle is a bit different.

For me, the Crucifixion is a reminder of how deep our human fallibility is, of what horrors we human beings can visit upon each other. It reminds me that the good often die young, very often the target of the human cruelty they spent their lives trying to transform into compassion. The truth is that each age has its passion play -- a story wherein the good are slain for no good reason by mobs armed with ignorance and hatred. I feel like this week we've seen our share of this play itself out on both sides in Iraq -- innocent non-Iraqis slain to make a point, and innocent Iraqis slain in response.

Just as Jesus' *life* showed us how one human being could reach into and out of the best in his nature, the story of his death holds up a mirror to show us what the worst of our nature might allow. The passion story for us, then, isn't so much about the redemption we are handed because of Jesus' death on the cross, but about the redemption we *choose and make* after we witness to his death. To use the poetic language of Holy Week, you might say that standing at the base of the cross and the end of this story, we are left with one question: Which will we emulate? Will we be accomplices to the destruction of the good in this life, or will we champion its endurance, and at what price?

A colleague said he was once asked by a parishioner to take out an advertisement for the Easter service. The parishioner wanted it to say, "Join us for Easter. We don't know what happened." Well, to some degree that is true. Most Unitarian Universalists tend to be at best agnostic about the empty tomb, but even read metaphorically, the message is the same as it is for many other Christians.

The Easter message is that there is hope for the world. Easter is our promissory note. The empty tomb of the Easter story stands for our belief that somehow the good prevails and will continue to prevail in this world, even and despite the worst that human beings can deal out. The resurrection of Jesus in the story is another way of saying that despite the challenges and injustices in our world, evil will not have the last word.

As our reading said this morning: "The story of Easter and a resurrection ... point[s] to a profound truth about life. The truth is that the darkest of times in the human spirit are succeeded by the renewal of life." Easter is about nations rebuilding; people who have been hurt daring to love again; even about our own fighting spirits. For me, the Easter story is a reminder that something -- call it God, call it the force of Love, call it Nature's own call to life -- something moves through us and this world, insisting on rebirth, second chances and hope. This faith doesn't absolve us from doing our part to save the world, but it does imply that we are not alone in this work.

I'm not sure how this passion story translates into a movie. If you think of it, let me know. Rumor has it there is money to be made in this kind of movie. Far more important, however, is how it translates into a life well lived. On this front, I think we're well on our way already. The Passion Story just reminds us what we're up against, the choices we must make, the guides we have along the way, and the promise that there is always hope, second chances and resurrection. Happy Easter, everyone. May the spirit of this season be with you not just this day, but all days in our challenging and rewarding lives in this harsh and beautiful world.