



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday

“Love Lives Again”

with Rev. Mary Gear, Rev. Sara Lewis, and Troy Fisher

Chalice Lighting from Jennifer McGlothin, “Like the First Hint of Green”

As the first hint of green begins to peek through the barren ground
As that little sprig grows into a healthy stem
As that stem grows into a stalk and forms a bud
As that bud slowly opens with each new day
To form a yellow daffodil
Let us be, like that first hint of green, renewed by the warm of the sun’s rays
And ready to emerge with a new energy, ready to face the day.
We light this chalice to bring a glimmer of that warmth into our space.

Opening Words from Peggy Clarke, “Love Brings Us Back to Life”

Easter is a holiday of miracles:
It is life from death,
Joy from sorrow,
Celebration from mourning.
Easter reminds us that all is never lost;
That the story continues as long as we are here to tell it.
So gather up your worries—we are going to bury them beneath the ground

And watch them transform into flowers of hope,
Pushing through the earth, reminding us on Easter morning that
Love brings us back to life,
Calls us from sadness, from grief, from anxiety,
Into a world renewed, and alive, and filled with joy
Once again.

First Story: “Ishtar and Tammuz: An Ancient Babylonian Story of Love and Death” as retold by Sara Lewis

This story takes place in Mesopotamia, which means between the rivers, and is roughly now the modern lands of Iran and Iraq. Long, long ago, people in the lands of Mesopotamia told of a beautiful and powerful Goddess, Ishtar. In fact, people have told stories of Ishtar since 5000 B.C. and some call her the first named Goddess.

Ishtar was a truly powerful Goddess, the goddess of the earth, of love, and of war. But as powerful as she was, she wanted even more and set out to conquer the underworld as well, going down into the underworld which was the domain of her sister, Ereshkigal. Before Ishtar left this world, she gathered her family together and gave them instructions on how to mourn her if she didn't return.

Ishtar's sister was ready for her, though, and Ishtar was trapped in the underworld. While Ishtar was gone, the world above suffered terribly for without the Goddess there was no love and no new life could be born. And so the other gods petitioned that Ishtar must be released and her sister had to relent and let Ishtar go.

When the goddess Ishtar returned home, she found her handmaiden wearing torn rags and covered in ashes, wailing and mourning for her mistress. She found her two sons similarly in mourning. But she found her

husband, Tammuz, lounging on his chair at his ease, not mourning her at all. Enraged, Ishtar smote Tammuz and killed him.

And so beautiful young Tammuz, called the prime steer of all the land, the most beautiful man there was, died and went to the underworld. And in his absence, the whole world grieved. The plants of the fields wilted and drooped and died. The animals went hungry. And even the Goddess Ishtar grew sad and listless. She came to regret her vengeful action and wanted her Tammuz back. And so she prepared to journey back into the underworld again to bring him home again.

In preparation Ishtar dressed herself well, with her finest dress, her scarves, necklaces, earrings, and crown. To cross into her sister's lands she would need to pass through 7 gates.

At each of the 7 gates, the porter made Ishtar give up a layer of her clothing, of her jewels, until finally she passed into the underworld entirely naked.

She came to a hall, where she found Tammuz lying as though sleeping or as though he were dead. But now, to wake him and bring him back to life with her, she found that she must make another sacrifice, and here she was now naked and with nothing left to give.

And so she wept. The love she felt, the grief she felt, came pouring out. The tears fell like rain from heaven, pouring over Tammuz. And this, this ceremony of weeping, became her sacrifice and the offering that brought Tammuz back to life. Together, they returned to the earth and brought love and fertility back again.

Forever more, when the land grows dry and the plants wilt, and the animals start to die, heaven weeps again, bringing a great ceremony of weeping and grief that brings the world back to love and to life again.

Reflection: “Love Lives Again” by Rev. Sara Lewis

The ancient story of Ishtar and Tammuz is echoed by many other similar stories: Isis and Osiris, Venus and Adonis, Demeter and Persephone, and more. In these tales, when one beloved spouse, lover, or child dies or is taken to the underworld, the grief of their loss becomes manifest on earth as drought, winter, or other forms of loss to fertility and well-being of all the plants and animals. The entire world mourns and suffers together.

And then, after some period of time and grief, the beloved is resurrected in some way, even if only partially or temporarily, and the whole world is made vibrant and well again. At least for now. One way of understanding these stories is that they explain the seasons.

But there is another way to understand these myths of death and rebirth, to see how we all go through our own journeys into the hard places, the traumas, the dark nights of our own souls, and we can all climb back out again. Not the same, never the same, we are always changed, but we can live whole and vibrant again.

Tammuz was a beautiful but not very serious young man, one who didn't show proper care for his missing wife. Adonis, Osiris, Persephone ... all naïve and young and untested. And in their stories, they are often the object of the story, not the subject. It is the love and searching of Ishtar, Isis, Venus, and Demeter, of the older and more powerful figure, that is centered in the story. But how would it be for Tammuz to be the hero, for Persephone to be the hero? For them to face their own depths, go deep into their own journey, and emerge whole again but also wiser, stronger, more mature?

We will all face hard things at times, we won't make it through life still naïve and young forever. But there will be another side to these times, a return to life and wholeness, a return to love. And love can guide us all through these journeys: the love of a partner, a parent, a friend, but most powerfully of all, the love of ourselves. For you can be both Ishtar and Tammuz at the same time, both Demeter and Persephone. Go seeking yourself, love

yourself, bring the whole of yourself back to life again. And again. And yet again.

For the seasons go round and round, both in the world and in our inner lives. And the sun rises again, the spring returns. Love lives again.

Second Story: “The Easter Story” by Sue Andrews

All the great religions have their stories, and usually a special day that celebrates that story. Today is Easter.

Easter and Christmas are the most special days for Christians: on Christmas we tell the story of Jesus being born in the manger; on Easter we tell a story about the end of Jesus' life.

As a boy, Jesus learned to be a carpenter. But after he grew up, he became a teacher and traveled all over Israel talking to people.

Jesus talked about being a loving person, being kind and helping those who need our help. He said we could see God's love in our loving relationships with other people. Jesus got very angry at people who put money first and people second.

Crowds of people came to hear Jesus speak. A small group of people traveled with Jesus. These were his disciples.

In the spring at this time of year, Jews celebrate Passover, which is a very important Jewish special day. Jesus and his disciples traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. They came into the city on what we now call Palm Sunday, which is the Sunday before Easter. There were huge crowds and people spread palm branches on the road. Jesus rode on a little donkey over the palm branches.

Jesus knew that he was upsetting the people in power.

He was telling people that putting money first was wrong, that God loved all of God's children, that it was more important to be a loving person than it was to be powerful. And Jesus knew he was going to get in big trouble with the authorities. It made the authorities very nervous that Jesus was so popular with the people.

Sure enough, the priests and bankers went to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and demanded that Jesus be arrested. And then, after Jesus was arrested, these powerful people insisted that Jesus be put to death. In those days, criminals were killed by being nailed up on a cross. That was called being crucified.

Jesus was put on a cross up on a hill between two robbers. After Jesus died, a good man named Joseph came to the authorities and asked to take away Jesus' body and put him in a tomb carved into a rocky hillside that Joseph had been saving for himself. This was on Friday. Now the Jewish holy day begins Friday night, so Joseph and the women who were very close to Jesus had to hurry and wrap his body in linen and put it in the tomb because for Jews Saturday, their sabbath, is a holy day of rest and no work at all may be done.

The powerful people insisted that a stone be put in front of the tomb and that there be guards. On Saturday, the men and women who had been Jesus' disciples and close friends observed their Sabbath, but first thing Sunday morning, the women who had been closest to Jesus went to his tomb with spices and perfumes to put on Jesus' body.

This is how the story goes in the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament of the Christian Bible:

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men

said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again."

Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

What Jesus said, and what he did, and the love he shared are still very much alive two thousand years later.

Reflection: "Love Lives Again" by Rev. Mary Gear

Today is Easter. Twelve days ago, we marked the turning of the seasons from winter to spring. Passover is yet to come in the next month. These are some of the holy days of Spring. Each of these holidays has a story of loss and grief, of an arduous journey of danger and sacrifice, and of redemption and rebirth. These are themes of the human condition, retold over and over in story after story.

We don't really know the details of Jesus' death or exactly when he died. We do know that he was most likely executed for political reasons; his message of love and equity was just too dangerous to the powers that were.

Whether or not he died on a cross is a topic of controversy. Some suggest that the story of Jesus' death and rebirth at this time of year

was part of the effort of the new Christian religion to erase and replace the pagan or earth-centered holidays. If early Christians wanted the ancient traditions and celebrations to go away, they couldn't just declare them illegal, but needed to replace them with something else. So, the pagan celebration of Spring honoring the Goddess Eostra, Ostara, and all of her other names, had to be replaced. The stories that explain the turning of the seasons, Ishtar & Tammuz, Isis & Osiris, Venus & Adonis, Demeter & Persephone, all were to be replaced with the story of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection.

Yet, the ancient stories did not die. They remain as long as we are here to tell them. They live on in many ways, including in Unitarian Universalism as we draw from many sources and many traditions, seeking to make meaning of our human experience, now and through the ages. It is in a UU Easter service that we will tell the story of an ancient Goddess who travels to the underworld and sing Alleluia for the resurrection of Christ. Both/all help us understand where we have come from and who we are. It helps us know that we are human and not alone as we mourn a loss, know regret, face injustice, weather sacrifice, and live in a world where everything that is alive will die.

And the stories live on in us. They live in our bodies and in the body of Earth. Grief, rage, regret all live in our bodies. So does memory, joy, hope, and rebirth.

These stories live on because they help us remember the cycle of life and death, repeated and again. The stories help us remember that the cycle of life and death is woven with threads of love. The stories help us remember that the journey may be hard, full of sacrifice and grief, and that in the end, there is Spring, resurrection, new life. We often don't know and can't predict what that new life will be; there is

uncertainty and mystery in this cycle and we do not control it. We do our part, making the best decisions we can, taking actions based on our best values. In this way, we co-create this world with the Divine.

How I make meaning of the Jesus story is that he suffered and died as a man committed to his values in an unjust system that was threatened by his teaching. I don't believe that he was literally resurrected, and I don't believe in a heaven somewhere else. What I am in awe of is that Jesus' teachings were so powerful, so meaningful, so needed that they have lived for over 2000 years. I marvel at the presence of a man who was so loving that his love has lived on for all these years.

Yes, the teachings and practices have been corrupted and used for evil—it can happen with any belief system created by humans. Yet, on this day, on Easter Sunday in the Spring of the year, we celebrate the miracle and possibility of rebirth. We marvel as the daffodils emerge from the ground, green shoots that bloom into flowers the color of sunshine. We honor the life of a prophet who envisioned a loving and just world. We gather to comfort each other with the knowing that the cycle of life and death is guided by love, that there is possibility and hope. We remind each other that, despite loss, sacrifice, regret, and injustice, love lives again, and again, and again.

“Love brings us back to life,
Calls us from sadness, from grief, from anxiety,
Into a world renewed, and alive, and filled with joy
Once again.”

Happy Spring. Happy Easter.

Extinguishing Chalice words from Joel Miller

We all know loss and pain.

Let none of it divide us.

In the rising sun today

Let us do together what we cannot do alone:

Roll away the stones that close our hearts.