

“The Greatest Story Ever Told?” with Worship Associate David Fu

Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD

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Lead in

I think it was – 1980. And cable TV was a new thing, which we sometimes had and sometimes didn't. Maybe my parents were alarmed at how much more TV we watched. Or what we watched. Or maybe we were chasing deals. I don't remember. But I do remember that cable TV allowed us to watch rated R movies without adult supervision, and it also allowed us to easily watch movies multiple times. Am I proud to say that I know pretty much all of the dialogue from *The Blues Brothers*? A little. But I digress.

So, it was the spring of 1980 and the seventh grade version of me was at home with a good friend, and we watched *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. It had some really funny bits, but between the fast talking, the British accents, and my lack of biblical knowledge, I'm afraid that much of the humor passed me by. The movie ends with the protagonist, Brian, and a literal chorus of folks being crucified, singing and whistling a cheery number titled “Always Look at the Bright Side of Life”.

I was 13, and I was a little on the naive side, so I found this scene – silly. It was only after I was well into my 40s that I had any idea of how absolutely wacky and irreverent this was. It was also in my 40s that I realized how incredibly offensive the entire movie, especially this scene, could be to some of the faithful. But for the record, I don't find it offensive. I find it deeply – hysterical. I laugh so hard that I find myself forced to confront this dark, dark bit of the Easter Story.

The story.

For many Christians, the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, a.k.a. “The Easter Story”, is the very heart of their religion. And it has been told and retold countless times over the years in a multitude of ways. To prepare for this service I read the four versions of the story in the Gospels, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament. And also, as it happens, the Bach in Baltimore choir, of which I am a member, performed Bach's St. John Passion, a musical rendition of the Easter Story from the book of John, two Sundays ago. All this is to say that I am more familiar with the story right now, than I have been in years.

You, however, may not be so familiar with the story, and since my sermon is about it, and since this is Channing Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist, and we embrace such things, I'm going to retell it – after a fashion. I now present you with an abridged, “hit the high points” version of the Easter Story, mostly based on the book of Matthew.

So, Jesus with his 12 disciples has been gallivanting about Galilee, speaking truth through parables, healing sick folk, walking on water, telling people to love another, etc., etc., etc, and gathering a large following in the process. The high Priests, the Scribes, the Elders, and the Pharisees, that is, the higher ups in the Jewish religious establishment, do *not* like this, they view it as a threat to their authority, and they are looking for a way to get rid of, this troublemaker, Jesus Christ.

On the Sunday before the Jewish Passover holiday, Jesus, and his motley crew of disciples show up in Jerusalem. Jesus rides a donkey, and a large crowd gathers to meet him, shouting praises and waving palm leaves. Jesus does his thing during the week, while the Priests and the Scribes are trying to find a way to make him disappear without causing a riot. Jesus' disciple Judas Iscariot decides he's a bit light on cash, so he goes to the chief Priests and agrees to turn Jesus over for 30 pieces of silver.

On Thursday evening, Jesus has a Passover Feast, now known as the Last Supper, with his disciples. He performs the first Eucharist: sharing wine and bread as symbols of his blood and body. And then he states that “One of you has betrayed me.” They go around the room, each of the disciples asking, “Is it I, Lord?”. Jesus knows who it is, but plays it close to the vest.

After dinner, Jesus and his disciples Peter, John, and James go to the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays three times for long hours to be let off the hook for what is to come: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. But let your will be done rather than mine.” And though Jesus asks them to stay awake during this time as a gesture of support, the three disciples continually fail to do so. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” It is now dawn and time to get on with the betrayal.

And as soon as they get up, Judas arrives with a host of others, armed with swords and staves. He has told them to arrest the person he greets (sidebar – interesting! So *these* people, this vigilante mob, they do *not* know who Jesus is...). Judas goes up to Jesus, kisses him and greets him as “Teacher”, and the tragic circus begins.

Jesus is first taken to Caiaphas the High Priest, where his enemies have gathered, and, after suffering various indignities and attempts to frame him, he is then brought to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. After some fruitless questioning, Pilate cannot figure out what Jesus' crime is, and he is pretty sure that Jesus is innocent. As a Roman tradition

during Passover, he can free a prisoner of the people's choice, and there is a notable one by the name of Barabbas. So he offers to free either Jesus or Barabbas. "But the chief Priests and Elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus". And so the crowd does just that. Ugly. And then the crowd clamors for Jesus' execution. Pilate literally washes his hands of the matter before whipping Jesus and sending him to his death.

Jesus is scorned, thorned, and mocked before being executed in the Romans' usual way of the times, which is to be nailed to a wooden cross and left to die in the sun. Crucifixion. It is a horrible, torturous death. Jesus' dying words are "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Jesus' body is placed in a sepulchre – a "cave grave", and a large rock is rolled in front of it to seal the entrance.

The next day, the chief Priests and Pharisees, with Pontious Pilate's permission, set up a watch over the tomb to make sure that no disciples come and steal the body in the night and say that Jesus has risen from the dead, as he had predicted.

On the third day, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joses come to administer the final funeral rites, but the rock has been rolled away, and Jesus' body is indeed gone! Jesus has risen from the dead, and he appears very much "in the flesh" a number of times to a number of people before meeting with his disciples one last time, charging them to go forth and spread the Word, and finally ascending to Heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

The end.

So that's the Easter Story – more or less. It is my contention that somehow, somewhere along the way, this story went from being an "us" story, to a "them" story. I think it's more challenging as an "us" story, and I also think it's more dangerous as a "them" story. What do I mean by all this?

This morning's first reading from the Book of John:

The Jews answered him, [him being Pontius Pilate, who has asked why Jesus should be executed] The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.

"The Jews". The Book of John was written roughly 100 years after the death of Christ and now it's "The Jews" who are clamoring for the death of Jesus. This part of the story appears only in the Book of John, which I tend to have difficulties with. For John is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I believe that this mindset, that "It was the Jews that killed Jesus,

not us Christians”, to be a sort of “great othering” by the early Christians, and it has been the seed for all manner of tragically bad human history. The thing is, during the time of the Easter Story, there *were* no Christians – *all* the main characters, including the disciples, were Jewish.

It wasn’t “them”, it was “us”.

And by “us” I mean we as humanity.

Jesus’ death on the cross is no picnic, but it is the final of many unkindnesses that he suffers. There is the disciple Peter – who three times denies that he knows Jesus because he is afraid for his own safety (we didn’t cover that part of the story – you’ll have to read it on your own). There are the Jewish high clergy, who are afraid of losing their authority. There is Judas, who betrays Jesus for personal gain. There is the arresting mob – ignorant of who Jesus is, loyally and unquestioningly following the orders of the chief Priests. There is the systemic unkindness of the Roman government – Pontius Pilate who tries to set Jesus free, but when push comes to shove, turns the cruel gears of the machine, and also the callous soldiers who gamble for his garments while he is on the cross. Even the two thieves who are crucified beside Jesus, his final neighbors, are mean to him. All of the Unkindness of Humanity piles upon Jesus, whose message is one of Kindness: “Love one another”. Kindness is Crucified by the Unkindness of Humanity. It was not “them”, it was not “the Jews” who killed Jesus, who killed Kindness. It was Humanity. It was “us”.

“Kindness, Kindness, why hast thou forsaken me?”.

Kindness

Kindness. Our second reading this morning. This poem by Arab-American Naomi Shihab Nye, was brought to my attention by my sister, Melissa, during a visit from my siblings at the end of March. And what a poem it is! I daresay it is a sermon in and of itself. A sermon about both the meaning of suffering and the answer to suffering. The rest is commentary.

In short, you cannot know Kindness until you know loss, until you see and know suffering, until you know sorrow. And then it is your duty, your sacred duty, to walk through this world with Kindness. Her poem is so beautiful, it just rips my heart wide open. I had to practice speaking it without breaking down and weeping. We must let the world hurt us, we must let life hurt us, for there is no other way to break the vicious circle of hatred and violence, and there is no other way to keep Kindness alive. Kindness as God. It is nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Nobler. Not easier. Not happier. Not safer.

I find that one of the great ironies of the Easter story as it is told in the Book of John, is that Jesus’ crime is quote “he made himself the Son of God, and for that he must die.” But the

thing is, we *are* all children of God, and we *all* must die. And if you cannot learn the lesson of Kindness, if you live to “win”, if you prioritize “safety” over your humanity, you will die having harmed others, and you will die having perpetuated hatred.

The Resurrection of Kindness

And what did God do in response to Jesus’ crucifixion? What was God’s answer to the Unkindness of Humanity? It was to resurrect Jesus; it was to resurrect Kindness. God repays Unkindness with Kindness. This is the Gift. This is the miracle of Easter. Hallelujah! [pause] Hallelujah.

Amen

So I want to do something a little different as we end the service this morning. A ritual of sorts. We’ll have our final hymn (number 318), and I’ll start out as usual with a benediction. But then, instead of extinguishing the chalice, we will have the “postlude”: Gabbi and I will play a movement from Olivier Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*. This piece, written in a German prisoner of war camp, has a fascinating history. Messiaen was a devout Catholic, and the movement we will play, a duet, is titled “Louange a l’Eternite de Jesus”, in English, “Praise to the Eternity of Jesus”. It’s a little longer than our usual postludes, so I hope you can sit tight and enjoy it.

It has a magical ending, and so when we finish the piece, I ask you to treat the silence as sacred, and to *not* clap. Instead, lean into the silence, as I put aside my instrument, extinguish the chalice, and process out of the sanctuary. When you are ready to leave, do so in silence, and you can meet me in the fellowship hall in the basement for our usual conversation, snacks, coffee, and generally good times.

To reiterate: hymn, benediction, postlude, NO CLAPPING, extinguish chalice, leave silently, meet in the basement. Get it? Got it! Good!