

Enduring Hope

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 5, 2026

When I was a young child, the celebration of Easter brought with it a basket of chocolate bunnies and multicolored jellybeans. My sister and I had hard boiled eggs soaked in blue, orange, and green food coloring, plastic eggs strategically tucked away, holding quarters or pieces of chocolate. Sometimes as children we received pots of prickly pink or yellow roses that we planted in my father's back yard. A celebratory time of joy and wonder, accompanied by the blossoming flowers of spring. We settled into the beauty of the season. A magical, wonderful time to be a child! And this has its place, always, throughout the generations, this offering of wonder and joy. And yet, beyond the colorful shelves lining CVS, beyond overindulgence of sugar, lies a story far deeper, steeped in faith, love, and – perhaps most importantly – it is a story interwoven with hope. As a people of faith, we can dig deeper and deeper by exploring the story of the death and life of one of the world's great prophets – one deeply influential spiritual teacher among many. Today we explore this Christian story of Easter and theology of hope through the lens of Unitarian Universalism.

Think of the ancient story itself. The women walked to the tomb, the resting place of Jesus. They carried with them spice and oils – small offerings of love and devotion. Upon reaching the tomb, they were perplexed and frightened for the stone that covered the opening was no longer in place. Upon entering, steeped in skepticism, they miraculously found that the tomb was empty. They encountered an angel who spoke the words, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”¹ Imagine their astonishment. Imagine the astonishment of the disciples when the women share this news with them. Ultimately, all of those in this story were met with shock interlaced with an impossible hope. If we pause in our own Unitarian Universalist faith, interpreting a resurrection that we do not agree with theologically, we can still use it metaphorically. We encounter this narrative as a story carried across millennia, revealing the tensions between doubt and faith, death and life, despair and

¹ Luke 24:5-6

hope. In the Easter story, faith, life, and hope endure— sentiments sustained through generations of believers. It is a story of overcoming against all odds, and at Easter, those odds were profound: death, violence, and oppression. Yet hope emerges as something cultivated when we take this story to heart. It is this hope, rising even in the face of what seems certain, that we turn to and hold onto today.

As we immerse ourselves in the deeper meaning of the story of Easter, we are invited to ask: what is Easter—and what is it not? Especially if we explore this holiday from a secular perspective that does not center the resurrection, we still need to grasp how this story can give us meaning and purpose. I took time to reflect upon the editorial we heard earlier. We do not have to prove nor disprove eternal life. We do not need to grapple with theological arguments about resurrection. What we can do is explore myriad concepts applicable to each of our own finite days. Easter moves through a narrative that confronts the woe of doubt—the doubt that any life can be renewed or restored after a time of hardship. Likewise, it is a renewal of a deeply held faith. We find a story that highlights goodness, love, mystery, wonder, and a promise of a more beautiful tomorrow. It is a sun rising no matter how profound the hardship—no matter how detrimental the struggle—the beauty of dawn appears again and again. It is an invitation to the wild unknown – what is yet to come? What miracles lie ahead? Lastly, it is hope. Hope is not born of certainty. Hope is persevering even through that of which we do not understand. Persevering based solely on the promise of possibility. Endings are not endings, but a time of renewal.²

What has Easter meant to ancient Christians throughout the ages? A resurrection of Jesus. A defeat of death and sin. A promise of eternal life in a world of hate, prejudice and violence born of the Roman empire. What changed after the resurrection of their savior? After Easter, Christians celebrated, as expressed in modern theological language quote, “a new earth, imbued with the beauty and grace of divine blessing.”³ This is the theology of authors Rita

² Editorial in Lewiston Tribune

³ Myke Johnson on *Saving Paradise* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker

Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker in their book *Saving Paradise*. What did this “new earth” look like? It is parallel to the values of our own Unitarian Universalist faith. The early Christians worked to care for the sick and the marginalized, embodying an inclusion of all siblings on this earthly realm. This is hope in action as they worked towards a future not promised, but possible. And this is born of the work of Jesus – touching the untouchable, loving the unlovable, tending to the sick and the ostracized, caring for the downtrodden. The story of Jesus’ resurrection, as understood by some liberal theologies, was a catalyst for creating heaven on earth. We, as Unitarian Universalists, do not understand this as a literal heaven descending to this earthly realm. We see a call to action – to justice work – feeding the hungry, housing the unhoused, healing the sick, protesting, voting – so that everyone’s experience of this one wild and precious life can be equitable, meaningful, and fulfilling. It is steeped in hope, as we diligently work for the possibility of a more blessed tomorrow.

We see Christian theology expressed in artwork and religious symbolism throughout the ages. My husband and I have seen this many times, exploring churches and cathedrals of times past. Heavenly angels with wings, towering statues of Jesus crucified, icons of the Virgin Mary embracing her child. Brock and Parker found that early Christian churches did not offer representations of Jesus’ crucifixion. This is not because they rejected the crucifixion and its theological importance, but because they avoided depicting suffering in art. Some of the early Christians more often emphasized sacred and holy depictions of love overcoming empire, images of hope, care, and guidance, avoiding images of torture or cruelty. They needed reminders that hope is still possible; that a blessed future was possible. They needed a way forward in the face of deep and enduring oppression. Throughout the millennia, art has reflected the evolving theologies of the resurrection and the meaning of Easter. And this changed throughout the years as interpretations and needs of Christianity grew and flourished. We can pause and revel in the intricate beauty, portrayed in deeply spiritual places.⁴

⁴ *Saving Paradise* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker

So we see that this is a story of hope—hope that life can emerge even in the most detrimental of times. That anguish can give way to possibility. That meaning and purpose can arise from loss and sorrow. That love endures beyond all expectations. Hope, even in the most trying times, does not deny the hardships of fear or anguish. Instead, it is the quiet promise of what can be—meeting these wounds with healing and companionship. This enduring hope is most profound when met with that harshest of challenges, reminiscent to where we find ourselves today. This is a hope for peace in the midst of war, for democracy rising against tyranny, for unity finding its way through deep and widening divisions. In times like this, we connect with hope by remembering the resilience of our ancestors – all that has been endured, transformed and overcome throughout millennia of pain and hardship, of war and violence. And hope – as described throughout millennia – throughout Christian theology - is a catalyst to action, meeting hardship, not with despair, but with an enduring belief that we can make a change – and acting to make this change. Hope holds space for grief and anger, but it also holds within the possibility for healing and growth. It is an opportunity for compassion in a divided world.

Hope is a profound belief that the narratives of our lives are not yet complete – that hardship will not have the final word – but that we can end our biographies instead, with what is life-giving. In our own narratives, hardship does not prevail. This mirrors the story of Jesus: This teacher’s narrative does not end with death but with a promise of new and enduring life. We can ask ourselves, what endures when hardship is met—not with denial or ignorance – but with hope? Hope reshapes how we meet adversity; it invites us to notice what remains when we confront hate and greed with an enduring love and an everlasting faith.

With hope, we notice moments of beauty. The sun slowly slipping below the horizon, a great orange orb descending, turning a sky of pinks and yellows into a deep, velvety black. Hope is seeing and acknowledging acts of care, a parent or guardian tending to a fussy child in a busy restaurant, stranger helping stranger by paying for a lunch, a rabbi praying over an anguished woman. Hope is recognizing the overwhelming goodness of humanity – expressed in ways large and small day after day and knowing that this endures no matter how ugly the world

seems. You are not alone. We are bound together in an enduring yet persistent connection with all that is.

I think of the tale of hope narrated in Easter applicable to the theologies of modern day Christians. I am reminded of the sentiments of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., relevant today, quote, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”⁵ Disappointment is inevitable and can be devastating, but it is forever held finite and transient. Hope, however, is a deeper, enduring faith. For King, hope both fuels the fight for justice and is strengthened through it. Hope was his firm belief in moral progress. It was his vision for a just, equitable, and loving future, where all are equal, where all have dignity. This is the hope that both fueled and sustained him. Hope, to King, is bigger than defeat. And it is driven by his profound and enduring faith.

Or the theology that inspired Desmond Tutu, Anglican bishop and human rights activist. This is evident of a common theme in his work, that hope is the courage to believe that light persists, even in the darkest of times.⁶ This is what we touched on earlier – hope does not deny darkness nor does it ignore the corresponding angst and injustice. Darkness is pervasive. But hope finds a flicker of light amidst any veil of shadows and doom – a light that serves as a catalyst towards true justice, love, faith, compassion, and genuine change. It is resilient and it is persistent.

Whether found in an ancient story of life over death, or held in the icons of a towering cathedral, or seen as the catalyst for creating heaven on earth—hope prevails. The Christian story of Easter depicts an enduring faith and love, portraying the life and death of one of the world’s great prophets, weaving together a teaching of hope whose lessons span millennia. Hope reminds us that the spark of love is never fully extinguished—that a flicker of light can be found even in the darkest of times. It holds before us the possibility of a better future – a future we can work towards in each of our blessed and finite days. Beyond devastation, something new can always emerge. In this way, hope connects us to something far greater than our

⁵ *Strength to Love* by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

⁶ *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu

individual selves—whether a faith community or a movement for justice. So, when the first daffodils bloom, when the aisles at CVS become populated with sugared eggs and chocolate wrapped in pink and purple tinfoil, when children fidget with anticipation, remember the Easter story and the abundant wisdom it offers. Suffering is not the end of the story. Even amidst defeat, new life is possible. Love is stronger than fear and even death. Never doubt the power of hope.

May it be so, and Amen.