



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Who Do We Believe: Doubt, Resurrection, and Return"

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What do you believe?

Do you believe in life after death?

Do you [believe](#) in life after love? =)

Do you believe in God - a creator God, a passive or an active God, a god that transcends reality or one that is immanent from within all things?

Do you believe in many gods? Or none?

Who do you believe?

Do you believe in any scriptures?

Do you believe in any myths?

How do you decide what or whom to believe?

How often or how willing are you to change your beliefs?

We are the faith that questions. One of my favorite memories of my early days in Unitarian Universalism was my delight in spotting a pamphlet on display at my home congregation: "Unitarian Universalism: Find Us, and You Shall Seek."

That felt so honest to me. It felt right to name that once you find an answer to a question, it doesn't necessarily mean that your search is over. You may be presented with new information. You may have an experience that changes your own perspective. You may hear from the perspective of someone else and look at what you used to believe in a new way.

"Find and you shall seek" is of course a play on a verse from the Christian Bible - specifically from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 7, verse 7: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (that's the King James Version, probably the most famous translation of this particular verse).

The next verse, verse 8, also in the King James Version, proceeds to expand upon this: "For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

Now it is of course the time and the culture of the King James Version that we bear in mind as we think of this, but consider: "Every one" in the first part of the verse is automatically set to be the antecedent for masculine pronouns: "he," "him." These were taken to stand for all. And yet we also know, historically, that there were times when a collective "he" or "him" actually meant precisely that - a group of men.

It is this idea - or perhaps, the questioning of this idea - that our two readings this morning ask us to take to the story of Jesus, and most particularly on this Easter morning to the story of the resurrection of Jesus.

First we heard the story of the [discovery of the empty tomb](#) as related in the Gospel of Luke. "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened."

In the burial customs of Jesus' Jewish community, it was the work of women to care for the bodies of the dead. This was the holy work that the women traveled to the tomb to do on that Sunday morning, once the Sabbath had ended and their faith permitted them to work again. But of course once they had such an experience - the mere fact of the empty tomb would have been shocking enough, but the fact of the messengers in dazzling clothing meant they absolutely HAD to go share what they had seen! What could it mean? Reminded as they were of what Jesus had told them earlier, they of course rushed to others who had loved Jesus. Perhaps they were scared AND excited AND uncertain AND hopeful all at once!

But then...arriving with this momentous news...their words were dismissed as an "idle tale."

They were not believed.

Peter did not believe until he went to the tomb himself, which reminds us of the familiar story of the apostle Thomas, "doubting Thomas," who did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he saw for himself. Let's visit what the King James Version has to say here, the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, Verse 29: "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

(Wait, is that a gender neutral potentially singular "they" in the King James Version of the Gospel of John? Goodness! How interesting!)

Yes. It's all very interesting.

The gnostic text of our second reading is even more interesting. What we have left of the [Gospel of Mary](#) is a partial text only, and today's reading is not a direct corollary to the text we heard from Luke. It is an illustrative sample of another account of a woman speaking of what she has learned from Jesus - again, in this story, she is not believed. But then, something different happens. Let's return to the text:

“Then Mary wept and said to Peter, My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?”

6) Levi answered and said to Peter, Peter you have always been hot tempered.

7) Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries.

8) But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well.”

The change is, Levi steps up. There is someone there who defends the story that Mary has told, even though he has no more knowledge of what she is relating than Peter does. In essence, Levi says, “If Jesus trusted her, I trust her. I believe what she says.”

When we look at the etymology of the words “belief” and “believe,” we see that the original meaning of the words in English, dating to the 12th century, is “faith, or confidence” in something. This stems from an Old English root word *geleafa*, belief or faith, from a West Germanic root meaning “to hold dear, esteem, trust” - even, in some instances, to love. “The meaning ‘be persuaded of the truth of’ (a doctrine, system, religion, etc.) is from mid-13c.; the meaning ‘credit upon the grounds of authority or testimony without complete demonstration, accept as true’ is from early 14c.” (Thank you [Etymology Online!](#))

The meaning of the word belief started out much, much closer to saying “I believe in you” than “I believe what you said is factually true.” A root traced back, delicately, to love.

If the women left the tomb and told the others who were close to Jesus, who missed Jesus and loved Jesus and were terrified of a world that would kill their beloved teacher and were scared about what would happen to them - if those

who heard the women were able to hear them in love, they would have been able to believe. They could have said, “We all loved Jesus. Something tremendous must have occurred to bring you away from the work you set out to do. We believe you.”

The truth of what happened that Easter morning long ago cannot be known by us today. We hear the clashes and clangs of the holy season - a holy season for many faiths. This year we have Easter, Passover, and Ramadan all occurring - and this weekend is also the celebration of the Buddha’s Birthday. There’s a different history there, but we wake to news of strife in the Holy Land...as though that land were the only one that was.

What is the sacred work of Easter for Unitarian Universalists? Our pluralistic faith holds room for many truths, many paths to truth. Pluralism is one of the core values of our faith, held always in relation to love. The newest language we have about pluralism (from the [new proposed language](#)) is: “We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.”

That to me feels like: even if you and I do not find the same path to truth and meaning, I love you enough to hear what you say, to listen with my heart, and to ask questions out of love not fear.

The work of our questioning, pluralistic faith at Easter, the holiest day of the Christian calendar, is to love. To be curious. To engage with these holy stories with respect. To ask what is in our heart about the story - the *stories* - of Easter, about the stories of Jesus, about the stories of life after death, about the stories of a God loving enough to release us all from the pain we feel when we fall short of the mark of the values we wish to uphold. Maybe we have found Jesus on our own search for truth and meaning, maybe we have left that path for others because of our own direct experience of mystery and wonder. Maybe you, like me, still love Jesus but are on a journey of learning and

exploring what Jesus means to you now as opposed to what you were taught when you were younger. No matter where you are on your faith journey, no matter what Easter means to you personally, believe in the heart of your fellow seekers, your fellow questioners. Believe in the light of love, the continuance, the persistence, the triumph of life and of joy in the darkest of times. Believe in the beauty of a story of life continuing after death, the joy of a story of love continuing to grow in the world, marvel at the story of a teacher losing himself in the fight against empire and in the strength of those who found a way to believe in him even through their fear. Believe we can create peace. Believe in the song of your heart, and lift your voices together.