



Easter Sunday Sermon  
Cambridge Unitarian Church  
Rev'd Andrew James Brown

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In one way I am exploring Easter from a similar angle as last week but because Easter Day itself presents to contemporary religious liberals problems that Palm Sunday does not there are some differences. In the case of Palm Sunday it is relatively easy to show how supporting a man who was desirous of affecting a spiritual and political revolution is universally relevant activity across religions and cultures. It is less clear to see how one can make a similar claim about this very mysterious event called the "resurrection" which, without doubt, lies at the heart of the Christian experience.

The word "experience" will help us begin to understanding Easter in a way that doesn't simply intellectualize it turning it into a fictional story so that it can be put safely away on the shelf for only occasional consideration. However it is true to say that many religious liberals who are desirous of a religious faith that is reasonable simply do want to file it away under the section marked "miscellaneous and extraneous." Easter is a deeply uncomfortable day to consider.

For years this was true for me - and in some ways it remains so for me - preaching on Easter in a liberal context such as this, and I mean really preaching on it as opposed to alluding to rebirth in the general sense we see in spring, well that is very difficult. So, to give us all space to breathe, I

remind us all that what I say you do not have to agree with - here there is no imposition of belief or doctrine.

To begin I offer a bald statement of my own faith (without any hedging or nuances - which I can and do often make) I think that the resurrection stories are true and so along with other, far more orthodox, Christians at Easter I always say from this pulpit on Easter Day, "He is risen." Now in some this invites an "Oh no!" response but it seems to me that this often occurs because such a statement is given as a statement of belief - but notice I used the word faith. Belief is about assenting to certain doctrinal statements but what I hope to show today is that a proper, balanced, emotionally and rationally connected understanding of Easter is not, repeat, not about BELIEF it is instead about faith as EXPERIENCE. And here is where "Strawberry Fields" by the Beatles comes into play; what follows is simply an analogy - it is not wholly perfect but I hope it helps you to grasp what I am saying.

Strawberry Fields, as our culture has come to know it is the song we heard first of all. By a remarkable course of events the song developed from its demo stage to two radically different versions, one played by the band itself and the second an orchestral version in another key and another tempo.

John Lennon was not entirely happy with either version and so asked their producer (really the fifth Beatle), George Martin, to put the two versions together. George Martin replied that it couldn't be done because of the differences of key and tempo. John insisted. George tried. Extraordinarily speeding up

the playback of one of the tapes brought it to the same tempo and key of the other take! It is one of the great providential moments in popular music. The completed song, though artificially put together, is Strawberry Fields in a way that could only be glimpsed in the earlier versions no matter how good they were. The other, earlier versions, are but half glimpsed moments of the inner truth of the song. What is true of Strawberry Fields is true, too, of the Gospel. As we heard in our readings the earliest traditions recalling Jesus' teaching and life have no resurrection stories (nor, it should be added o they contain stories about Jesus' birth) yet, in the light of the continuing experience of the community that saw Jesus as their spiritual leader, they added other aspects. In short they took an original, though still incomplete, song arranged it, tried different versions and then started to put together different versions of it until - lo, the Gospel stories we now have came into being. Like the final recording of Strawberry Fields we can find in the Gospels the points at which they were edited. This is interesting to know - for those of us who are interested in how things develop - but it does not change the wonder and miracle of Strawberry Fields Forever, nor does it diminish the wonder and miracle of the Gospels.

Also we need to remember that Strawberry Fields Forever is to be experienced - it is not to be believed in. Has anybody ever asked you whether you believed in Strawberry Fields Forever? Well, rationally I know the place exists but and can say x and y about all sorts of things but the point is that this is the wrong question. What is true of Strawberry Fields Forever

is true, too, of the gospel story. They are not to be believed but experienced - one must simply let the story and the "events" it narrates work on you and be let slowly and seamlessly into your heart just as Strawberry Fields Forever has entered the very consciousness of British culture. On the bus of a Monday morning you find yourself singing "Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to Strawberry Fields." In a religious community within the Christian tradition (both liberal and conservative) one is suddenly aware of a living presence that has the name "Jesus Christ." This is something not to be believed in but simply experienced and acknowledged. Might you be said to believe this at Easter any more or less than that you were going to Strawberry Fields when you sang the song on the bus?

The essential problem for many rationalist religious liberals at Easter is that everything quickly moves too quickly into the arena of belief and away from experience. We move, in an often unacknowledged way, from being artists to scientists. I value the results of scientific enquiry very highly but science cannot get to the heart of Easter just as it cannot get to the heart of Strawberry Fields Forever. Only an artistic approach can bring us to the heart of these two, apparently disparate events - the creation of one of the most important pop songs in western culture and the Resurrection and the creation of the Christian tradition.

So this is something of why and how each Easter, I personally have no choice but to say and really mean, "He is risen!".

I conclude by returning, very briefly, to a theme I explored during the artist Paula Patterson's Memorial Service. Strawberry Fields and the Easter Story "give more than they have." They are both, it seems to me, vehicles for the free grace and artistic play of God - what the Hindu's call "lila." Something extraordinary enters our world that was not there before and the artist in us responds to the artist who is God. The only true way in to Easter for our often sceptical tradition is as an artist.

Still sceptical and think I'm absolutely barking mad? Well, next time you read or hear the Resurrection stories sing to yourself "Strawberry Fields Forever" something odd might just happen.

Happy Easter.

Amen.