
Jesus died, but Christ has triumphed

A sermon given at the Unitarian Church, Cambridge

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In any liberal religious context Easter is a very difficult day to preach on simply because there is always present the overwhelming temptation to avoid the heart of the matter put starkly and disturbingly by St Paul in *I Corinthians* (15:11-15):

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ.

It was probably just this kind of language and a literalistic preaching on its meaning that propelled many of us out of orthodox Christianity and, in our different ways, brought us to this church. It was, in part, certainly so for me. But too many people coming into our churches are led to believe that Unitarians and Free Christians merely reject St Paul's words. But we have not, at least historically considered, ever rejected the resurrection rather, instead we have reinterpreted it in a way that seems consonant with the Biblical text, the understanding of the earliest Christian communities and human reason.

So today, with no pulled punches and no caveats, I'm simply going to explain how Unitarian Christianity, at least in the modern form that I represent, understands the Resurrection. For those who want to know about earlier Unitarian understandings please ask me afterwards – it is a very interesting subject. Also please remember that I am not suggesting that this is the only way to understand it – all I am explaining today is the tradition's understanding.

In essence it is simple. Jesus was a human being, an extraordinary human being who was and is, for us, the central *revealer* of God and the primary (but not the exclusive) teacher of how to worship and to live. Two weeks ago I unfolded

in greater depth something of what is meant by this and I'll happily give a copy of that address to anyone who wants one. Jesus gave his life to the ideals of his faith in standing against the repressive political and religious powers of his own day. For this he was tried and executed and he died a dreadful, human death upon the cross.

The first disciples were utterly shocked and demoralised by these events because everything, absolutely everything, they had hoped for seemed to be lost. But, in the days following the crucifixion, they had a variety of experiences which led them to believe Jesus was, in some real way, still amongst them. Those experiences were recorded in our Gospels in a fashion suited to the time and culture and we do them a great injustice if we try to read them in any way as “accurate” contemporary journalistic accounts. In my opinion we waste a great deal of time and energy in getting in a tiz over whether the Resurrection actually occurred and, if so, how, because the point of these accounts is *not* the Resurrection *itself*. If you read the Resurrection accounts in the canonical Gospels very carefully you will notice something very, very odd. The Resurrection itself is never described and there are, as my friend Joe Bord recently pointed out to me, only *deferred* references to it. Nowhere do we find, as might be expected, an authorial voice interjecting which attempts to describe this event. There are no passages in which we read things like, “a bright light shone within the shroud and Jesus was restored to life” or which describe how the angels came and ministered to him and removed him away from the tomb with, or without, the rolling away of the stone. What is always to the fore are the very different *experiences* of the two Marys and the disciples, experiences which include, in equal measure, fear, astonishment, joy, confusion, doubt and faith. You see the stories are *not* about the Resurrection *itself* but mystical poetic attempts to explore the disciples’ *experience* that somehow Jesus was not lost to them even after his death. Our reading today, the story of the meeting of Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24¹³⁻³²) gives but one illustration of this. Today we are affirming and celebrating the disciples’ experience – the Resurrection itself is, in truth,

secondary. What counts is that they were transformed and were brought to a new kind of life and understanding.

In the months and years that followed these experiences a beautiful idea developed within early Christian communities who slowly came to understand that *they* were the Resurrection, *they* were now the earthly body of Christ. In a moment I will explore the change I have just made from *Jesus* language to *Christ* language but first note that when the writer of the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus say: “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). It is this community understanding of the Resurrection to which he is referring and today, on Easter Day, we find that as a living community gathering in the Spirit of Jesus we, too, are the resurrection and the life, we are the risen body of Christ.

There is nothing spooky, weird or irrational about this, we are simply celebrating that, in a genuine loving community that understands itself in this way, the intimate connection to the Divine we saw particularly revealed in the life of Jesus, remains real and present among and within us.

Now the reason for shifting from Jesus language to Christ language at this point is also simple but very crucial. As we explore this remember the word Christ simply means *God's anointed* and is a title which accords particular honour and respect to its bearer.

The word 'Jesus' has a single function as the proper name referring to an individual, a Jewish rabbi who lived and died in first century Palestine but the title Christ functions in two ways. Firstly it is the title accorded to the same individual man. But, secondly, and without losing its quality as word referring to a singularity, it also functions as a *collective* noun for all those who have followed Jesus in loving community. This brilliant insight was first recorded by St Paul and he expressed it in another famous and beautiful passage found in *I Corinthians*:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. [. . .] If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (12:12-14; 26-27)

Paul was saying to all who would listen that only in true loving community can we be meaningfully both one *and* many. The word *Christ* is for us in the Christian tradition, the quintessential expression of the idea of unity in diversity that lies at the heart of our liberal faith.

Now I use the word *Christ* very sparingly in worship, simply because it is so easily misunderstood having, in my opinion, been thoroughly misused for centuries. However, just because it is such a difficult word to use properly and to understand its meaning, it is vital that we don't lose it. And, although it is not often explicitly stated in our pulpits, I think it is important to remember that we are, in the sense I have just outlined, a Christ centred community and an Easter people and not simply one which just thinks Jesus was an all round nice guy with a good line in pithy moral teachings. I'm not denigrating this latter position for it is clearly an admirable one to adopt and one which should be commended more widely, but it doesn't quite hit the spot on the matter of who we are and certainly not on Easter Day. It doesn't help us understand the mystical aspect of being a living Christian community truly connected, not only with Jesus and the first disciples, but with all our forbears in the faith and, ultimately of course, to God.

This all reminds us that the Resurrection was never a one time experience –it is the ongoing, daily experience of our community. The Resurrection either never happened or it always happens.

All this will, I hope, enable us to sing with real passion and commitment our final hymn today, *Jesus died, but Christ has triumphed*, written by my friend and fellow Unitarian minister Cliff Reed. In it Cliff puts into concise poetic terms

all that I have been exploring today and for me it remains the perfect expression of what it means to be an Easter People and to belong to a Unitarian and Free Christian community. It is also why I can still say with good conscience and reason, even though what I mean by it clearly differs from many, if not most, other Christians: “Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen indeed!” I can’t help it because I see its truth in the face of each one of you as we gather together every Sunday, in the spirit of Jesus, to worship the God who is all life and love. Christ is Risen indeed!

Happy Easter. Amen.

*JESUS died, but Christ has triumphed.
Broken now the chains of death:
From the tomb comes God’s anointed.
Kindling cold hearts with his breath.*

*Now at last we see his purpose,
Breaking through like sunburst bright:
Liberation for God’s people
Ends humanity’s long night.*

*For there is a Spirit greater,
Who has now the victory;
And our God indwells the human,
Striving for our liberty.*

*And that Spirit dwelt in Jesus,
Teaching us that love redeems;
How God, through a man’s compassion,
Gains great ends by human means.*

*But for love and life undying
Death of self must be the key;
Jesus died to bear this witness
And Christ rose to make us free.*

Clifford Martin Reed