

The Liberal Christian Herald



The Unitarian Christian Association seeks to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition.



Issue 107 Easter Edition 2023



The Liberal Christian Herald



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Unitarian Christian Association

The Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) was formed in 1991 to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition within the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in Britain. We aim to be that place where this tradition can be explored, while at the same time providing a resource for the denomination as a whole.

From the object of the General Assembly:

‘To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.’

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Front Cover Picture: Resurrection

Editorial

“It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body”: so the Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Christian church in Corinth. (15.44) However we may interpret those words, and Unitarians and liberal Christians will have many different viewpoints on what they mean, they point to a mystery at the heart of the Easter story. It is, above all, a spiritual reality. For me, it is not simply about what may or may not have happened on that Easter day, but its significance for our own lives today. Have we ‘risen’ to new life, in the here and now, and how far do our everyday lives reflect that transformation? In a world that cries out for change and renewal, a world whose very existence is in danger, can we bring our own ‘resurrection light’: not just in prayer and worship, but in practical work and service, according to our own abilities and circumstances?

Many thanks to all our contributors to this Easter edition, and a huge thank you to Cathy Fozard and Paul Hubbard, who have helped this new and inexperienced editor!

Wishing you all a happy and blessed Easter. Alex Bradley



The Message of Easter Jean Bradley

As Chairperson of the Unitarian Christian Association officer group, I am pleased to write to all our members wishing you a Happy Easter. I hope you will all feel a sense of joy and hope through the Easter story, and can also enjoy the beauty of spring in all its glory.

Many of us Liberal Christians struggle with various aspects of the Easter story, Rev Maud Robinson wrote a short article for the Unitarian Magazine in 2012 and I would like to share an extract from that article. Maud says....

So often I find myself reaching for the inclusive, for the unfathomable wideness of the mystery that encompasses us all. and yet in the weeks before Easter I find myself drawn again and again to the strange particularity of the Easter story. which is so familiar to many of us, that we can almost pass it by, unremarked. We can sift it into belief or non-belief, but what's important about the story is not whether it's true or not, but what it means.

Maud makes a valuable point. We can let Easter pass us by as so many Unitarians let Lent pass them by. We can attempt to give up various things for Lent but not all of us are prepared to walk in Jesus's footsteps and use this time as a spiritual exercise. I have to admit that the very notion of aggression and cruelty is something that I back away from and so the actual telling of the crucifixion for me is something that I would rather not dwell on. The Rev Charles VanDenBroeder, says that....

At Easter both believers and unbelievers have a tendency to focus on the physical resurrection. This to me is a mistake. Far more important is what happens afterward. Most of us live with a protective cynicism which we are reluctant to abandon. Jesus had a way of piercing this cynicism which was so powerful that men and women gave up their security to follow him. When they discovered that his way would lead them to the cross, their first reaction was to hide. Later there was no turning back. They had a commitment to the way of life he led and they now wanted to keep it.

None of us wants anything unpleasant to come into our lives, Rev VanDenbroeder is right; we are all afraid of change that brings us negative outcomes. Yet the power of Jesus's ministry in his lifetime must have overridden that fear, otherwise Christianity would never have grown.

The Easter story, as told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and John, describes the rollercoaster ride of that short time in Jesus's life, which leads me to reflect on own life stories and to wonder if there are parallels in our own lives.

The Anglican priest and author, John Macleod Campbell Crum, wrote the wonderful Easter hymn 'Now the green blade rises' in 1928. It speaks to me of both the suffering and love that Jesus experienced and also of our suffering and love within our own lives.

*Now the green blade rises from the buried grain.
Wheat that in the dark earth many years have lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been;
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.*

*When our hearts are saddened, grieving or in pain,
By Your touch You call us back again;
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.*



Jean Bradley

Chair of the UCA

I believe that the power of love, which is our gift from God, can revive all things. Just as John M C Crum's hymn describes the green blade coming from the grain buried in the dark earth, Jesus taught us that the power of God's love was a power that was stronger and greater than death.

Whether we believe in the truth of the resurrection, or we simply believe that Jesus was our spiritual leader and guide, it is love that allows his ministry to continue over more than two thousand years, to help us find an inner peace and a way to live. If we reflect on our own lives, it is still that power of love that gives us strength to continue, even when going through dreadful and shocking times. Many of us have to bear the agony of seeing a loved one in illness, distress or fear. We also have to face the knowledge of loss, not only loss of a life, but a loss of so many aspects of our lives and our security: loss of work, loss of a home, loss of friendships or companions, loss of money or other things that are precious to us.

We have to hold on to the image of Jesus who was prepared to die for his beliefs, but we do not have to hold on to the cruelty of crucifixion. I suggest that, instead of thinking of human suffering, we should think of Jesus and all those we have loved and lost to death as if they are like that green blade which comes through the darkness and grows and blossoms in a place of beauty and peace. Our Springtime flowers show us that image every year. They push their way through the dark cold earth to give reassurance to us, if we can only take the time to notice, that what seems impossible is possible. We don't have all the answers. We only know God as a mystery. We are not ready yet to truly know God. We are rather like those spring flowers still waiting in the dark before they can bloom.

I hope that Easter can be a support to you if you have a sadness, I also hope that Easter can be an inspiration to continue to follow Jesus's way to live, to seek peace and love with all that we meet, for in the springtime the awakening of life happens, not just in nature but in us. Let us awaken to life, to wholeness, to health and to holiness.

Membership Subscriptions Catherine Fozard UCA Membership Secretary

A reminder that membership subscriptions for 2023 are now due. Subscription rates remain the same (see below) and can be paid by standing order, bank transfer, PayPal or cheque. If you have not already set up a standing order, please consider doing so. It helps a lot with administration as I do not have to send out reminders. If you would like me to send you a standing order mandate, please email me or phone me (details below). It is possible to set up a standing order using online banking. If you are eligible to gift aid your subscription, please consider this as well. The UCA receives 25% return from HMRC so your £12.00 subscription amounts to £15.00 which helps the UCA finances.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if there are any problems about payment of subscriptions because of financial hardship or other difficulties

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'Is Doubting Thomas the Patron Saint of Unitarians?' (based on an Easter Sunday Sermon) Sheena Gabriel

Bible Passage: *John 20.19–29*



My theme for this Easter service, strictly speaking is a week early. In the Church calendar the Sunday after Easter - 'Low Sunday' - includes the reading on Thomas from John's Gospel. It's also known as 'Holy Humour Sunday' (or 'God's Joke') as the resurrection is seen as the ultimate joke on death.

Traditionally on Low Sunday, clergy dress up in funny clothes and include jokes in their sermons. And so, I begin with a joke: "A priest and a taxi driver die and go to heaven. St. Peter welcomes them at the Pearly gates. 'Come with me,' he says to the taxi driver. The taxi driver follows St Peter to a mansion with wide-screen T.V, a golf course, and an Olympic size pool. 'Oh, my word, thank you,' says the taxi driver. Next, St. Peter leads the priest to a rough old shack with a bunk bed and old T.V. 'Hang on a minute, I think you've got us mixed up,' says the priest. 'Shouldn't I get the mansion? After all I was a priest, I went to church every day and preached God's word. And every Easter I spent hours crafting my sermon.' 'Yes, that's true.' St Peter replies, 'But during your Easter sermons people slept. When the taxi driver drove, everyone prayed!'"

Back to 'Doubting Thomas'; I think he deserves a walk-on part on Easter Sunday, because most Unitarians have more questions than joyful certainties when it comes to the resurrection. As a child growing up in a church which required blind allegiance to certain beliefs, I took comfort in the character of Thomas, admiring his refusal to accept the hearsay of others. Every Easter Monday my family joined with hundreds of other Pentecostal Christians at the Royal Albert Hall, to celebrate the fact of the Resurrection. That was what was preached; no 'ifs', no 'buts' – "Jesus has risen and is alive today!" As I watched the enraptured faces around me, I had no doubt this was the reality for many. But it was not *my* reality, and as I grew older, so the gulf widened between the message proclaimed and my gnawing doubts. I could relate

to the sufferings of Jesus the man on Good Friday, but his resurrection as Son of God on Easter Sunday, felt like a forced happy ending. As a serious and rather melancholy child, being told to rejoice on Easter Sunday "because Jesus has risen" felt platitudinous. Jesus had NOT risen for me – at least not in the way everyone spoke of. It felt like that maddening chime of 'Cheer up! Everything will be all right' that is sometimes thrust on folk in times of grief and extremis. Each person needs time to process their own Good Friday experience, without being cajoled into a premature resurrection. We imagine Thomas still in mourning; the rumour that Jesus was alive must have seemed a cruel joke. He wasn't present for the supposed sighting of Jesus to the other disciples. Quite reasonably he asked for proof. As a young adult, whilst I lacked his courage in refuting aloud the certainties of others, inwardly I decided to put aside doctrines that puzzled me and wait for further enlightenment. Whilst my questions about Jesus have increased rather than decreased with the years, I have now experienced the reality of resurrection for myself. Not as a one-off supernatural event 2000 years ago, but as the renewal of the spirit which manifests in every age. This belief is shaped, as with Thomas, not on hearsay but out of lived experience; what I've seen with my own eyes - times as a counsellor when I've witnessed the lifting of depression; what I've heard with my own ears - stories which reaffirm my hope in humankind; what I've felt in my own bones – the mystery of a loving, abiding presence, which I call God; what I've grasped with my own mind – the authority of rabbi Jesus as a worthy guide. My faith such as it now is, has been forged in the crucible of lived experience, rather than a hand-me-down faith. As Unitarians we pride ourselves on this refusal to accept imposed beliefs and stress the individual's right to refuse any authority at odds with inner conviction. The character of Thomas seems an ideal role model. Perhaps we could even claim 'Doubting Thomas' as the first Unitarian – or at least as a patron saint? We believe that healthy religion contains an element of doubt and would surely identify with these words of Raynor C. Johnson, 'I am not prepared to hand over to any person, though wise and learned, or to any institution however ancient or sure of its position, my inalienable right to search for ever-growing truth. I believe the craving for security in belief... can only be met adequately

from resources within ourselves... It is far more important for a soul in evolution to believe a few things, because it has struggled, thought and suffered to discover and possess them, than it is to have a comfortable and orderly faith adopted from any source outside itself".¹ This position seems utterly reasonable, as does Thomas's refusal to take on trust the rumours of resurrection.

But what of Jesus' response? He gives Thomas the proof he asks for, but suggests the need for proof is a weakness, "Because you have seen me you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed". Of course, we can't know if Jesus ever spoke such words. Perhaps he uttered something similar earlier in his ministry, and the writer of John's Gospel wove them into his resurrection narrative. Biblical scholar Elaine Pagels, suggests the author of John's Gospel, wanting to show Jesus was God, deliberately portrayed Thomas as an unbeliever, to undermine the Gospel of Thomas (which some scholars suggest predates the Gospel of John).² Unlike the canonical Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas records no details about Jesus' life - no nativity story, no miracles, no crucifixion, no resurrection - only dialogue with his disciples and sayings attributed to Jesus. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is more a wisdom teacher than a divine saviour. Along with other gospels circulating amongst early Christians, the Gospel of Thomas was outlawed in the 4th c. when church authorities anxious to rout out heresy, limited the canon of acceptable scriptures to those in our current Bible. It's thought that in the purge, monks hid the banned books where they stayed unread for 1600 years. In 1945 the Gospel of Thomas was discovered along with other ancient manuscripts, in a cave in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The Gospel of Thomas offers a refreshingly different perspective on Jesus, linked to gnostic teachings which emphasise inner knowing, rather than reliance on external authority. Some scholars think it may be the earliest record we have of Jesus' teachings; closer to the real Jesus - as man, rather than God. We don't know if the disciple Thomas (also called Didymus) wrote the Gospel of Thomas, but the words we find in the Gospel certainly seems to encourage a faith based on personal experience: "When you know yourself, then you will be known and will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty" (verse 3). "Recognise what is before your eyes, and

the mysteries will be revealed to you" (verse 5). "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you" (verse 70).³ Whether or not these words were recorded by Thomas (Didymus), how sad it is that the church has held him up as an example of unbelief, based on his desire to know first-hand. I recall one sermon (from a book of 'Best sermons') labelling him not just 'Doubting', but 'Distrusting, Dismissive, Disbelieving, Denying, Defying, Dissenting, Thomas'. I suspect the preacher would label Unitarians similarly!

But it's not just Unitarians who find comfort in the character of Thomas; he's become the patron saint of all who wrestle with faith. Stories have grown up around him, including one where Mary the mother of Jesus is taken up to heaven. All the disciples see it, except for poor old Thomas. Mary drops her girdle onto him as physical proof (it's apparently preserved as a relic in Prato Cathedral, Tuscany, and thought to assist pregnant women!) Legend aside, if Jesus really did say, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed", it's unlikely he was advocating blind faith. In other Gospel passages, Jesus encourages inner knowing, "The Kingdom of God is within you", and is critical of doctrines enforced by external authorities. Blind faith that puts trust in religious authority and flies in the face of evidence is dangerous - as illustrated by a Sufi story: A man falls ill and appears to die. His body is placed in a coffin. As the coffin is carried to the graveyard, there comes knocking from inside. The lid opens, a voice cries out, 'I'm not dead, I'm not dead - you must let me out!' The coffin bearer replies, "I'm sorry sir, you can't be alive - the doctor has certified your death and the priest has agreed it" whereupon the lid is closed, and the man buried! Another story, supposedly true: a scientist challenges an evangelical Christian, "According to the Bible the earth was created 5,000 years ago, but we've discovered bones that point to life on earth a million years ago". The Christian replies: "When God created the earth 5,000 years ago, he deliberately put those bones in, to test our faith and see if we'd believe his words rather than scientific evidence."

Of course, we should sift our beliefs using reason, in the light of science. This is what Unitarian faith is grounded on. But the reproof, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed" also offer a challenge to fundamentalist atheism and

worldviews that dismiss any notion of spiritual reality. Some things can never be proved in a laboratory: we can't dissect love or pin down transcendent moments of wonder. We should guard against dogmatic scepticism that narrows belief to *only* that which can be empirically validated. Jesus was impatient with those who demanded outward signs before they would follow him. To believe without seeing, suggests a need to see with 'inner eyes', through the lens of possibility and imagination – not reducing everything to hard evidence. In 'Alice in Wonderland' the Queen asserts she is one hundred and one years, five months and one day old. *"I can't believe that!"* says Alice. *"Can't you?"* asks the queen, *"Draw a long deep breath and shut your eyes"*. That was what much of my childhood was like - belief as a mental act of will. The story of doubting Thomas allows us to say 'No' to that sort of faith. But the human psyche at times *needs* to believe the impossible; in the words of Richard Holloway, *"Tread softly for you tread on my dreams – is not a bad motto for religious investigators - there are times when we should leave undisturbed what we may believe to be consoling fictions and let people find what comfort they can against the emptiness or horror that confronts them."*⁴

Thomas appears two other times in John's Gospel. After Lazarus' death he encourages his fellow disciples to go with Jesus, *"that we may die with him"* (John 11:16) and at the Last Supper, he is unafraid to question Jesus (John 14:5). Legend has it Thomas travelled to India as a missionary. Some say he died a martyr's death. These clues suggest Thomas was a passionate follower of Jesus. So, let's reclaim him – not as 'Doubting, Distrusting, Dismissive, Disbelieving, Denying, Defying, Dissenting Thomas' - but as 'Honest, Open, Genuine, Candid, Searching, Tenacious, Courageous Thomas'. Let's learn from him to balance faith with doubt; brave enough to ask difficult questions and challenge hearsay, yet willing to trust in a reality beyond our five senses, so that we too might cry out with conviction before the Ultimate mystery, as Thomas did when he finally beheld the risen Christ. This Easter, may we in the words of Sydney Carter, follow the dance of faith, *"Swung by the rhythm of a yes and no"*. Let us have the honesty to seek the evidence we need on our spiritual path, whilst

remaining open to that which can only be experienced through inner gnosis:

*"O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee...
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!"*⁵

1. Raynor C. Johnson 'A Religious Outlook for Modern Man' 1962, Hodder and Stoughton. pp. 122-23
2. Elaine Pagels 'Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas' (2003, Vintage Books)
3. Ibid – text adapted by Elaine Pagels from Professor Marvin Meyer's translation.
4. Revd. Richard Holloway 'Lecture 2: 'What is the Use of the Bible?' (Gresham College 18th Nov 1998)
5. Francis Thompson, from 'In No Strange Land' (poem written in the 1880's)

"Christ is the morning star who, when the darkness of this world is past, brings to his saints the promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day."

St Bede (c. 673-735) , 'Father of English Church History' (c.f. Revelation 22.16)

A PRAYER FOR EASTER DAY, from (Unitarian) 'Orders of Worship'

Eternal Creator of all things, who after the night's departure causest the day-star to arise, and by whose command the world is adorned with the splendour of light; lift up now the light of thy countenance upon us, that in thy light we may see light; light upon every hidden unworthiness; light upon every doubt and fear; light upon every worldly interest and every path of duty. Shine upon our ignorance as the light of knowledge; upon our perplexity as the light of faith; upon our sin as the light of purity; upon our sorrow as the light of joy; upon our broken hopes as the light of that immortal life into which thou callest us to enter, in fellowship with him who triumphed over death. Amen.

“What happened at Easter? I don’t know”! Denise and Graham Birks

The title of this article comes from a question asked of a Unitarian Christian congregation some years ago, followed by the answer of “I don’t know”! Given that the question was posed by the Minister leading the Easter Service, this may seem somewhat surprising, although it depends of course on what your understanding is of the Easter story.

We had been Unitarian Christians for some time, and had become used to a liberal interpretation of the Bible, but we had never heard an Easter service being started in that way, and it has to be said how refreshing it sounded. Going back many years, when we returned to church attendance after a long absence, we had gone along to an Easter service at an evangelical church which was a very different experience. The story of Easter was taken very literally, and of course concentrated on the need to believe that Jesus had died for our sins, the “price was paid”, and that his resurrection from the dead 3 days later was a sign of his triumph over death, and that “Jesus lives”.

Despite our surprise at this fundamental approach to the Bible and all its stories, which we struggled with, we found the Vicar to be a very powerful and convincing speaker, and indeed the congregation were very welcoming and committed to spreading the good news of the Gospel. We became Christians, and attended the church for many years. However there came a time when the literal interpretation of the Bible, and the constant reference to Christianity being the only way to salvation, became too much for us to defend in any debate about religion. So we were looking around for another church in which we perhaps might be more comfortable.

Eventually, on a day out in Shrewsbury, we came across the Unitarian Chapel in the town centre. It was closed on that day, but displayed outside was a summary of their beliefs and ethos. We felt inspired, and then eventually found a chapel near to where we lived, and where we have attended for many years. Which brings us back to that Easter Sunday, giving rise to our title.

So many questions about Easter are unanswerable. Was Jesus really dead when he was laid in the tomb? Who moved the stone? Who actually was the first to discover that the tomb was empty? (The Bible itself is not clear on this). Did Jesus really appear in person to his disciples later, and what does the Easter story mean to us, as Unitarian Christians?

The one consistent factor in all the stories was that this man was godly. Through his preaching and teaching and through his healing of people Jesus was experienced as being closer to God than anyone else his followers had ever known. But the pivotal event was clearly his death and what happened after it. Imagining ourselves back into those times we can see that to have your beloved leader and spiritual guide suddenly taken from you and killed would be the most terrible shock. You would be stunned; you would hide away for a time. But then, because there were many of you, the common will to survive would assert itself. You might find yourself saying, as bereaved people often do, “But I can still feel him with me. I hear his voice. He is guiding me. He is still here”. With many of you feeling and then saying that, the corporate reaction to loss would swell up into joy. The knowledge that communication with the one who has died has not ceased might well lead from “hearing” and “sensing” to reports of “seeing” Jesus.

The late Gerald Priestland, a BBC presenter and writer on religious matters, wrote of the stories in this way: “In John’s Gospel we read of Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Christ near the tomb. She does not

recognise him, mistaking him for the gardener. There is also the story of two followers of Jesus, on the road to Emmaus. They encounter a man who speaks to them of the scriptures. They spend all day with him before they recognise him as Jesus. These were people who knew Jesus well, and yet they did not recognise him. For Priestland these stories tell us that the Christ Spirit (the spirit of God) is in every man and every woman; we just have to learn to recognise it.

So how did Jesus “save us”? How was the cross redemptive? If we look at the life of Jesus, rather than the religion built around him, we can see that he demonstrates how we are to be reconciled to God. Not by his death, but by how he lived. If we mend our broken relationships with each other (love our neighbour), then we mend our relationship with the spirit of God. Jesus saved us, not by paying for our sins with his death, but by how he lived, freeing us - from prejudice, bigotry, hate and deceit, freeing us from religious attitudes and practices that follow from a belief in separation, or a belief in a “chosen people”. We believe he did not save us from the wrath of God - he saved us from the fear of God.

What place then, does Jesus have in an honest Christianity? Can those who cannot allow themselves to say that he is God still claim to be Christians? Who is Christ for you? Was he sent by God, to be sacrificed to pay for your sins? Or was he, through his understanding of God, and through God’s spirit, showing us and teaching us how to live our lives, and to care for each other? Are those teachings only for a select few, or are they for everyone, whatever religion they belong to? These are the real questions posed by the Easter story.

In his book, “Tomorrow’s Christian”, Adrian B. Smith suggests that the word Christ, “anointed one” has the broader meaning of “the Divine made manifest within creation”. In other words, whilst it encompasses Jesus, the “Christ” is also the Divine wherever it is made manifest, ie not only in Jesus. In Colossians 1:15 we read “The Christ is the visible image of the invisible God”, but also in Colossians 3:11 “Christ is all, Christ is within all”. We believe that the eternal spirit of God, blossoming fully within Jesus of Nazareth, was to show us how we should live and what we are capable of. It showed us what our relationship with God and each other should be like. The Christ LIFE is the spirit of God lived in a human person. The Christ within Jesus is the same Christ within us. The difference is one of degree, not of kind. Interestingly, Adrian B Smith is a Roman Catholic Priest who has served as a Consultor to the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity. He has written several books expressing liberal Christian views. He appears not to have been branded a heretic!



Denise and Graham Birks

Easter Sunday, 31 March 2013

[Mark 16.1-8] Jeff Gould

On delivering a chocolate Easter Egg to my godson earlier this week, I was reminded that the chief role of a godparent is to answer those difficult questions that the child's parents have suggested should be saved up until the next visit. So it was that a long list of theological queries was presented to me just as I handed over said egg and Easter card. Along with, 'How old was Jesus when he died?', and, 'Where did Jesus go before he rose on the third day?', was the equally weighty, 'Why did God flood the earth?' This last question was clearly the most important, because my godson's name is Noah. You begin to see the importance of getting the answers to these questions right. The poor boy might require years of therapy, should I offer puzzling or damaging information. My response was to explain that the story of Noah and the ark was just that, a story. The point of a story isn't whether it was grounded in **history**, but instead, if it is grounded in **experience**. Does it offer a moral that we can grasp as being true to our understanding of how life really works?

Throughout the season of Lent this year we have explored the classic stories of our Biblically-inspired faith, along with millions of other people, through the encouragement of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Today, on Easter Sunday, we arrive at the story that is fundamental to our identity as Christians, because it is the Resurrection, not the Christmas story that fuelled the first fourteen centuries of Christianity to spread the religion we have inherited. We can blame Saint Francis of Assisi for switching the focus to the stories of Jesus' conception and birth, but that's a sermon for another time.

Resurrection stories are not unique to Christianity. In ancient Egypt, the health of the nation's crops was dependent on the annual cycle of death and



resurrection of the Sun God, Osiris. The Incan and Mayan cultures of the New World nurtured the myth of a half-man/half-god who was sacrificed for the well-being of the people, and whose rebirth guaranteed good weather and successful harvests. The early Roman Empire sustained the Mithra Cult, which featured tales of a child whose miraculous conception, birth and life led to a sacrificial death, the benefits of which could be claimed by humans in a cycle of unending death and resurrection. These and many other stories demonstrate a human need to find meaning from apparent failure and death. Resurrection stories abound in virtually every culture and era. Ours is but one of many, but that does not diminish its power to inspire and to provoke discussion.

The story of the Resurrection as it is told in Mark's Gospel is a real cliff-hanger, because it ends without telling the reader whodunit. In fact, it ends before telling the reader what has been done! Mark, chapter 16, verses one to eight is agreed by most Biblical scholars not to have been the real ending to the story. Additional verses completed the tale, but they were lost or separated from the main text. What we do have from verses nine to twenty is the attempt on the part of someone writing at least one, if not two generations after the Gospel had been finished to tidy up the story by providing an ending. From time to time Hollywood commissions some unknown author to write a sequel to ***Gone With the Wind***, because so many people who read it feel it commands a continuation, or at least a more conclusive ending. Such was the case with Mark's Gospel. The early Church could not accept that it ended with the statement: ***'Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.'***

I rather like the open-ended termination of this Gospel, because the onus is then placed on us, the reader, to imagine what happens next. You know the old adage that radio is far better than television . . . because the pictures are better. We are required to work out for ourselves what this empty tomb might mean, and what light it sheds on our faith in

Jesus of Nazareth as someone whose life and teachings influence our own conduct and spirituality. It is the very untidiness that keeps the options open. And we like open options, don't we?

Each of us has our own personal stories of resurrection, and they are not to be belittled or diminished, merely because they are not filled with miraculous events or details of Biblical proportions. Each of us has known failure or catastrophe at some point in our lives, and everyone has had some experience of loss, especially through death.

What we celebrate today is a story that is universal to humankind, yet is unique to each person. The British poet, novelist and critic, G.K. Chesterton, once likened a Unitarian to a person climbing a gradual slope. As he mounts it, he discards one creedal garment after another: the infallible Bible, the infallible Church, the Incarnation, the Atonement . . . At last he stands on the topmost peak. Only a belief in God and immortality remains. Most Unitarians, Chesterton quipped, have the wit to stop there. If (and it is a very big 'if'), if they do stop there, what is meant by 'God' and what is meant by 'immortality' is as varied as the number of persons who hold such beliefs. The great number of resurrection stories we have inherited speaks to this wealth of interpretations. Ultimately, we share **one** story, a story of hopefulness, and Easter is that day in which one story of resurrections carries the weight of all our hopes. May we be risen indeed. **AMEN.**

Easter a poem by Andrew M Hill

We look, this Easter, to rise above
tombs of unreasonableness:

From the tomb which confines God
to supernatural orders
Let God rise respecting nature's
universal laws.

From the tomb of literalism and
exclusivism and fanaticism
Let rise imagination and
inclusiveness and co-operation.

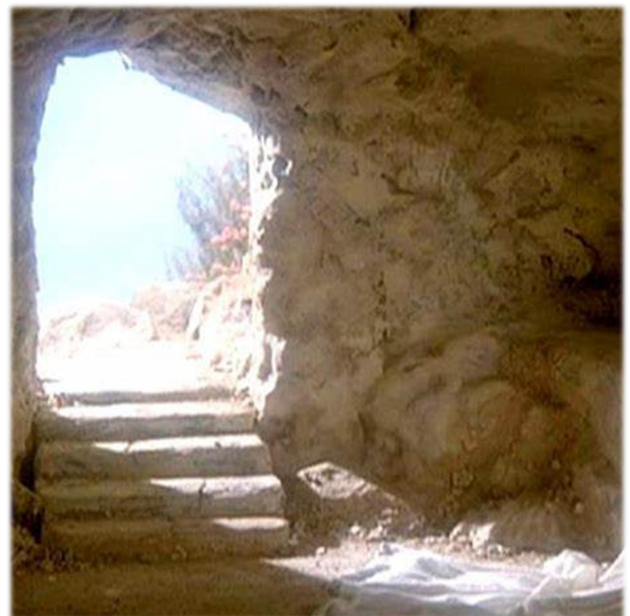
From the tomb where we hear
nothing but our own voices' echoes
Let rise voices reasoning together.

From the tomb which chains human
minds
Let rise minds which test and quest
without resting.

From the tomb of never ending sorrow
and despair
Let rise new beginnings and new hope.

From the tomb of conflict and war
Let rise listening, tolerant and
participatory government.
From the tomb where after-life claims
all life's meaning

Let rise new meanings for this life.
Most reasonable God warm our hearts
and may our hearts' fires be led by
reason.



Feedback about our UCA online Sunday services from some of our regular attenders

“These services mean a huge amount to me. As a practising Methodist (yes, Sundays are really busy for me) These services mean a huge amount to me. As a practising Methodist (yes, Sundays are really busy for me) I really value the fact that, because my maternal grandmother was a Unitarian *and* a Christian, I can also express my Unitarian heritage through my Christian belief. By worshipping virtually, we typically have 16 – 20 attendees from the UK and beyond, such as Brazil and Canada. Not only is it great to see everyone; I also value the sense of ‘togetherness’ we have, even though we’re geographically miles apart. In addition, the regular double-figure numbers of attendees creates a ‘critical mass’ of fellow Unitarian Christians who may otherwise feel atomised and alone if they belong to Unitarian congregations lacking a corporate Christian identity. I appreciate the UCA services because they provide us with a Unitarian Christian corporate identity from which I – and others - derive spiritual strength”. **Mari Leeks**

“Although I’m not a member of a Unitarian congregation, I get a lot out of coming to UCA services. Firstly, I’m hard of hearing and tend to feel anxious in social settings because of hearing loss. I also find it impossible to follow services in Churches or Chapels (the loop system never seems to work!) The UCA have kindly enabled subtitles on their online services, so I’m able to follow everything being said, and I’m tremendously grateful for that. I don’t feel “on the outside” as I do in other worship environments. Secondly, I love the fact that I can benefit from Unitarian values of open mindedness and social responsibility found in any Unitarian congregation, but also know that the people I’m gathered with identify as “Christian” as I do. We all have different interpretations of what the word “Christian” means and that’s a good thing - it brings diversity and colour to the services.” **Pete Shastri**

“I belong to a Unitarian chapel that is very diverse in its theology and acknowledges its Christian heritage on occasion within the wider spiritual experience. Usually, it’s a narrow Western European Christian experience that is referred to. I appreciate the Sunday UCA services because it celebrates the variety within Christian worship. It allows me to openly engage with a worship experience without having to constantly explain my Unitarian Christian perspective. I find these Sunday evening services more open, free, in using a recognisable Christian lexicon to express spiritual concepts - and thus more engaging at a personal level” **Jacky Woodman**

“I enjoy the zoom services. It’s convenient as I don’t drive. I sometimes find big services in church overwhelming. I didn’t want to go to church due to covid. The zoom meetings are friendly and calming and nourish my soul. I can sit, relaxed with a cup of tea. As an Anglican - I feel welcome. It’s inclusive. The friendly chat at the end is good. Thank you for these types of service, it’s so good for me.” **Rachel Curtis**

I have been attending the UCA Sunday worship online since March 2022, I attended by default as one of our congregation members was leading a Sunday service and I wanted to give him some moral support, and I’ve continued attending regularly since. So why do I keep attending? I like the benefit of not having to travel. If I’m running late, I can connect by my phone wherever I am, even on holiday or away from home. One week I was delayed by traffic and just turned off my camera phone (husband was driving) and watched most of the service on the M56! Over summer I joined from my garden. We don’t have a minister at our chapel and we only meet the first and third Sundays of the month with lay leaders taking the services. For me it is very much about connection, but also the diversity each Sunday service brings and the person leading the service brings their own interpretation. By attending the online UCA worship it has also given me a greater understanding of the Christian faith – Easter this year was a very different experience with Stephen Lingwood leading on prayers and reflection, it enhanced the meaning behind Good Friday and Easter Sunday. I stumbled into the Unitarian church a few years ago. Previously my only experience was through school. I never felt drawn to attend the local Church of England where I live, and I have a more spiritual background. The timing is ideal. I know I can leave at the end but with the option to stay and talk. If I am having a ‘bad hair day’ I can just leave the camera off, and on a plus note it gets me out of making the Sunday tea!! I took up the opportunity to take up membership with the UCA. I feel a great warmth and very welcomed by all, without any additional pressure to attend further groups. It is lovely to put a name to a face. I also appreciate the time everyone gives with the technical support or to lead a service. I hope the UCA Sunday worship continues. If I had not attended that very first time I would have missed out on so much! **Lesley Lewis**

As a co-opted UCA officer with responsibility for coordinating the rota for our online worship, I’d encourage those who’ve not yet zoomed in, to give it a try – we would love to see you! We are online every Sunday (God willing) 5.45 for a 6pm start. Services last around 40 minutes and are followed by an optional time of fellowship:

<https://www.unitarianchristian.org.uk/liveworship> And if you are a UCA member and would be willing to lead an occasional service or help with the Zoom – please be in touch: revsheenagabriel@gmail.com **Sheena Gabriel**

FROM THE TRADITION: CLASSIC UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS

Introduction by Alex Bradley

Rev Dr Alfred Hall was a prominent Unitarian minister and writer in the first half of the twentieth century. This extract is taken from his book, 'The Beliefs of a Unitarian', published in 1932. It is written from a broadly Christian viewpoint and assumes that the reader will have a or at least a passing acquaintance with basic Christian teachings, an assumption that is perhaps less likely to be the case, than it was 90 years ago, and Unitarianism has become more pluralistic and less firmly rooted in the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, despite its age, it often still serves as a good introduction to Unitarianism in general and Unitarian Christianity in particular. At first glance the book's title might seem to run counter to the Unitarian tenet of individual freedom of belief, but the author assures his readers in the Preface, "I speak solely for myself, and I should regret if any sentence I have written should be taken as a dogmatic utterance. Unitarians believe that the basis of Church life should be undogmatic." This statement is vitally important as many Unitarians from opposite ends of the theological spectrum, may disagree, perhaps strongly, with some, perhaps even most, of his opinions. It is this freedom of individual belief that is integral to Unitarianism, in its modern form at least.

Chapter 27 The Resurrection of Jesus

Unitarians believe that *life is continuous*, that the soul never dies, and that consequently there can be no resurrection in the ordinary sense. Death is an experience in the process of eternal life. *Unitarians do not believe in the resurrection of the body.*

1 THE GOSPEL RECORDS It is extremely difficult, not only to discover the truth contained in the records of the resurrection, but even to find out the beliefs of the early disciples of Jesus concerning it. In the 'Encyclopaedia Biblica', Professor Schmiedel considers the contradictions in the Gospels and the Epistles of St Paul under twenty-two separate heads, and these contradictions are of a most serious character. According to *John*, the physical body was raised from the dead, and the doubt of Thomas was removed with the words 'Reach hither thy finger, and see my hands.' In the same Gospel we are told that the body entered a room, when the doors were closed. According to *Luke*, Jesus ate fish after his death, and in the same narrative, it is stated that his appearance was so changed that two disciples, on their way to Emmaus, did not recognize him. According to *Matthew* and *Mark* the revelations were made in Galilee, whereas *Luke* records that the disciples tarried in Jerusalem. Dr Drummond calls attention to some important omissions from the narrative of Paul, who was the first writer on the subject: 'Paul says nothing of the empty grave; nothing of an appearance to the women; nothing of the old wounded body; nothing of eating and drinking; nothing of intercourse and conversation with the apostles; nothing of a bodily ascension.' But Paul says, 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God'. Evidently *the legendary element in the Gospels grew as time proceeded.*

2 DIFFERENT THEORIES There is one point in which the narratives do agree and that is that *Jesus was seen*. What took place? Various theories have been put forward, some of which we may now consider.

a) One explanation is that the body revived while in the tomb. This is unsatisfactory, because the disciples based much of their teaching on the belief that Jesus did actually die on the cross, and their enemies often taunted them with this fact.

b) The idea that the disciples stole the body, and then spread reports concerning the resurrection, must be rejected. They were not the class of men to stoop to a deception of this character. The statement in *Matthew* that the Pharisees bribed the guard to say that while they slumbered the disciples came and stole the body, cannot be accepted. It was the last confession a Roman soldier would make: death was the penalty for being asleep on duty.

c) Explanations, such as that the appearance was entirely subjective and the disciples were the victims of hallucination, create more difficulties that they remove. One great obstacle, however, in the way of accepting a bodily resurrection is that the appearances were to the immediate friends of Jesus, and, except in the case of Paul, not to his enemies, who would surely have been convinced, had the crucified Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst and rebuked them again for their errors.

d) John Locke, being accused of heresy, owing to his denial of the resurrection of the body, made an exhaustive study of the New Testament teaching on the subject. He found that while mention was made of 'the resurrection of the dead', no reference was made to the 'resurrection of the same body.' If that is so, it cannot be accepted as scriptural doctrine. But it early became a doctrine of the Church, which was engaged in attacking the Docetic heresy that the body of Jesus was only a semblance of a body and that a spirit so pure could not have had contact with so base a thing as matter. In its reaction against this teaching, the Church went to extremes and asserted not only the reality of the body of Jesus, but the endurance and resurrection of the bodies of all men.

e) The doctrine of bodily resurrection is rejected today because of the teaching of medical science that the particles which compose the human body are completely changed in the course of a few years. As Dr Harvey Goodwin, a former Bishop of Carlisle, said, 'The notion of particle being joined to the particle so as to re-form a certain body, involves an impossibility, because the same particle may have belonged to a thousand different bodies and may be as rightly claimed by one as the other'.

f) Many Unitarians keep an open mind and hold that psychical research or the science of psychology may finally explain the difficulties which surround the records of the resurrection. The narratives seem to indicate that something of surpassing importance did occur after the death of Jesus, and it may be that in these accounts we have a confused statement of a natural phenomenon.

Already we are beginning to think, as Professor Lake says, that 'it is by no means certain that even our present life is always and absolutely circumscribed by space and time. On one side of our nature it is; but is there not also a side which is already at times in conscious communion with something which transcends those limits?' We feel that the deepest communion between the living is not by the way of speech. May it not be that the souls of those who reach the heights of love are joined by invisible bonds, and that neither time, nor space nor death can absolutely separate them?

UCA at the Annual Meeting April 2023 Catherine Fozard

This year the Unitarian Christian Association will be attending the General Assembly Annual Meeting at Staverton Park near Daventry. There will be a stall with UCA merchandise and publicity about the online worship, Bible discussion group and the charity we are supporting this year CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide)



On Wednesday April 5 at 3.20pm the UCA will be hosting an event. A speaker from our designated charity CSW will give a presentation about the work of the charity. If you are attending the Annual Meeting please come along if you are able and bring your friends.

UCA AGM 2023—Hinckley Leicestershire

Our Annual General Meeting this year was at Hinckley as guests of Hinckley Unitarians in their historic and beautiful Great Meeting chapel. Although the railway strikes meant that our numbers were diminished, those who attended in person and on line were able to hear an excellent service by Robin Hanford and take part in our AGM, which took place afterwards. It also happened to be the birthday of our Chair, Jean Bradley, who was presented with a lovely bouquet of flowers from all of us.

After the AGM Cathy Fozard gave a presentation on the work of the charity we are fundraising for this year, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), who campaign for the rights of people of all faiths.

In their own words, “Our vision is a world free from religious persecution, where everyone can practise a religion or belief of their choice”. After the presentation, those lucky enough to be present in person were able to enjoy a delicious afternoon tea.

We are grateful to all those who made the day possible: to Rob Oulton for his invaluable technical support which made the hybrid meeting possible, to the Hinckley congregation for their warm welcome, and to Cathy Fozard for all her work in organising the event.



Robin Hanford—Minister at Hinckley



Rob Oulton—technical advisor



Members attending the AGM

CSW everyone
free to believe



Giulio Paletta/CSW

**OUR VISION IS A WORLD
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RELIGION OR BELIEF FREELY.**

www.csw.org.uk

unitarianchristian.org.uk

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Join us for online worship and fellowship each Sunday at 6pm.

Go to unitarianchristian.org.uk/liveworship