NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Feast of Fools

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April 1, 2018

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We live in the age of the image. More and more, people are bypassing the Facebook status or tweet for the Instagram photo. Even more popular, the Snapchat or Instagram story both let the user post "moments," short videos of moving images which disappear within twenty four hours. These stories give us a glimpse into each other's daily lives, often documenting mundane moments which fly by without any particular fanfare. In his book After Virtue, philosopher Alasdair MacIntire describes humans as the "storytelling animal." Stories, he proposed, answer the question: "What are we doing?" Writing in the early 80s, MacIntire suggested that while the stories of our lives are often only told after we die, as in our obituaries, they are in fact lived before they are told.

Today, we have an unprecedented ability to tell our stories to one another in real time, as they are lived in real time. On Instagram, I can see which of my friends are celebrating Passover with holiday tables dressed with oranges and olives. I can see them serving that perfect-looking fluffy matzo ball soup. Others are dressing their kids in pastels and dyeing or hunting for eggs.

As a culture we have become accustomed to telling our stories in the language of the visual. In many ways, technology's access to visual storytelling connects us to an ancient past in which the image, by necessity and by design, was the central mode of communication. In Judeo-Christian religious history, word and image have been inextricably connected. Before there was the word, there was the image, and before that, the story. Before the Bible was ascribed to the page and canonized, the image communicated the essential stories of the Old and New Testament. Literacy was largely held by cultural elites and religious authority. Stained glass windows depicting biblical scenes are perhaps the most familiar Christian images of the European western church, second only to the icons of the Eastern Orthodox church.

Perhaps no visual image has invited so much interpretation throughout history as the image of Jesus. As the central figure of the Christian story, the quest to find the authentic image of Jesus has been a timeless pursuit of historians, archaeologists and theologians, each with their different set of tools.

In Matthew Chapter 16 of the New Testament, which tells of Jesus' ministry in Cesarea Phillipi, located at the base of Mt. Hermon in modern day territory of Golan Heights, he asks the following of his disciples:

> *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"*
>
> *They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*
>
> *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*
>
> *Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, (meaning the anointed, or chosen one) the Son of the living God."*

"Who do you say I am?" has proved a persistent question one over time. For the liberal religious congregations like ours, we believe not in a creedal understanding of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but are free to bring our own interpretation without pressure or doctrinal constraint. In a sense, Jesus can become who we say he is. We understand Jesus through the lens of scholarship and history, and our own religious tradition. In the visual age of the image, our understanding of Jesus is shaped by both saying, and seeing.

Perhaps our best informant in "seeing" Jesus has been through the arts. You might remember the controversial image of Jesus created by the Canadian visual artist Timothy Schmaltz. Inspired by the text from Matthew:

> *"As you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me,"*

Schmaltz created a series of bronze statues depicting Jesus as a homeless man sleeping on a park bench. The artist offered the bench to be installed outside of churches like a regular park bench, with room for others to sit at the feet of the homeless Jesus, bone thin and wrapped in a shabby blanket. The artist offered the first cast to St. Patrick's cathedral in New York City, where homeless people slept on steps of the church nightly and hung out during the day. Ironically, St. Patrick's declined the installation, as did St. Michael's cathedral in Toronto, saying "appreciation was not unanimous."

Eventually, the sculpture did find an appreciator and was installed at St. Albans Episcopal Church in Davidson, North Carolina. The pastor of the church, Reverend David Buck, said in an interview in 2013 that it was a "Bible lesson for those used to seeing Jesus depicted in traditional religious art as the Christ of glory, enthroned in finery. We believe that that's not the kind of life Jesus had. He was, in essence, a homeless person." The statue now is installed outside over a dozen prominent houses of worship in the US, Canada, Ireland, and, most famously, the Vatican.

And then of course there are the images of Jesus seen on the stage and screen. Some of most provocative images of Jesus have been featured in Broadway productions. There was *Godspell*, Stephen Schwartz' 1970 "rock opera" which was inspired by Harvard theologian Harvey Cox's book *Feast of Fools.* In *Godspell*, Jesus is depicted with a clown face, red suspenders and a superman tee shirt. During Medieval European times, the "Feast of Fools" roasted the church in an act of street theater featuring playful caricature, mocking the hypocrisy of corrupt government and church. The practice was banned by religious authorities but taken up in Cox's study of this practice to discover a more playful, joyful Jesus.

In his book, Cox begins with the same question "Who do you say that I am?" He writes:

> *To Christ's pointed question of Peter (…) We can no longer conscientiously spout the conventional replies. So we clothe Christ in a clown suit, and that way we express many things at once: our doubts, our disillusionment, our fascination, our ironic hope.*

In my favorite Broadway show, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Jesus takes on a similarly playful image of a magnetic, counter-cultural, guru figure with a growing following of underground misfits, marginalized and fame-seeking wannabes. This show seems to invite unconventional casting. For example, my high school church performance had an all-female leading cast, with Jesus, Pilate, and Judas all played by teenage girls. Can you guess which role I played? Hint, I wasn't the good guy. As a young, punk rock Judas, I dressed up in a camo shirt, studded collar and red lipstick to my female costar's Jesus in linens and Birkenstocks.

Tonight, the image of Jesus as "Superstar" is resurrected with a live performance on primetime television. The incarnation of the play casts R&B artist John Legend as Jesus, giving us a new image for our times: Jesus as a black man, executed by the state for his resistance to an unjust social order. Viewers tonight can't help but see this depiction of Jesus against the backdrop of the black lives matter movement and the ongoing reality of police killings.

These artistic images of the person of Jesus expand our view of his humanity, his flaws and foibles, desires and doubts. They challenge us to answer that question Jesus posed to his disciples. "Who do you say I am?" Can we see a homeless person living in a tent on the street under the freeway? Can we see Jesus in Stephon Clark, the latest in the long line of unarmed young black man killed by the police? Can we see Jesus in the foolish political satire of Kate McKinnon or Alec Baldwin on Saturday Night Live, or even the provocative humor of Trevor Noah or John Oliver?

As religious liberals, we need these images of Jesus to help us make meaning of a Christian tradition we can otherwise feel distant from. Singing along to "I don't know how to love him," despite our ambivalence, we might feel a new connection with a human and flawed Jesus, disconnected from the "muscular" conservative Christianity which dominates our American landscape and threatens to upend the civil rights progress we cherish.

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has dedicated his life to the critical reading of the bible, seeking an authentic interpretation of Jesus through the "matrix" of the church's history of conquest and imperialism. In his new book *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision*, he proposes that our largely visual culture now demands a more critical practice of visual interpretation. In a recent interview he said: "I think if we are unable to decode, or deconstruct if you will, images, then we have lost one of our human faculties."

In his new book, he begins with the premise that the images of Jesus we know largely have their basis in text, except for one, the moment of Easter. From the biblical texts, we can imagine Jesus' ministry and the violence of his crucifixion. We can imagine him placed in a tomb. We can even imagine the women coming to the tomb on Easter Sunday. The "Resurrection" Easter text from Mark actually emphasizes the word "see" or "saw" over and over again:

> *When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. [2] Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb [3]and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" [4]But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.[5] As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. [6]"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. [7]But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' "*

Days later his disciples claimed they saw him walking and talking. But what happened in between? What was that moment of the resurrection like? As it turned out in Crossan's probe, no biblical author had adequately described this moment of the Easter story. Crossan and his wife traveled extensively across Europe, the Middle East and Asia searching for what is absent in text-- images that might instead tell the story of the resurrection event, one so central and yet so mysterious in Christianity.

Remarkably, they discovered two different sets of images of the resurrection event. First, they found the image you might expect, the predicted he would find from his experience growing up and practicing with Western Christianity:

> *The first direct image of the Resurrection appeared by the year 400. This is what is called the individual resurrection tradition, because it focuses on Christ alone. It imagines Christ rising from an empty tomb in splendid, triumphant, and transcendent majesty, but also in splendid, triumphant, and transcendent isolation.*

The second direct Resurrection image, from Western Christianity, was created by the year 700. This is what is called the universal resurrection tradition because, instead of arising alone, Christ raises all of humanity with him. He reaches out toward Adam and Eve, the biblical parents and symbols for humanity itself, raises them up, and leads them out of Hades, the prison of death.

Traveling through the Middle East and Asia, Turkey and Egypt, the Crossans saw the second resurrection image over and over again. They saw depictions of Jesus carrying the dead on his back, standing side by side and linking hands with ancestors from the Hebrew Bible and John the Baptist. "What does it mean, Crossan asks, "whether or not it is credible, to depict Christ's Resurrection as humanity's liberation from death—all humanity, past, present, and future?"

Challenging the Western image of the solo Christ, chosen one, rising from the empty tomb in defeat of his own death, Crossan goes on to call this second Eastern tradition of resurrection images a depiction of "God's peace and reconciliation commission."

How might this image of a Universalist resurrection inform our faith as liberal religious people? In light of this new image of the resurrection, how might we answer the question "Who do you say I am?" How might it change how we tell the story of Easter? The poet Madeline Gleason once wrote: "We have all seen death. Show us the resurrection." On this glorious Easter morning, this feast of feasts, let our spirits be free to seek the meaning we need to make mysterious event which forever shaped religion. What if we are the resurrected community, the visual sign of God's truth and reconciliation? Might we look around and see evidence of resurrection all around us. The rising up of intersectional movements for justice which link the arms of younger and older generations across race and class. The rising up of kindness within our beloved community as we care for one another in our times of need and reminds one another that here we will be remembered. The call to say the names of the dead as partners with us in the quest for justice. This Easter morning, especially when it feels foolish, let us hold fast to Universalist vision of a life abundant in spite of the presence of death, a love abundant in spite of the presence of fear. May this be our resurrection promise and our prayer.

Happy Easter and Amen