

When Jesus Woke

A sermon for Easter Sunday 2024

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Unity Church – Unitarian

If there's one question I've wrestled with every Easter morning it's this one: What really happened? I often feel like I'm among those disciples in the passage we just heard, walking together towards the village of Emmaus, talking about Jesus, but feeling in my heart of hearts that there is only one thing we can know for sure – that Jesus is dead. That was indisputable because the disciples had all seen his death with their own eyes. And, it was hard enough to watch their friend die, but with him had also died the dreams of the world that Jesus preached – a world where the last shall be first, and the first last; where the promise of a coming Messiah that would overturn the oppressions of Empire would at last be fulfilled. That dream had been so real in their minds and hearts, but the crucifixion was a rude awakening. So now what? All we have left is our stories about Jesus that we can tell to strangers, strangers like this guy who's just joined us on the road to Emmaus. Hey, who is this guy anyway? Is he a friend of yours?

This Gospel story has always riled me up! What is wrong these people? Why can't they recognize the person they have spent the last three years with – travelling, eating, drinking, sleeping together – why can they not recognize him? It makes me feel like I want to shout "Wake Up! You fools! It's Jesus walking with you, not some stranger!"

But when I calm down, I recognize I've got to give the disciples a break, because I have the same problem they do. Maybe you do as well! I call it the "Hidden in Plain Sight" problem. You know what I mean? Where are my keys! I can't find my keys! My husband will point to the coffee table – you mean those right there? Why couldn't I see what was right in front of me? It's usually because I have such a strong picture in my mind of where something is *supposed* to be – that I can't see where it *really* is. In many ways, that's what Jesus' ministry was all about, helping people to see what was hidden in plain sight: the cruelties of Empire; the ways in which the religious authorities and Law had ceased to serve human needs; all the ways that principalities and powers of the time were death-dealing instead of life-affirming.

I also suspect another reason for why the disciples could not see him. It's grief. Grief can take many forms, but one of those forms is denial. Not denial about death, but an emotional resistance to the new reality. You're trying to bridge two worlds – the world with your beloved in it – and the one that is now forever without them. When we're grieving, and particularly when that loss has been traumatic – you try to find ways to get back to some sense of normalcy. One of the ways we do that is to tell stories. Here at Unity when we offer memorial services, we solicit those stories in collage of voices; all parts of a bigger picture of a person's life story.

So it was natural and understandable that those disciples on that dusty road would be telling stories about Jesus as a way of keeping him alive. "Hey," says Cleopas, "You remember the time

we all went out on Lake Galilee for a sail” “Yeah,” says Peter. “I remember that Jesus fell fast asleep in the boat, and then that wind and rainstorm came up – you remember?” “How could I forget? It was so bad the boat was filling up with water -and yet, Jesus kept on sleeping. So we finally had to try waking him up and I remember you yelled at him! What’d you say?” Peter looks really uncomfortable as he remembered his words: “I said, master, do you not care that we are perishing?” And then what happened? When Jesus finally woke, what did he say?

Well, I’ll tell you the answer to that in a few minutes, but first let’s notice something about the different ways I’ve already been using different variations on a particular infamous word: “woke”. It’s a word we hear a lot these days, mostly in its hijacked form from the American far right, in laws coming out of red states that limit civil rights and academic freedoms. But let’s take that word “woke” apart and look at all its different forms.

A moment ago I mentioned the disciples had a “rude awakening” from a beautiful dream of a world that Jesus was preaching. That sudden transition from a world you’re dreaming about to a life you’re really living is one way to understand being woken up.

I’ve also in my story about the disciples on the road to Emmaus told you I feel like yelling at them “Wake Up”. See what’s right in front of you! When you “wake up” to a different reality you see something you hadn’t noticed before because your attention was distracted, or because you had a strong picture in your mind of something that you thought was one way, but turns out to be another.

Many religions talk about the metaphorical meaning of being woke, especially Buddhism. When Buddha gets asked whether he should be understood as a god or a wizard, he answer back only three words: “I am awake”. And since this is a major religious holiday in the Christian tradition, I also have to mention that the resurrection story at the heart of Easter was grafted onto the season of spring celebrations from older religious traditions. It’s what many Unitarian Universalists prefer to celebrate at Easter – nature’s resurrections, singing different words to the tune and hymn we will share later, words written by the Transcendentalist poet Samuel Longfellow under the title “Lo the Earth Awakes Again”.

Jesus himself used the language of waking up in his parables and teaching stories. Jesus’s parable of the five wise and foolish bridesmaids ends with his admonition: “Keep awake! You know neither the day nor the hour.” He’s approached by a distraught leader of the synagogue who’s daughter is dead. Jesus says “no, she’s only sleeping. Little girl, wake up!”

In the book of Mark, Jesus tells us to stay awake, be on guard, stay alert! So, who knows, if Jesus were to come back right now with a message in today’s vernacular it’s possible that this message might be: “Stay Woke!”

But that isn’t what Jesus said when the disciples woke him up in the middle of a storm on the Sea of Galilee according to the book of Mark. Here’s what he did say “Why are you afraid, O ye of little faith?” And what happened next is that the storm that had threatened to engulf them was calmed.

Now some people take this story literally and say Jesus had the power to control the wind and the rain. Others, like me, think that the story is a metaphor for their swirling fears of being overwhelmed by forces they could not control. And that the faith that Jesus was referring to was not in him as a miracle worker, but a faith in themselves, that his disciples would have the power to survive those things that threaten to overwhelm them.

Heaven knows there are plenty of storms out there among us all today that threaten to overwhelm us. I don't need to give you the usual list – you've heard it all before – but I will say that one of the most insidious storms is that segment of American culture that wants to keep us all asleep, injected with dreamy mythologies of a glorious past, an American once great but gone with the wind, and that can and should be reclaimed.

These forces of Christian nationalism aligned with the resurgent right wing of American politics movements are telling us that engaging with diversity, equity and inclusion in our schools and workplaces is divisive; that teaching our children the truth about American history is damaging. They want to tell us soothing bedtime stories, lulling us into a false sense of security.

One story that's told during Holy Week is not soothing – but disturbing. It's when Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed that he might have faith enough to sustain him through the terrors that awaited him. But the one thing he was counting on was that his friends, his disciples, would stay with him – would be his allies – and stay awake with during this dark night. But as the story goes, they couldn't. Three times he begs them to stay awake with him and three times they fall into a deep stupor. Jesus started a Revolution of Love and Inclusion, but his disciples slept through the hardest part.

In 1966, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King delivered the Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly and his words then are eerily prescient for us today. His title was “Don't Sleep Through the Revolution.” His main message to the group of Unitarian Universalists who were struggling to discern their place in the Civil Rights Movement was a wakeup call to action. He said “The question is what do we do when we find ourselves in such a period?”

The church has a great responsibility because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society. It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary.” And then he goes to explore what the church needs to do to stay awake through the revolution. King insists that liberals continue to affirm the essential immortality of segregation; in today's words, he would certainly frame it as “white supremacy culture”. He rejects the belief in the superiority of one race over another. And he enjoins the church to engage in strong social justice and social action programs-- to disrupt the status quo. Stay Awake! King tells us – a powerful message then and now.

I think if he was resurrected today, Jesus would have no problem telling us all to “Stay Awake! To Stay Woke”. He would know where that use of the word “woke” first came from – from a song by the folk and blues singer Lead Belly, a song about the Scottsboro Boys – eight

black teenagers wrongly accused and imprisoned for crimes they did not commit. He warns his listeners to be careful when travelling through the south “Just stay woke, keep your eyes open,” he sings. It’s a call to black people to be vigilant about the realities of racism.

I appreciate knowing about this song, but I also like this modern definition of staying woke from the conservative columnist David Brooks: “to be woke is to be radically aware and justifiably paranoid. It is to be cognizant of the rot pervading the power structures.”

I think that the rot in the power structures Brooks is talking about that we have to wake up to and be suspicious of this country’s history of racialized capitalism; the reality of systemic and institutional racism and the pervasiveness of white privilege; and the fact that gender based discriminations of all kinds sustain and support these structures of power

As we look upon ourselves in this time and place in history – what is the storm that we are facing now? The storm that is on our horizon is being stirred up by the same people who are legislating against wokeness, who have successfully co-opted that word in their campaign to reassure Americans that slavery wasn’t so bad, that drag queens are an abomination, that antisemitism and anti-Asian discrimination doesn’t exist, and that their policies will prevent the poisoning of the blood of the real Americans, the white ones. These are the first signs of a bigger storm that we should see very clearly for what it is and call it by name - it’s called fascism and we cannot sleep through that storm or lose faith in our own strength to stand up to it.

I know – it’s Easter Sunday, and I’m sure some of you came today to find hope in the coming glories of Spring instead of hope for ending fascism. But Jesus was a prophet challenging Empire, not an Easter bunny, and his words still challenge us today, not only his encouragement to set aside fear and embrace faith in each other, but also his question: “Can you not discern the signs of the times?” Jason Stanley, author of “How Fascism Works” has given us many signs we should be looking for in the rhetoric from the right during the upcoming election season. Here are some of them:

“Fascists are always telling a story about a glorious past that’s been lost and they tap into this nostalgia.”, says Stanley

Fascism routinely creates alternative realities that have no basis in fact. Stanley writes: “authoritarians undermine what we know to be true and convince the population that (a) everyone is lying and (b) the lies don’t matter.”

And fascism preaches victimhood. “Fascists tell people that equality is victimizing them by making them lose their rightful place in power. Therefore, fascists seek to eliminate both democratic processes and marginalized communities to return to an often fictitious and glorified past where their power reigned unchecked.”

These – and many others on Stanley’s list– are the signs of a nation that is in desperate need of people not be lulled to sleep with the belief that democracy cannot fail. What is needed now is a Gospel moment like when the disciples’ eyes were opened and they said to each other

“were not our hearts burning with us while he was opening the scripture to us?” In today’s words, were we not moved when we remembered the dream of Beloved Community? Did our despair not turn to a renewal of our faith in this dream that is not dead – but it’s up to us to make it real?

Here's some good news to remember on this Easter Sunday – that this custom and tradition of celebrating Easter began with failure! Not the failure of Jesus, despite his execution and the scattering of his followers. No, Easter began to be celebrated with the failure of Empire! Despite all their efforts to suppress the Jesus story – to silence the movement that his preaching started – Empire failed. We celebrate Easter today because although the authorities tried their best to keep that body down in its grave, they could not. They failed miserably. They thought that by killing a man, they could also kill this movement that began. They thought that by shutting him up in a tomb/grave that those who were inspired by him would simply go away. But three centuries later, his movement took over the Empire when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. And here we are, still talking about Jesus, standing atop the ruins of empires long gone.

Those in charge back then were deeply threatened by the idea of Jesus’ resurrection but they could not grasp what the reality of resurrection really meant.

And I’m here to tell you that all of us together have that same power that the early Christian community found – that you have the power inside of you to awaken your faith in Beloved Community and to disturb the sleep of a catatonic culture.

I’m here to tell you have the power to wake the sleeping giant of democracy.

I’m here to tell you that the next time someone throws out wokeness at you intending it to be an insult, you turn over the tables in the temples of fear and fascism, you say “yes, I’m woke, but more than that – I’m awake and I want you to be awake too!

So let’s wake up to this Easter to the real Resurrection Message!

Wake up to Beloved Community! Stay awake! Stay Woke!

Rise up with me now – rise up in celebration and song – rise up and sing with me our closing hymn “Jesus Christ is Risen today!”