

# "DEATH, FORGIVENESS, LOVE AND BIG JOY"

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Reading: "Easter Exultet" by James Broughton

Shake out your qualms.  
Shake up your dreams.  
Deepen your roots.  
Extend your branches.  
Trust deep water  
and head for the open,  
even if your vision  
shipwrecks you.  
Quit your addiction  
to sneer and complain.  
Open a lookout.  
Dance on a brink.  
Run with your wildfire.  
You are closer to glory  
leaping an abyss  
than upholstering a rut.  
Not dawdling.  
Not doubting.  
Intrepid all the way  
Walk toward clarity.  
At every crossroad  
Be prepared  
to bump into wonder.  
Only love prevails.  
En route to disaster  
insist on canticles.  
Lift your ineffable  
out of the mundane.  
Nothing perishes;  
nothing survives;  
everything transforms!  
Honeymoon with Big Joy!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sparkpeople.com/mypage\\_public\\_journal\\_individual.asp?blog\\_id=4823124](http://www.sparkpeople.com/mypage_public_journal_individual.asp?blog_id=4823124).

## Sermon

The late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church said that if you only come to one service a year, make it Easter. Not Christmas.

This is counter-intuitive advice for Unitarian Universalists. In my experience, Christmas is pretty easy for most UUs to get excited about. There's often--not always--good memories of Christmas from our childhoods, it's a feel-good holiday with lots of fun trimmings, and it's a great story about babies and a stable and shepherds and wisemen.

Easter is far trickier terrain for Unitarian Universalists. Gruesome crucifixion, followers who betray or abandon their beloved leader, and most difficult of all for many of us, a resurrection. Many of us struggle with this story and holiday. As a result, many Unitarian Universalists skip over most of this difficult stuff and instead focus on Easter as a symbol of the new life that abounds in springtime. Daffodils, chicks, eggs: let's make it another feel-good holiday, like Christmas. Others of us just stay away from our UU congregation on Easter--a choice I have been unable to make for all but one of the last 25 Easters. (For the curious: I wasn't here during my sabbatical in 1996.)

Easter is the hardest holiday for me as a Unitarian Universalist minister. A lot of you ordinarily come into the Fellowship each week with a fair amount of baggage from your pasts. Once in awhile, I visualize it all piled around us in here. But on Easter, we can't fit all the baggage in this room. It's filled the lobby, the Fellowship Hall, the Legacy Room, and we've rented storage space for the weekend at nearby Prince of Peace Lutheran Church.

Given all this, my Easter strategy has been to offer variety. Some years I've done a sermon focusing very much on the story of Jesus's death and resurrection. Some years I've focused on bunnies and flowers. One year the focus was chocolate, and another year we did Tai chi. Sometimes it's an all-ages service; some years it's not. A few years we have even sung "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today;" most years we don't. I wouldn't say that I've gotten a ton more flack on Easter than other services, but each year I have a vague feeling that the service missed the mark for a larger number than usual. Next Easter will not be a time when I'll wax nostalgic for my life as a Unitarian Universalist parish minister.

I don't think my experience of doing Easter services is unusual for UU ministers. So why in the world does Forest Church say that Easter is the service to come to if you're coming to only one all year? What was in the jelly beans he was eating?

Here's how he explains it: "Christmas has birth. But Easter has death and rebirth. Birth is essential, but for our spiritual journey death and rebirth are far more consequential."<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to say that of course flowers are nice. So are jelly beans and chicks. But, he writes:

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Forest Church come from his book *Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. 69-74.

Easter is not about flowers. Yes, flowers are beautiful for a brief season and then languish and die, just like we do. But then they cast their seeds to the wind, seeds which crack open, springing to new life from the husk of death. It's a pretty metaphor. There's only one problem with it. We are not flowers. And Easter is about us.

So what is Easter about? Church says that Easter is about "the spiritual rebirth of Jesus's followers,"—NOT about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And, he writes, this is "a saving transformation as available to us today as it was to his disciples so very long ago."

What does he mean by this? Think of the contour of the story for Jesus's followers. On Palm Sunday, Jesus enters triumphantly into Jerusalem. His followers are brimming with such pride and hope: he really is the Messiah! A new era marked by justice and mercy and inclusion—the cornerstones of his teachings—is about to dawn!

Within a week, it all comes crashing down. One of his beloved followers betrays Jesus. Their leader is arrested, humiliated, tortured, subjected to a sham trial, condemned, and executed in a breathtakingly cruel way. And they see or hear about how Jesus on the cross struggled—like a human and not like some impervious, divine entity. He cries out, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" "I thirst!" He isn't Superman on the cross; he is a vulnerable, suffering, lonely, abandoned human being. Some triumphant new age!

This is the not the ending his followers foresaw a week earlier.

So they scatter in terror. Would they be next to suffer the same horrible, cruel fate? Peter, one of his most faithful followers, denies he knows Jesus three different times. Scattered and in hiding, Jesus's followers must feel overcome not just by abject fear, but bitter disappointment, isolation, hopelessness. And just about every one of them must feel terrible about how they have abandoned their leader, their hopes and their ideals. All has been lost in one week.

And this is when the key twist in the story happens. Slowly, with Jesus's women followers in the lead ("The last shall be first," he taught), they realize that all is not lost. The first hints of this may be the memory of Jesus's teachings about forgiveness. Forgiveness was such a central spiritual value for him. Maybe, just maybe, each of his followers start to think, that spirit of forgiveness he preached and exemplified, might apply to me! A little of the desolation slips away as they begin to forgive themselves and each other for the manifold failures they committed in this terribly difficult time.

And then they remember his teachings about love. God is love, he taught. That teaching, they realize, was not crucified and buried with Jesus. It's still there in their hearts, tender, fragile, but alive. They start feeling the love, for each other as they start to reconnect—for their families and friends, too. They remember the teaching about loving even your enemies. They picture the Roman authorities whose brutal oppression killed their leader and threatens them with the same fate. Maybe not today, they think, but maybe, somehow, I'll be able to grow in love to the point that I can even find some love for my enemies.

Their friend and leader is gone, but now they understand that his teachings remain. Even more importantly, the forgiveness and the love he showered on them is still alive in their hearts, in their memories, in their spirits, and maybe, if they try, even in their actions.

And there you have it: Jesus's gift of love trumps death. Where is thy victory, oh Grave? Nowhere! Oppression and death and destruction cannot kill love! Not now, not ever! Thus it has always been: at Selma, in Soweto, even in Auschwitz. In the Easter story, Jesus's gift of love transcends the power of death, Forest Church declares. He goes on:

Jesus suffered, wept, forgave, and died. His followers failed, scattered, wept, found forgiveness, lived, reborn of his death, children of his undying love. For him and for them, even after death, in his love Jesus lived on. In his disciples' hearts he reigned as never before...Jesus lived within them, not simply among them. That is the essence of the Easter experience. A transformation occurred. Jesus was reborn in (their) hearts. Death was the occasion, love the medium, and forgiveness the catalyst.

Let me say that last, incredible line again: "Death was the occasion, love the medium, and forgiveness the catalyst." This is the essence of the Easter story. It's why it hit homes. Death is part of life, but so is love, and so is forgiveness.

I invite you to completely disregard this story if you have never felt disappointed in yourself and others, if you have never felt alone, abandoned, or desolate. I invite you to ignore this story if you have never wept in grief or despair. Disregard this if you have never had fear grip your soul. Ignore it if you have never woken up in the middle of the night, anxiety preventing you from falling back asleep.

But if you have felt any of these things, well, this story just might have something important to say to you.

It did to Forest Church. The piece I've been quoting is in his last book, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. He knew this was his last book. He wrote it as he went through the final, year-and-a-half long chapter of his life after being diagnosed with terminal esophageal cancer in 2008.

I've said before that when I'm around people who know they are dying, I listen very hard to what they say. Some of the greatest wisdom I've heard has been from people who know more intimately than I the truth that our lives are finite. So this is a book that gets my attention.

The Easter story nourished Forest during his dying days. The story had death all over it, which was important given the most prominent circumstance in his life: a fatal diagnosis. Any story had to give death a major role if it was to be meaningful to him.

The story had failure in it. Forest, like all of us, had his failures. Unlike most of us, his prominence as the son of a senator and one-time presidential candidate and as a noted minister in

Manhattan meant that some of his most notable failures were fodder for articles in the *New York Times*. He committed what I consider to be the cardinal sin for ministers: sexual misconduct within his congregation. At some point, Forest not so anonymously embarked on a Twelve Steps recovery. He became much more intimate with his failures, shortcomings, and bad deeds as he worked the program. Surely in his dying days he pondered all these things. And this Easter story of forgiveness comforted him.

And then there's love! This story says that love does not die when we die. It lives on. For a person staring death in the face, what a wonderful message! The love Forest found and shared—albeit imperfectly—would live on.

His is a story of transformation. It's not a perfect story. He was no saint. I would never give him a free pass, even after death, for his misconduct. But the truth is we all have the capacity to do terrible things, and to some extent all of us have done things that are patently wrong and hurtful. Death, failure, mistakes: these are part of each one of our spiritual journeys. We are all, like Jesus's followers, like Forest Church, in need of rebirth. We are all in need of a saving transformation.

And so we come to Big Joy. When I've seriously addressed the Easter story with you (maybe once every three Easters), I've overlooked this part. Because Unitarian Universalists don't do much with Lent, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday--key parts of the story and season--I've tried to interject them into our Easter service. Today is no exception. But too often I got stuck there. I forgot the Big Joy that comes with spiritual transformation. This may be the most important part of the story. Easter is an opportunity to open ourselves to Big Joy, to shout alleluia, to wear fancy hats and eat delicious treats! It's a chance to surround ourselves with flowers. It's a day to dance on a brink, to run with your wildfire. Yes, there's an abyss right there, in front of you and me, but maybe we are closer to glory when leaping the abyss than when we're upholstering a rut. Be prepared to bump into wonder, even as you face your mistakes and death. Only love prevails. Nothing perishes; nothing survives; everything transforms! Honeymoon with Big Joy today! Honeymoon with Big Joy every day!

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