

## “What now?”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
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There is a tale told of a Chinese sage, a wise man with great zest for life and for the countless adventures that life served up. We could say that he was in love with life no matter what. He wasn't happy because he didn't know any better; he was well acquainted with pain and loss and the sure knowledge that one day he would die. He wasn't anxious about what was to come – good or ill; nor was he euphoric when days simply blossomed. He just opened his heart to the mixed and glorious bag of what he experienced as it happened. He was widely loved and admired for his kindness, his good humor, and his wisdom. There was just one habit of his that folks found curious, in fact downright strange. He rode his mule backwards.

His friends asked him outright, “Why is it that you seem to have life so together, but you ride your mule backwards?”

His response was always the same: “It makes no difference where you are going. Where you are going is not important. It is what you do along the way that makes all the difference.”

This gave folks cause to wonder about their own approach to life, focused as they were on what lay ahead. So they asked him, “How then should we respond to life?”

His answer came naturally: “Don't become proud over what seems to be your triumphs; don't become despondent over what you might call tragedies. The flux of life holds joy and sadness, celebration and suffering; everything that happens to you is simply a way to shape your character. When you go through times of hardship, you will benefit as much as when you know fortune. Cooperate with whatever happens to you, that you might grow in strength of character.”

Some might think that this Chinese sage was foolishly passive or naïve or even fatalistic. I don't think so. I believe he was prophetic by the good grace of hindsight. He rode his mule backwards. No need to be anxious about what was ahead, only to learn from the road he had covered.

The story of Easter offers us the gifts of hindsight. We know what happened – or rather what was reported to have happened. The Gospels tell the tale of the man named Jesus, a man of humble birth, who was precocious as a child, whose story goes blank for almost twenty years and picks up again as he begins a career as teacher, as rabbi. His methods were simple; he taught love of God and neighbor through common stories. His deeds were not so simple, for with astonishing consistency, he practiced kindness, hospitality, compassion, and justice, and when he confronted their opposites he let it be known.

Like the Chinese sage, he held a zest for life blended with wisdom that rang like prophecy. Like the Chinese sage, he was unimpressed by wealth and power and unimpeded by suffering and ill fortune. It was as if Jesus rode his mule backwards. He knew the human heart, its capacity for love, its capacity for deceit, betrayal, murder even. He was filled with the wisdom of hindsight and the spirit of love, even for those who didn't love him, even for those who bid him ill and did him ill. His was a power that threatened the powers, and in the politics of the Roman Empire, such a threat was not to be tolerated. He was tried; he was convicted; he was executed – all in the brutal commonplace of the Roman tyranny. His friends were devastated. Jesus was dead, buried in a tomb sealed with a massive boulder. What were they to do? Like other

mourners, they took their grief to his tomb, but the Gospels tell us that they found it empty, with the boulder opened like a flimsy door. Then they encountered Jesus himself; they were amazed.

Resurrection it's been called. Resurrection – it goes against the outer margins of reason.

There are three possibilities. The first is that Jesus stayed dead. The story of the resurrection simply grew as stories do. The second is that Jesus somehow stretched the expected birth-to-life-to-death sequence into the completely unexpected birth-to-life-to-death-to-rebirth. The third is: maybe, maybe not.

Sometimes I think that we Unitarian Universalists want all three. We want so much to believe that resurrection happened, that maybe we ourselves will live beyond death. We want so much to hold fast to our reason and cry, “Nonsense.” Then we hedge our bets with a, “Maybe, maybe not” or a “Maybe, probably not.” Where does that leave us? One from column A, one from column B, one from column C – a veritable smorgasbord which we then pour into our very own Cuisinart, press “ON,” and call it Easter.

What throws us off, I believe, is our attention to destinations – birth, death, resurrection. Back to the Chinese sage:

“It makes no difference where you are going. Where you are going is not important. It is what you do along the way that makes all the difference.”

What did Jesus do along the way from birth to death to whatever? He made friends. He told stories. He learned and taught. He preached and practiced radical kindness, compassionate justice, obedience to spiritual truth. His presence was healing. His passion for compassion was so magnetic that men with other things to do dropped them all and followed him. So full of life was he that when the powers that be brutally snuffed his out, all that he had been and taught came alive again – does it matter how? – among those who first believed all was lost.

The sun rises and the sun sets and the sun rises again. Which counts most? Is it not what happened during the day? Jesus was born and Jesus died and some say he lived again. Which counts most – his birth, his death, or his resurrection? Is it not what he did along the way?

Again and again, Easter suggests that we tend to who Jesus was and how he lived along the way. Easter calls us to open our hearts to whatever life brings us, to learn and grow from the wisdom of the path itself. Easter bids us to tend to the sun rising and setting but to not miss the day itself, for surely every day between sunrise and sunset, every day between birth and life, is a resurrection not to be missed.

I wish for each of you a resurrection not to be missed. I love you. Happy Easter! Amen

Source:

The story of the Chinese sage was told in *The Resilient Spirit: Transforming Suffering into Insight and Renewal*, (Da Capo Press, 1996), by Polly Young-Eisendrath, Ph.D., whose client discovered it in a detective novel, *Case of the Backward Mule* (William Morrow, New York, 1946) by E. S. Gardner.