

Trusting Myth  
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
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“The supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts.” What does the nineteenth century German Protestant Christian theologian David Friedrich Strauss mean by that?

I expect the same thing that I might mean if I say that Ebenezer Scrooge’s meeting with ghosts reveals eternal truths even though Scrooge is a fictional character, and we can debate whether there is such a thing as a ghost.

The truths told by the stories of Jesus get more complicated than the truths of A Christmas Carol. That is because the Bible is not one book. It is a collection of books, and the truths that Paul wants to tell in his letters, the truths that the gospel of Mark tells, the truths that the gospel of Luke and The Book of the Acts of the Apostles tell, the truths that the gospel of Matthew tells, and the truths that the gospel of John tells are not the same set of truths.

New Testament scholar Norman Perrin writes in his book, The New Testament: An Introduction, “Though the books in the New Testament differ from one another in their understanding of the nature of Christian faith in the world, they are in common wrestling with the problems of that faith and no other. Their authors are at different stages in the development of New Testament Christianity and so face different problems, and they necessarily develop their understanding of the nature and meaning of Christian faith differently. When they face the same problems they sometimes respond to them in different ways. But there is an overall unity in the New Testament: each writer attempts to relate to and to make sense of life in the world by means of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Perrin continues, “The diversity of the New Testament is matched by the diversity of Christian churches in subsequent Christian history. Over and over again a particular viewpoint in the New Testament is developed historically by a group of churches. Chapter 4 of this book describes ‘apocalyptic Christianity,’ a viewpoint represented by many Christian sects even today. The particular perspective of ‘justification by faith’ found in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and to the Romans is the central thrust of the churches that owe their allegiance directly or indirectly to Martin Luther. Further, both the gospel of Matthew, which we argue later on is preeminently the ‘Church’s book,’ and the literature of ‘emergent Catholicism’ are clearly the inspiration of the Catholic church through the centuries. The Luke-Acts understanding and presentation of Jesus as the first Christian, the model and paradigm of Christian faith and practice, is as clearly the foundation of the ‘liberal’ understanding of Christian faith as the literature of the ‘Johannine school’ is the inspiration for centuries of Christian mysticism.

“The New Testament represents the whole spectrum of possibilities of what it means to be Christian in the world, and either anticipates or inspires every subsequent development within the Christian churches. The Roman Catholic and the Lutheran, the liberal Protestant and the fundamentalist, the contemplative mystic and the apocalyptic visionary, all find themselves at home in one part or another of this collection from the literature of earliest Christianity.” Remember I said the Bible is not one book.

It is a collection of books. People have been drawn to different parts, and sometimes what that part is can be surprising.

I know a Unitarian Universalist who says that his favorite piece of Christian scripture is an apocalyptic text even though I am almost completely sure that he does not expect Jesus' imminent return to earth. And what is this text?

From the gospel of Matthew chapter 25: 31-45NIV:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these (siblings) of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

I think the Unitarian Universalist who named this as his favorite passage of Christian scripture found truths in it that did not require his belief in a Second Coming or heaven or hell. I might say he saw in the passage the Jesus that Perrin calls, "the first Christian, the model and paradigm of Christian faith and practice," calling for Christians to act as he did.

In 1993 The Communion Book edited by Carl Seaburg was published by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. As well as flower communions and water communions and other services it also includes a section called "Traditional Services." The service titled "A Christian Communion for Unitarian Universalists" has these words as part of the words of institution, "Take and eat this in remembrance of Jesus and all dedicated souls," "Drink this in remembrance of Jesus and all those who have given their lives in service to others." Jesus is seen as one in a line of many who gave their lives in love and service.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalist and briefly Unitarian minister, gave his Harvard Divinity School Address in 1838 he said, "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. .... One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates (God)self in (hu)man(ity), and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of (the) world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think,'" [Divinity School Address - Ralph Waldo Emerson \(emersoncentral.com\)](#). Obviously, Emerson has some of the Christian mystic in him. In his words one may still see Jesus as exemplar but now there is also a seeking of some mystical connection with the spirit of Jesus and of God.

Many Unitarian Universalists came out of Christian churches rejecting what we learned there, but there is a place for truths gleaned from Christianity within Unitarian Universalism. There is a Covenant of UU Pagans, a UU Humanist Association, UUs for Jewish Awareness and a UU Buddhist Fellowship, but there is also a UU Christian Fellowship. The UU Christian Fellowship (UUCF) website describes themselves thus, "We are non-creedal followers of Jesus rooted in the history and tradition of Unitarian Universalism. All who wish to freely follow Jesus are welcome to be members of the UUCF. The UUCF especially ministers to those who feel they are too UU to be Christian and too Christian to be UU. We are a movement and organization of members who are interested in exploring liberal Christianity as we walk freely in the spirit of Jesus, growing our souls and the soul of the world," [UU Christian Fellowship](#).

Following the teachings of Jesus, I think most of us can understand. In the front of our own hymnals right below our Principles our Sources are listed. Below the heading, "The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources:" these words are included, "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." But what do we do with the Christian symbols and the parts of the Jesus' story we can't swallow as historical fact, a virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, ascension?

As for Christian symbol, I remember a seminary professor who asked us why so many of us were wearing execution devices as part of our clothing or jewelry. Would we wear electric chair earrings? But it was a Christian seminary and many of us were indeed wearing crosses. The thing is though that for Christians the cross is not a symbol of death but of hope. Despite an ignoble death Christians continued to feel the presence of their Teacher with them.

With a long history of being subject to mock justice and lynchings the Black American Christian church has found a part of their own story in the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, death and resurrection. "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen, Nobody Knows But Jesus." In the Christian story death is not the end, and the Black American Christian Church has taken up that hope. Do we need to believe in a physical resurrection to understand that? I don't think so.

Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong wrote in his book, [Resurrection: Myth or Reality](#), "If we locate the narrative of Easter in an objective moment, we will doom Easter to extinction. Attempts to capture that moment in theological words or liturgical symbols only lead to the tyranny of the creeds or the hostile, oppressive actions of those who call themselves true believers, who act as if they alone possess something called the true faith..."

“if, however, Easter and resurrection are aspects of a human experience, timeless but always subjective, breaking through our barriers now and again in mind-altering, consciousness-raising revelations, then we can use the words of our forebears in faith to journey toward the experience in which their lives were changed. We travel in the hope that we might at some time or some place in the subjectivity of our experience touch that reality that they also seemed to have touched.

“Perhaps we need to be reminded that our ultimate goal is not objectivity, certainty, or rational truth. It is rather life, wholeness, heightened consciousness, and an expanded sense of transcendence...”

Please join me in prayer using words from my UU ministerial colleague Victoria Weinstein, “Being the Resurrection”:

“The stone has got to be rolled back from the tomb again and again every year.

Roll up your sleeves.

“He is not coming back, you know.

He is not coming back unless it is we who rise for him

We who lay healing hands on the reviled and rejected like he did  
on his behalf --

We who rage for righteousness in his insistent voice

We who love the sinner, even knowing that "the sinner" is no farther off than our own heartbeat

“He will not be back to join us at the table

To share God's extravagant banquet

God's love feast, all are invited, come as you are

And so it is you and I who must feast for him

Must say the grace and break the bread and pass it to the left

and dish up the broiled fish (or pour the wine) and pass it to the right.

And treat each one so tenderly

as though just this morning (they) made the personal effort

to make it back from heaven, or from hell

but certainly from death

to be by our side.

“Because if by some miracle (and why not a miracle?)

He did come back

Wouldn't he want to see us like this?

Wouldn't it be a miracle to live for just one day

So that if he did, by some amazing feat

come riding into town

He could take a look around and say

"This is what I meant!"

“And we could say

it took us a long time...

but we finally figured it out.

“Oh, let us live to make it so.

**“You** are the resurrection and the life.” Amen.