

All the King's Horses and All the King's Men

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The egg is a symbol in so many religious traditions, a symbol of life in potential, and a symbol of the balance of nature. You heard Joan tell the story of Eostara, and how we came to have egg-laying bunnies symbolizing Easter. But we have many other ways in which the egg symbolizes spring. We had hard-boiled eggs on our Passover plates for the seder on Tuesday. And for many years I have been fascinated by the quasi-scientific notion that at the hour of the vernal and autumnal equinox, you can balance an egg on its end. Here is a picture of an egg-balancing experiment that I carried out at the Spring equinox in about 2007, here on Cape Cod at Ocean Edge resort, where I was attending a minister's retreat. As you can see, I got at least three eggs to stand on end, and was trying for a fourth.

But though the equinox is behind us, I want to begin my reflections on resurrection with this illustration of a well-known nursery rhyme. Here is Humpty Dumpty, and here is his wall. Let us see how well he can balance two weeks after the vernal equinox. *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall*

*Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
All the King's Horses and All the King's Men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

That, my friends, in a nutshell, is the religious naturalist case against bodily resurrection. We learn it at our mother's knee, and the lesson is reinforced many times during childhood. If we're lucky, it will be only squirrels and birds and maybe a pet hamster or two that will introduce us to the finality of death. If we have a less happy circumstances, we may lose a brother or a parent or grandparent. But the point is we learn at a very early age that physical death is an irreversible process.

Yet orthodox Christianity insists on resurrection. As you know, I was raised an Episcopalian, I loved the look and feel of church, the sociality, the aesthetics. But by my mid-teens, I found I could no longer say the creed. And it wasn't really the Virgin Birth that first stuck in my throat, I think it was the bit about Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting.

Make no mistake about it, that is what the creed insists on. Not a spiritual resurrection,

but a resurrection of the body, not only for Jesus but for you and me. It makes no sense to me; as I've mentioned before, my first wife's father died in his mid sixties after a lifetime battling diabetes. In the last two years of his life he had progressive amputations of his legs. I wondered after he died if he was to be resurrected in his body at the sound of the last trumpet, would his legs be whole again? Which body is to be resurrected?

I see it as part of our mission as UUs to assess what Jesus means, and to separate, as I'm fond of saying, Jesus baby from Jesus bathwater. I hope and pray that what I'm doing here will be of more than academic interest; these are literally questions of life and death, and you and I and all religions wrestle with them.

Religious naturalism is kind of a fancy name for the idea that we start our religious perspective from the world as we know it though our senses and through science. For those of you who don't like fancy words, for purposes of this discussion we can just call it the Humpty Dumpty principle. From the Humpty Dumpty point of view, any claim that Jesus or any other human comes bodily back to life three days after dying in very public manner seems to be Jesus bathwater. We can do without it.

But first impressions can be deceiving, and I want to examine the Christian claim more closely. Where shall we look? We could look at the creeds or catechisms, but I think the most reliable place to start is the source we share with all of Christianity, the words of the Bible. But what part? In most Christian churches at Easter it is customary to read the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, the empty tomb and the appearances to Mary Magdalene. But the earliest Christian writings on the resurrection are not the Gospel accounts, but this extensive treatment in Chapter 15 of the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians which I just read. Most biblical scholars would date Paul's letters sometime in the 40's or 50's of the common era, about 15 to 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, whereas the Gospel accounts were written after the year 70.

Here's the context of the letter: Paul has apparently been to Corinth, established or helped a Christian community there, and moved on, so he is writing them from somewhere else about various matters of doctrine and practice. I know this form; it's what I write every month in my column for the newsletter. If Paul were writing today, he'd probably have something in there about the length of announcements or wearing your nametags. In Chapter fifteen of his letter to Corinth, some people have apparently been raising the point that resurrection of the dead is impossible for anyone, and thus Jesus could not have been raised from the dead. This Humpty Dumpty objection forces Paul to a full-blown defense of resurrection.

There are many fascinating part of this chapter, but I want to hold up four of them here, and ask whether they do not point to a more spiritual interpretation of resurrection than the creeds devised three centuries later. The first is his list of witnesses to Jesus' resurrection: he includes *himself* among them; now it is clear from the Book of Acts and Paul's own letters that

Paul never encountered Jesus during Jesus' lifetime, so it looks like the resurrection he is talking about may be more spiritual than it becomes in the later gospel accounts.

Second, Paul uses a different Greek word to describe the followers of Jesus who are no longer alive: he says they have fallen asleep. Everywhere else in the passage where he wants to say dead or death, he says dead or death, but as to those who knew Jesus but are no longer with them, he says they have fallen asleep. The third point is that he ties the possibility of Jesus's resurrection to the possibility of the resurrection of humans, so that Jesus is here more in the category of human than divine. He argues, if Jesus can be resurrected so can you, and if you can't be, he can't be. And fourth that he asserts Jesus as the new Adam.

I want to spend some time unpacking that last point, the comparison of Christ with Adam. Paul says

21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.

22: For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Now this is a sweeping reference to the great creation myth of Genesis 2, the second creation story whereby Adam is created from the dust, Eve is created out of Adam's rib, they live in the Garden of Eden, do their thing with the serpent, eat of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and are expelled from the garden. We think we know that story well, but it's worth reminding ourselves what the punishment is that God imposes on Adam and Eve for their apple-eating. They are expelled from the garden, and God tells Eve that child-bearing shall be painful, and says to Adam that farming the land will be hard work. The final penalty is that (Genesis 3: 19) "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

So there are four penalties: out of the garden, painful childbirth for women, hard labor for men, and death.

What is implied pretty clearly in this story is that God's original plan was for immortal humans – they were expelled for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, not the tree of life, which was also in the Garden and was permitted to them.

We can see the Garden of Eden story as the archetypal Jewish myth to answer several very basic questions about human existence: (1) why are there two sexes? (2) why does it hurt so much to have babies? (3) why do we have to work in order to eat? And (4) why do we die?

And it's in Paul's reworking of this myth to answer the skeptical church members in Corinth that is the origin of Original Sin in Christian theology: Christ is the new Adam, and as in Adam all die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive. Christ, Paul tells us, has stood the Garden of Eden story on its head. Adam and Eve sinned and incurred the punishment of death on the whole human race, and now God gave his son to atone for that and he will release us from the death penalty and lead us to everlasting life. This is the earliest text from which this basic idea

comes, and it is this idea which has become the whole meaning of Jesus' death in orthodox Christianity.

This idea, which is technically called substitutionary atonement, is the nub of disagreement between our Universalist ancestors and the Christian mainstream. As Hosea Ballou argued in his Treatise on Atonement in 1805, a loving God would have no need of sacrifices. The idea makes no sense. Adam's sin corrupts all humankind, placing a debt on humanity it never could pay, so God sends his son to pay ransom for the human race by dying on the cross? Ballou likens it to a debtor. Let's say the bank has loaned me money, and it comes to collect it and I tell the bank, sorry, I don't have it and I'm never going to have it, I will never be able to pay the debt I owe. And then the bank says, "that's OK, we'll just pay it to ourselves and you won't have to worry about it." For God the Father and God the Son, in the Trinitarian view, are part of the same Godhead, so that when the Son pays the debt of humanity to the Father, it is God paying God's self.

So from the point of view of Universalist theology, the theory proposed by Paul, on which the entire Orthodox Christian understanding of Easter hinges, does not make sense. But now let's look at it through the lens of religious naturalism, the picture of the world painted by modern science, particularly Darwinian genetics. Can we have a resurrection of the dead? No, not in physical sense; an individual organism which dies is going to stay dead. Modern medicine can work seeming miracles, can reattach severed limbs, transplant damaged organs, and can resuscitate people whose hearts have stopped for several minutes, but we haven't figured out a way to ultimately prevent death or to reverse it. Religious naturalism affirms the Humpty Dumpty principle.

But the Garden of Eden story is not irrelevant, because it turns out there is a connection between sex and death in evolutionary science. You don't have to have sex and you don't have to have death in order to have life. There was a time when all life forms on earth reproduced asexually, like an amoeba does. When an amoeba wants to make another amoeba, he doesn't have to get all dolled up and go cruise the amoeba bars and try to pick up some cute little amoeba of the opposite sex because there are no amoebas of the opposite sex. An amoeba just splits in two. And amoebas don't have any regular programmed deaths either. You can kill them by boiling them, but they don't have a regular lifespan.

Maybe without sex or death amoebas are happier than we are, but they aren't very interesting. You wouldn't invite one to your next dinner party, at least not knowingly. You see, it's only when you get sex and death that you get evolution. In order to have the genetic variation necessary for real forward progress to be made, you have to have a system where you inherit genes from both parents, a system of sexual reproduction.

Biologically, death and sex are the prices we pay for having evolved all our human traits,

including our individual consciousness and our collective cultures. If we were still amoebas, we wouldn't have produced Mozart or Michelangelo or, on a more prosaic level, you and me.

So the writers of Genesis 2 got it sort of right – there is a bargain made at the very outset of the human experiment that says, to be human is to have two sexes and to have definite life spans and to die.

But where does that leave Paul's revision of Genesis? Would Jesus' appearance on the scene turn us all back into single-celled organisms which reproduce just by splitting in two so that we can inherit life eternal? Holy amoebas! It's not my vision of heaven nor do I think it was Paul's.

No, what has happened in evolutionary terms is that humans brought a new capacity on the scene, the development of the brain with its incredible cortex. This is a signal advance in complexity. Let's step back still further and look at the really big picture. The universe as a whole goes from order to disorder, entropy is always on the rise. But on planet earth, and maybe on other planets in other solar systems, life has developed, and life is the exception to this rule, at least temporarily. Biological matter while living makes more order. Evolution produces organisms of ever-increasing complexity. My car sports a bumper sticker that says "Evolutionists Do It With Increasing Complexity" As you go up the scale of complexity, new properties are continually emerging from the combination of the lower elements.

And at the apex of this natural hierarchy sits the human brain, the most complex bit of matter in the known universe. One of the truly great and exciting scientific puzzles of the present age is how this bit of grey matter generates the feeling of ourselves as persons. We have not yet explained consciousness in material terms, nor any other such higher Order religious concepts as soul, spirit, idea, feeling or God.

But there are higher orders of complexity even than the individual human brain, or its internal feelings, for the sum total of our words and deeds creates a realm of culture in which every word spoken and every deed done has a causal influence on everything that comes afterwards. From the point of view of the resurrection question, however, the key idea is that some of the order we can create in our lifetime can survive death, because it is passed on from human to human in the form of knowledge, culture, ideas, and love.

Paul is on kind of a parallel track here when he refers to nature in order to reassure the Corinthians about resurrection:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

37: And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

38: But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

What I think Paul is saying here is that we don't know what kind of form the body would

take in an afterlife.

Now, I'm not going to try to make Paul into a religious naturalist or to sell Pauline Christianity to religious naturalists. If anything in this passage he sounds a bit pagan, as if he would be singing about John Barleycorn. At a certain point, the circle can't be squared, and the Humpty Dumpty principle prevents us from taking bodily resurrection too seriously. But there are hints that Paul may not have meant bodily resurrection in this passage and maybe that was a later addition of the Gospel writers. But even if Paul did mean bodily resurrection, he never met Jesus, it is still an open question whether resurrection was the central point of what Jesus taught in his lifetime. Suppose that resurrection was only the selling point for the message: since the Jesus movement was a complete flop as a revolt against Rome, you couldn't get anyone to take it seriously in the first century unless you packaged it in the supernatural.

OK, you say, if the resurrection was only the envelope carrying the message, what was the message? I think the central message of Jesus' ministry was three fold: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might, love your neighbor as yourself, and the kingdom of heaven is within you.

In other words, it's about love, and it is love which survives death, not the body. Paul had seen this firsthand – he comes into the picture as a persecutor, and is present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He must have asked himself what force could keep these Jews loyal to a failed Messiah in the face of persecutions and death. The love Jesus preached and which he practiced survived his death.

Paul was himself converted a little later, and went on to be the first Christian missionary. Love was never far from his thought and practice. Only two chapters earlier in the First Letter to the Corinthians, he had written probably the greatest essay on love ever written; he said

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

We need to read Paul's thesis on resurrection in light of his thesis on love two chapters earlier. More importantly, a love that survives death does not violate the Humpty Dumpty principle.

We know in this church how love survives. We still hear the echoes of the loving words and deeds of Chuck Chesnut, Dave Reed, Deedee Breed, Kay Baker, Fran Birch as they worked to

make this church thrive and make the community a better place.

The kingdom of heaven is within you and all about you. All the king's horses and all the king's men can't put Humpty Dumpty together again, but it is within the power of love to create realms on this earth which the king's horse and king's men cannot topple. Jesus said inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Or as he says in the Gospel of Thomas 77 "I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. 2 Split a piece of wood; I am there. 3 Lift up the stone, and you will find me there." (Gospel of Thomas 77)

Amen.

Reading 1 Corinthians 15

1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain.

3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ — whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have

perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

29 Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?

30 And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? 31 I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you — a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. 32 If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised,

"Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die."

33 Do not be deceived:

"Bad company ruins good morals."

34 Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

35 But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" 36 Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. 37 And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. 38 But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. 39 Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. 40 There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. 41 There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

42 So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. 47 The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

50 What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55 "Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.