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A few times lately, I've woken in the middle of the night and thought, I could die of the coronavirus. Semi-conscious in a hospital bed with a big blue tube down my throat, machines beeping, and no family allowed in.

Over tea and breakfast, I'm more optimistic. I could well live—maybe twenty-five years more, given my family history.

So, I'm trying to get ready for either. Easter's a good time to think about life and death, and so is a global pandemic.

Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the equinox. In this hemisphere, the world is bathed in spring light. But we're now in a dark time. Things seemed apocalyptic enough when California and Australia were burning. But now, people are burning. With fever.

Sheltering at home, we can't meet a friend for lunch, or even gather around a table with colleagues to discuss problems.

It reminds me how full and rich normal life is. Who will ever again take simple pleasures for granted? Going to a concert. Hugging our grandchildren. Sitting quietly in the Stone Chapel and clustering around the refreshment table in the coffee hour.

Easter can be an uncomfortable service for a UU to speak at. What approach can you take? History? Science? Metaphor? Easter is the most sacred holiday of Christianity. It's about life and death, murder and resurrection. It's the ultimate rebellion against despair. It's about snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

The Biblical story of Holy Week is a roller coaster of drama and emotion. The story starts with triumph—Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It continues with conflict—chasing the money-changers from the temple. It descends into foreboding with the Last Supper and sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane. It hits a low with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, his arrest, the hasty trial by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Next comes brutal flogging, followed by the agony of crucifixion.

But after a couple of days of despair and grief, unexpectedly, there’s an explosion of hope. The women go to the tomb, find the stone of the entrance rolled aside. They don’t find a body. But in the weeks to come, their murdered kinsman appears in various places, before being lifted up to Heaven.

For many Christians, this story of resurrection is the literal truth. Hence the Easter greeting, “He is risen.”

The nonbeliever says: People do not rise from the dead.

Will we ever know what really happened?

Professors like Bart Ehrman and James Tabor, both of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have spent their academic careers looking for “the historical Jesus.”

Their take is that Jesus was born the normal way to a woman who got pregnant the normal way, perhaps by a man who wasn’t Joseph, her fiancé. He was Jewish, from a family of lower-class workers, likely had a number of sisters and brothers, spoke Aramaic, and could probably read the Hebrew scriptures.

He was an apocalyptic prophet. He thought God was coming soon to overthrow a corrupt and evil regime and establish his

kingdom on earth.

In the last week of his life, Jesus went to Jerusalem, to celebrate Passover. The authorities feared he'd stir up the mobs, gave him a cursory trial, and put him to death as a subversive.

But what happened next? Was Jesus's body put in a burial cave offered by a sympathetic rich man? Or was it left to be eaten by birds or dogs? Dumped in a mass grave, or maybe put to rest in a family tomb? And how about Jesus's reappearances? Any explanations there?

Tabor points out that there are so many discrepancies between gospels that there's not one narrative, but several. The oldest account—that of Mark—got considerably embroidered later on. We can't know the historical reality. The historians offer question marks.

Let's turn to science for another slant on the Easter story. MIT professor of nuclear science and engineering Ian Hutchinson believes in the literal truth of the resurrection. He says that when it comes to miracles, there's no real conflict between science and religion. Why? Because science—in its current state—is only a tiny window into reality.

Science popularizers such as physicist Brian Greene talk of a vast landscape of possible universes. Something with not three dimensions, or four (if you count time) but eleven. As for the one-directional passage of time, that's an illusion. All time exists at once. This implies that people are both dead and alive simultaneously. Equally odd to contemplate, another universe could infiltrate ours and make strange things happen. Anything is possible.

Wow. That's heady stuff. But, alas, we can't swoop into another universe to figure it out. For the moment, I'll leave the mysterious and the incomprehensible to the theoretical physicists.

Now let's try a metaphor closer to what's happening. It's not a huge stretch to link Easter to the pandemic now raging on this planet.

For weeks, we've been getting death counts. We hear reports of Italian crematoria that can't burn the bodies fast enough. Of refrigerated trucks waiting for corpses outside the hospitals in New York City. Of nursing homes where the virus mercilessly mows down elderly patients.

What further reminder of mortality do we need other than the evening news?

Moreover, when have we been more in need of a resurrection? By that, I don't mean a premature reopening of the economy that would bring another surge of patients to overwhelmed hospitals. I mean a remaking of the world we live in.

I take hope in the fact that a kind of resurrection has already started.

The forces of life are all around us and fighting hard. We see this in the daily heroism of doctors, nurses, cleaning folks, grocery store check-out clerks. They are suppressing their own fears and risking their lives, for others. For us. They are Christ-like.

Many, many people are giving their time, their money, their efforts—for others. Teenagers are sewing face masks. Volunteers are driving meals to school kids. Distilleries are making hand sanitizer. A new clothing manufacturer in New Hampshire has switched his production to face masks and is donating 100% of them to health care facilities.

They are snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

Back now to the two possibilities I was wondering about.

The first, that I'll die. It makes me ask, how do I use the time I have left? What unfinished business do I have? To whom should I reach out and say:

Thank you
I'm sorry
You're wonderful
I love you

I have a younger sister I'm out of touch with and I've felt bad about this for a long time. I was leisurely putting together pictures of her, intending to assemble a photo biography one day with one of those online make-your-own book services.

Suddenly, leisurely didn't seem fast enough. It felt urgent. I spent last weekend uploading pictures and writing a narrative. Late Sunday evening, I pressed "Place Order."

You may have been planning some project like that. How about starting it this afternoon?

Turning to my second possibility, what if I *live*? What comes after the pandemic?

Our country is getting an opportunity to be remade. We're finding that a lot of people have an ethic of giving—not of grabbing. A focus on service, not on wealth.

There are some ideas from 2,000 years ago that sound pretty weird. Turn the other cheek... Go the extra mile... If someone sues you for your shirt, give him your coat as well... Sell everything you have and give it to the poor.

These teachings of Jesus are the opposite of our conventional virtues. Don't plan, don't save, don't defend yourself, give it all away, love your enemies... Who actually lives this way? These ideals seem impractical to the point of being almost irritating. But during the pandemic, many people are already living them. It's enough to make you believe in miracles.

After the crisis is over, will we resurrect the old *status quo*? I certainly hope not. I want something better. Clean energy for a healthier planet. Schools that teach children to think. A health system that keeps people well. Roads without potholes. A government that serves all, not just a privileged few. There will be plenty of work to do.

The virus will pass, the stone will be rolled away from the tomb. I pray that we all emerge alive, grateful, and ready to plunge in to the challenges ahead.

In the meantime, stay safe, everyone. Don't let up on the masks and the endless hand washing. We're all in this together, and one day, I hope, we can look back on this Easter as the time when we set our sights on a new and better world.

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