

## One person's journey - how I came to love Easter

Plainly and simply, Easter is the highlight of my church year. It's the centre-point of the ancient story on which my faith stands. It hasn't always been so: it's taken a good part of my life (so far) for me to get past being decidedly uncomfortable with Easter. I suspect such discomfort is still there for a great many people – both outside the church and inside it too.

Most born-in-Canada people over about age 40 grew up in a culture steeped in what I call 'common Christianity', whether or not they and their families attended a church. In a broad sense, Christianity was just absorbed from the culture. What was absorbed, though, was often confused and poorly defined, especially for non-church families and their children. Even so, most people grew up with some basic knowledge about the Christian faith. At the very least, they knew some version of the stories of Christmas and Easter, the ones that lie right on the surface of common Christian expression.

The problem was that what people understood from these stories often was distorted and incomplete. Some aspects of the stories were emphasized and others ignored. People without a learning-focused involvement in a church were never invited to connect the Jesus-story with their own lives. They were left with the unfounded sense that Christians just accepted the story at face value. The public voice of Christianity was mostly a conservative voice that promoted exactly that. Yet many people couldn't accept the story that way, saying to themselves, "It just doesn't make sense to me." The story became less and less meaningful and useful to them in their lives. Eventually the Christian faith the story appeared to represent was relegated to the same level of real-life meaning as a fairy tale. Thus were planted some of the seeds of today's secular society.

That's pretty much where I found myself as a young adult. The story – and the faith seemed to go with it – had little meaning or relevance for me, and little attraction. Church and faith rested firmly in fairy-tale territory as far as I was concerned.

Christmas was at least nominally positive and seemed to bring out good thoughts and actions for lots of people. I could live with it on that basis. But Easter? All that stuff about Jesus being horribly tortured and killed, and that was supposed to be **good** for the world, and **good** for me? God **needed** Jesus to die? And I too **needed** Jesus to die? I could accept none of that. For me, it was a twisted fairy tale at best, and I couldn't see how any thinking person could really believe any of it.

What changed for me? Well, life happened. Experiences of life happened that spoke not to my head, but to my heart and my spirit. Unexpectedly and unlooked-for, I came to see an underlying reality that fostered good in the world. I saw through my own experience that this reality inclined people toward good, even when it was hard work, or costly, or dangerous. While my intellect may have remained sceptical, my emotions and my spirit knew what was real. In the end, I recognized I was experiencing God and God's utterly positive presence in the world and in my life, even if I couldn't fully understand it. I was journeying beyond the limited, fuzzy, unpalatable spiritual sensibility I had absorbed from the culture.

My journey into Christian faith continued, even with potholes, detours and dead ends. On that journey, I bumped into the core Christian notion of Trinity – God, Jesus and Holy Spirit as three-in-one. 'God' and 'Spirit' settled into my emerging faith fairly easily, but 'Jesus' remained a thorny problem. My remaining 'common Christianity' sense of Easter was the difficulty. I just couldn't accept some parts of that worldview, such as "God sent Jesus to die" or even "Jesus died for our/my sins". That just didn't – and couldn't – fit with what I believed and experienced about God and God's positive relationship with people and the world.

Then, thankfully, I discovered that this was not the only 'real' or 'right' way to understand Jesus. What a surprise! What a revelation! With tongue in cheek a bit here, this was the salvation of my faith.

For many years now, a growing number of Christian writers and thinkers have set aside the theology of Jesus that I found so troubling and damaging. It's named 'atonement theology', and was largely constructed and fostered through the church of 1600 years ago. It was built on a chain of ideas about a sinful base for human nature, God's anger about that, divine punishment that humankind deserved, and Jesus choosing (or being sent) to take all that punishment on himself by dying on the cross. It's a theology that reflected the medieval European world of its origins, but has questionable connection or relevance to our 21<sup>st</sup> century world-village.

Many respected theologians and others have pointed out the legacy of damaged individuals and peoples that atonement theology has fostered, as it became embellished and extended into all parts of life and culture. They have shown some of the accompanying distortions of power throughout church and society down through the centuries. For decades, educated and thoughtful writers have been offering alternative ways to understand the Jesus-story, especially the meaning and relevance of Jesus' death.

When Jesus' death is seen as the normal, to-be-expected response of powerful human institutions to Jesus' challenge of their authority and privilege, then it becomes a human tragedy with which we can all relate. When the passion and resurrection story is understood as divine rejection of the powers of empire and might, it becomes a salvation story of universal import even for today.

When the empty tomb of Easter becomes the climactic image of the story, rather than the cross of Good Friday, then the message of Christianity becomes life-giving. It becomes a message of life over death, peace over violence, commitment over betrayal, love over greed, and solidarity over might. Jesus truly becomes the 'Son of Man' he names himself in John's gospel – a man like you and me, yet so filled with God's Spirit of Life that in him, people experienced the realm of God powerfully and invitingly. Even more, Jesus life and the message that it conveyed was so potent it continued to invade and inform their own lives even after their traumatic experiences of his death. The cross had lost all power for them, so they began to reject it as a symbol of fear and death, and adopted it ironically as a symbol for the beginning of new life. This new life rested on a compelling sense of Jesus' continued place in their own living, just as when he was alive in their midst.

For me, that same power flows through the passion story today. When we let go of a life-limiting, person-diminishing focus on sin and judgement and the cross, and we focus instead on a divine relationship more powerful even than death, a love that goes farther than anything we can imagine, and a call to live the realm of God here-and-now, then Easter takes its true place at the centre of Christian faith. We no longer need to accept a God who demands anyone's suffering and dying and holds us under constant death-sentence for being human. Instead we can celebrate, share and live the story of God who loves first, last and always, and who creates a universe of blessing, invitation, and unending relatedness for every single person and thing.

That's the Easter message I embrace. That's an Easter I can love!

