

The poster features a vibrant, abstract background with large, textured brushstrokes in shades of purple, orange, green, and blue. A white rectangular frame is centered on the image, containing the word "Easter" in a large, elegant, white cursive script. Below it, the text "AT FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS" is written in a smaller, white, all-caps sans-serif font. At the bottom of the frame, the text "SUNDAY WORSHIP AND CELEBRATION" is written in a bold, white, all-caps sans-serif font, followed by "9:30 and 11am services | 10:40am Egg Scramble" in a slightly smaller, white, all-caps sans-serif font.

Easter

AT FIRST UNITARIAN
CHURCH OF DALLAS

SUNDAY WORSHIP AND CELEBRATION

9:30 and 11am services | 10:40am Egg Scramble

A Desperate Mad Hope

Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter, April 20, 2025

Well, I've said the words Jesus Christ so many times in the last couple months, none of them had to do with Easter except that tasty chocolate bunny I had for breakfast. Jesus Christ, it was good. Honestly, people we are living in interesting times as the expression goes. That saying actually didn't come from a Chinese proverb, it came from a British ambassador to China in the 1890s, and this is what he actually said. He said, "I think that you will all agree that we are living in most interesting times." They responded, "Here-here." "I never remember myself a time in which our history," he said, "Was so full, in which day by day brought us new objects of interest and let me say also new objects for anxiety." "Here-here," they said.

You see, we are not the first or last to have this notion, and all the same my response, so much of the time of what is going on these days is to do what my grandmother warned against, which is to take the Lord's name in vain, Jesus Christ, an Easter theological declaration, which we doubt very much. You see, you are in a church that has been asking theological questions about this holiday, this person, this myth, this theology for 500 years, the kinds of questions that sound like, does any of this make sense? Is this Jesus thing real? What is Easter? What is this incoherence in my heart in church? Am I really here for the doughnuts?

We Unitarians and Universalists have been asking for 500 or more years was Jesus God? How could God commit violence? What is this resurrection? Why do we even celebrate Jesus? Some of you asked that walking in today. The truth is that all these questions are exactly why we are here

today. Whether you've been through a personal evolution with these questions today or you lived in Poland or Transylvania in the 16th centuries, the question was the same. Our religious ancestors asked, "How could God sacrifice his son when God was about love?" They and we asked, "How could Jesus be God? If God so loved the world, then why would God send his son to his demise just when he was doing so well, teaching people how to live in interesting times?"

They asked, "If God created everything, why would God condemn us to eternal punishment rather than return us to love?" They asked, "What is the purpose of the church? Is it to uphold some political structure or to make us reflect on how to love one another?" These rambunctious rebels, these heretics from the fourth century to the 21st century, asking the same questions. And their answers and our answers are, "Jesus was great, but he was flawed like us, human and caught up in the machinery of a state that did not accept protest or claims to equity." The Roman state in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus did not want to hear that all people are worthy, rich, poor, gay, straight, trans, non-binary, cis, Democrat, republican, cowboy, and Eagle fans alike. The state did not want to hear about free speech. They didn't want schools teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion, but here came Jesus, one in a long line of people who were defying those in power, saying, "You cannot lie to us. You cannot do everything just so the rich get richer and people suffer, and everything gets deregulated until it is all chaos."

He was there to say that we should love one another and treat each other with kindness and compassion, and beyond that, we are responsible for one another. Sound familiar? So many Jesuses today, too many to crucify is the good news, but they killed Jesus and they killed the dream of his followers, that he, Jesus, was once and for all going to save the people from tyranny. They left the foot of the cross devastated and they needed hope. So they started to tell a story that he was resurrected, taken up into God's love, and the genius of this story is that they figured out how the story could sidestep the state's attention. They didn't say the Romans killed him, they said God killed him for the reason to free everyone from their sins. The logic of this story has never made sense to me, but what made sense to me was the hope, the resurrection, not just rebirth like the flowers of the field, but resurrection, that something good will come when everything looks so bad, that life comes from death, the source of hope for all.

We know this in our own lives if we are honest. We live through tragedy and we build anew. We lose loved ones and we find new ones to love. We see nature regenerate after disaster, communities bind together to survive traumas created by us, healed with intention. Our resilience has no end. That is why I believe in resurrection, not an event from ancient Jerusalem, but events in our lives. We can apply this to these interesting times too. When we look at our country just from about any perspective there is, we can only find worry and concern that we are veering off the irreparable tracks. But looked at with a longer lens that starts in the first century, we might see another possibility. The journalist and writer, David Brooks, calls this period we're living in a period of repair, of rupture and repair. He says, "We have seen versions of this before and before we have been tempted to say that all is lost," but he reminds us that people before us have passed on spiritual resources to help us through interesting times.

He says, "We have Genesis that says we are all made in God's image, a core concept in the foundation of democracy." He says, "We have Exodus. That we wander in the wilderness, but we can get to the promised land." He said, "We have Jesus who said, 'Blessed are the meek and the poor in spirit,'" that there are spiritual sources of strength that remind us when we dig deeper in our spiritual natures or our relationship to God, or that which pulls us to our better nature as we find that we can face just about anything. He said, "We have Alexander Hamilton." "Poor boys and girls should arise and succeed," quoted Hamilton, whose belief in the possibility that we can rise from challenging circumstances came from his own rise from poverty and despair. And we have Edmund Burke who said, "We should be modest about what we think we know, because society and culture are complicated, so we should operate on humanity like we would operate on our father, gradually and carefully." And I say if we take a longer lens about this moment in our history, we can see that we created this moment.

This did not happen in the last election or the last five or 10 years, this happened with the legacy of slavery. This happened with the militarized economy that Eisenhower worried about and warned us about. This happened through Jim Crow and segregation, and much more, and yet the prophets and the philosophers and the writers and the thinkers and our ancestors has said over and over to us from the past that we can create culture change from a spiritual shifting of the heart by creating community and purpose out of our despair. This is something that the early Christians understood and embedded in their story, something the early Unitarians understood, something that resurrection teaches us that out of death comes life in society and in us. I have preached about resurrection every Easter for many years now, and I have shown you stories of people who turn their life deaths into life-giving forces. Some of you are sitting right here in this sanctuary.

The messages that I have said on every Easter are that the heart of all this is the task to not create more enemies, but to resurrect old grievances into new possibilities. That is the work and the core of today's story. And just to get very real about today's story, I want to say to you that I often wonder how Jesus must have felt on Friday morning, that emotional drain of the last supper, the agonies of the garden, the betrayal of Judas, the desertion of his friends, the cops, the swords, the clubs, the interrogation, the lack of sleep.

The anxiety of death, the mocking, the spitting, the crown of thorns. Like a criminal marched through the streets, he was not at his best. It was like the whole human life packed into a few hours, because that is how we are most of the time, not at our best, exhausted, cranky, short, especially when we hear the news coming out of Washington. Feeling betrayed, bewildered, unable to formulate the right response, ugly in front of the people we want to relate to. Weak in the sight of those we wish would love us. Not up to the task, afraid.

But the story says rebels and heretics and questioners of the common accepted story of the day, that deep in the human heart always there is a desperate, mad hope that is the core of resurrection. That even when we feel like the good Friday Jesus, on Sunday with a little rest and renewal, we are capable of loving others. That we are loved ourselves, that new life comes from death, that we can find new answers about how we should live our lives. That culture changes when

we find creative answers to complex questions. That when a creative minority finds a beautiful way to live, more people will follow and together confront the times they are in. That a spiritual revolution is always necessary when times get interesting, and they start with digging into who we really are, finding in ourselves a new love for humanity that challenges our despair about humanity.

T.S. Eliot said, and I think maybe some words of hope for what is trying to be built in Washington. T.S. Eliot said, "You cannot create a system so perfect that people don't have to be good. It is when you put the moral formation at the center of society and mix it with a determined hope and resistance to empires of hatred and bigotry that resurrection can become real." In other words, it is up to us if life will go on, if resurrection will happen. And all of this means that we have to change. We have to change. We have to be less anxious and we have to be less divisive, and we have to be less timid and we have to be less desirous of escapism.

We will have to build a new moral foundation for not only our lives but our society, and that is what rebels do in interesting times. The great prophet James Baldwin, who my God, faced his share of interesting times, bigotry and hatred, says to us from the past, "There may not be as much humanity in the world as one would like to see, but there is some. There's more than one would think. Love has never been a popular movement and no one has really ever wanted to be free. The world is held together," he said, "By the love and passion of very few people." "Walk down the street of any city," he said, "Any afternoon and look around you. What you've got to remember is what you're looking at is also you. You could be that monster, that saint, and you have to decide who you are going to be."

You see, Baldwin could have been bitter about the racist state that stood over him, but he wasn't. He knew that in difficult times, in interesting times, we are called to see each other in our fullest, in the most deepest respectful way that we can, the way that God hopes for us. He knew, we knew, Jesus Christ knew, the disciples knew, that still deep inside the human heart, there is always a desperate, mad hope that holds us, that we are capable of loving others, that we ourselves are loved.

That is what our religious ancestors would've said to your question today, why celebrate Easter? We don't celebrate it because it's a literal event that happened years ago, but we live into the story of resurrection, of possibility, in times so full that bring day by day objects of interest, objects of anxiety. "Celebrate Easter for what it is," our ancestors would say, the resurrection of life that starts with each of us. "Celebrate Easter today and every day," they would have said. They would've known that we too could have a great hope, even in these interesting times. And they never had a chocolate bunny for breakfast. Happy Easter to all of you, and Amen.