



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Making Sense of the Easter Story*

### *“Part 4 - Into the Mystic”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
April 5, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** John 13:1-5 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*It was before the Feast of Passover, and Jesus realized that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to God. He had always loved his own in this world, but now he showed how perfect this love was. The Devil had already convinced Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. So during supper, Jesus - knowing that God had put all things into his own hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God - rose from the table, took off his clothes and wrapped a towel around his waist. He then poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and dry them with the towel that was around his waist.*

### Sermon

Well, thank you for spending Easter with us. If you're a visitor, my condolences. You made a mistake. Next year, you'll know. I'm not an orthodox Christian theologian. Are you surprised? (laughter) Yeah, Reverend Babs is very disappointed.

Well, it was orthodox religion that killed Jesus. It was orthodox religion that took the Sermon on the Mount and put it on the edges of the faith. It was orthodox religion that killed the mystics who were the original Christians.

And so it's very important for people to realize that orthodox Christianity is not the only form of Christianity. In addition to people like Luther and Calvin and Augustine, there were people like Schweitzer, Tolstoy, Martin Luther King. And their religion was based on the Sermon on the Mount, up front and center. The theological parts were cosmic poetry to help someone understand what it means to be a human being in the universe.

I love the Church. I've given my life to the Church, but I've also had a lifelong lover's quarrel with the Church because we don't like to leave other people alone, and that's not okay. The president is more and more, whatever the new modern tweet thing is, X, being more and more religious now, more and more theological. He sent one out today mocking the Iranians, saying

how he's going to commit war crimes against their infrastructure. He didn't use those words. But to bomb civilian infrastructure is a war crime. Not that the whole war is not a war crime.

But in addition to threatening to turn their lives into hell, he closed with praise Allah. He taunted. Now he and Hegseth are not going to be the ones to go to Iran. It will be the young people of America who he's sending out to what may be for some a holy war now.

This cruelty is the setting that Christianity was born out of. Herod was really good at building buildings too. He liked putting gold on everything. This is an ancient, ancient story. And Christianity, like many world religions, was born to give hope to those in that situation.

The faith was not originally about unprovable claims about invisible people. It was a poetry about who you are in the universe.

I got a bad attitude really early in life. My grandparents were morticians. And there's a very particular type of religion, you know, fans with that kind of fan with the biblical quotes. He's much better now. God must have needed a plumber. (laughter) But the worst for me was hearing that people looked so naturally like they were asleep, because to me they look like wax candles.

So there was a horror early on of seeing people pretend things, that they knew that person was in heaven, but then they'd break down and cry. That didn't make sense to a little kid. So I knew that adults were pretending. It didn't make them bad. It made them afraid.

There's a type of Christianity that claims that Easter is the proof that Christianity is superior to every other kind of religion. You've heard the story. Buddha's grave is full. Muhammad's grave is full. But Jesus' grave is empty. So I was told early on that Christian faith, the basis of it, is pretending like I know that Jesus rose from the dead, pretending that I know that Jesus was born of a virgin.

That cannot be the heart of faith. Why? Because pretending I know something I don't know is dishonest. How do you search for truth when you begin by pretending that you know something that you don't know? Surely Jesus was coming from a deeper place than that. And when we say that the Resurrection proves the claims of Jesus. I always come to the same question: if Hitler rose from the grave, would you follow Hitler?

It wouldn't prove a thing other than power, that there was some kind of magical power. So we have to choose whether the heart of Christianity is this kind of magical power or a kind of mystical love. And that's what I want to talk about today— Easter as mystical love.

Because I don't have anything to do with the crusader Jesus that's running this nation right now. I want to make sure that people know I'm not on that team. Because when I was young and I read about Christians cooperating with Hitler, I always said if I'd been there, I would have been different. Well, now I'm here and now I've got to back up my words, a lifetime of words, that I would have defended Anne Frank.

Who all in Texas needs to be defended? That's how we'll know what we would have done back in those days. Do we stand up for the people that are being attacked now?

You cannot put Jesus Christ first and America first. That's number one, right? If you put America first, you've just renounced Jesus Christ, in any kind of meaningful way.

So what we're going to try to look at today is a power that comes through love, through sometimes suffering love, that makes love more powerful than hate and life more powerful than death.

The story opens up. The devil's in the story. How many of y'all believe in the devil?

Okay. Tough crowd. Tough crowd. (laughter) Well, I don't either. The devil was one of the poems that was used. When you wanted to teach people mysticism, you had to start where they were, which often took fairy tales. But the fairy tales, you would exaggerate, to put them in touch with deeper processes that were bringing them into life. The devil was a symbol of dualism, a dualistic mind, a mind stuck in the either/or. That's why he had cloven hooves, he had a fork, forked tongue, the horns. The word itself means to cast in two.

So it was a poem.

Judas Iscariot— Iscariot means dagger. Judas was a militant rebel. Like Barabbas, he didn't like the idea of someone trusting gentleness and love. So they're having this kind of argument. And it's the setup for what the Resurrection means.

After I left the funeral home, behind our house was a field. And the field had real death. Life, birth, death. And it bothered me at first to see lizards with ants on them. But I began to see a beauty there that I didn't see in the funeral home.

There was still pain, but there was a larger life going on. You had a sense of a shared life that was bigger than any one of the lives. And that each of the beings was a cell in that larger body. When you see the word cosmos, or world, in John, that's one of the things to look for. Is he talking about the common life, the larger self, the cosmic self?

Let's look at the first slide.



In the story, or in the painting print that we have, the risen Jesus, you see Thomas touching the side, very philosophical moment. If I can't touch it, it's not real. Thomas was a literalist. And Jesus says, "My peace be with you. Be not afraid."

There are other versions of that. Could we go to the next slide?



This is one of my favorite religious symbols in the whole world. It's the dancing Shiva. You see the circle of fire, everything that's happening in time. You see the multiple arms because what many of the gods in Hinduism represent is the heart of being. So they have multiple heads, multiple arms. You have a drum for time. You have different symbols.

But there's almost always one hand doing that. Do not fear.

The next symbol is very familiar, the yin-yang.



I want to think in terms of Christianity and the year in liturgy. In the yin-yang symbol, you have a dark half circle with a white circle and a light with the dark. If you think of Christmas as the

winter solstice, you have a darkness with the birth taking place. If the dark with the light, if that's Christmas, then the light with the dark is death that takes place at the birth of spring.

So what you have is the suggestion that when we're born into this world, there's a sense that we're born out of the material world. We're in a sense born out of death. Paul Tillich had a sermon on the nativity that he called "Born in a Grave." Frankincense and myrrh are funeral ornaments.

As a human being, your body does not belong to you. You're here on a field trip. But when you die, you die into a larger life.

In most of the mystical systems of the world, your ego is an illusion. You're the larger life, you just don't know it, because you've been taught a small view of yourself. So the sacraments, like baptism, communion, are initiating you into a larger view of who you are, of what your life is. And what Easter is saying is that your end is not the end of who you really are.

The decoder ring that I use when I look at the symbols of the world is that whatever is true in that story has got to be true of everybody, everywhere, all the time. If not, it's not very helpful to me. So if the Resurrection is a story about somebody, one person, who 2,000 years ago on the other side of the world sat up in the grave, that doesn't illumine my life very much.

If it's a symbol that my life goes deeper than I can possibly imagine, then that may wake something in me that's important. When you look at the stories, the teaching stories, remember that the stories of Scripture are coming way, way after the fact. Way too late for a reporter to show up. Particularly John. John's a long time after that.

So their purpose is to give you the experience that they had. I believe that the purpose of symbols is to have an experience. The beliefs are going to get in your way if you try to learn science. The rules are going to get in your way when you try to be ethical. So it requires enormous flexibility. But that's what a Resurrection would suggest, right?

Because if not, what you're doing is taxidermy Jesus. You're bringing him back, stuffing him, and carrying him around in the parade. And you're doing it with yourself too, because when you think your faith is repeating the words of dead people. That's a terrible place to be if you're trying to be born.

The symbol God is a symbol of whatever the creative source is that you have. The word parent, when you see that, is the source of our being, whatever that is. And you have to authentically choose what that is for you, what works in your life, what helps your understanding.

In the stories, there's stories of mistaken identity. I think that's very important. They didn't try to polish the stories. They didn't try to get the alibi straight, which tells you they're not talking about history. If they're trying to get you to believe one account of history, then it would have made a huge difference whether it was one angel, two angels, whether it's this place, that place. They didn't care.

And when Mary sees Jesus at the grave, she thinks it's a gardener. Isn't that a wonderful symbol? In a place where you're coming to dress the dead, there are flowers. There's new life. She was seeing Christ around her. When the disciples get together, they see Christ in their midst. They're seeing Christ in each other. When they go on the road to Emmaus, they see two strangers. They don't realize it's Jesus. Because the punchline is everybody is Christ. Everybody's Buddha. We're all a part of the Shiva dance.

If you believe in Darwin, and I think you should, then resurrecting to the same form would be a terrible mistake because life is change. Life is transition. In the sense of the cosmic life, we're all trans. Right? We're becoming something else. So that has to be okay. We have to let go of what we've been in the past and be born into something new and not let that scare us.

Jesus said whoever holds on to their soul will lose it. That's not what the Church has taught. Church has taught you that Jesus will save your soul. What Jesus says is you have to let go. Faith is letting go.

There's a great quote from a scientist, Loren Eiseley, who's scientific. I don't think he believes in God, but he's a mystic through and through. I love his stuff. He says of our role in the circle of life,

*We are rag dolls made out of many ages and skins, changelings who have slept in wood nests and hissed in the uncouth guise of waddling amphibians. We have played such roles for infinitely longer ages than we have been human. Our identity is a dream. We are a process, not reality.*

That's one understanding of what the resurrection means. It's that our personal death does not end the story that's being expressed through us. It doesn't end the life that's being expressed through it.

Another great realization is that nature is not our backdrop, it's our essence. Nature is not your backdrop, it is your essence. Nature is not born, does not die. So part of the Resurrection is realizing you're a cosmic process.

So one understanding of bodily resurrection is that a body, a cadaver, has to get up. If that works for you, that's wonderful. It doesn't work for me. I want a mysticism that takes in science. I want a mysticism that calls me to universal human rights. Another idea of bodily resurrection is that it's happening in the life process itself, in the physical real world.

This is Martin Luther, and I apologize for putting him down earlier. He said,

*Our God has written the promise of resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.*

Which resurrection would you rather have? The cadaver that got up 2,000 years ago, or one that's happening right now all around you. Augustine:

*And Christ departed from our sight that we might return to our hearts and find Christ there. For Christ left us, and behold, Christ is here.*

That's mystical.

One of the best presentations of a mystical experience, and I think every person here has had them. If you've ever looked at the sky and kind of felt yourself dissolving, kind of melting into the sky, or stood on a beach and again just felt yourself being absorbed by it, that's the experience of a life that's larger than yours. It doesn't take a church, doesn't take a Bible, it just takes presence.

This is a song by Van Morrison, who was raised near the ocean. He wrote a song called *Into the Mystic*.

*We were born before the wind. Also younger than the sun.  
Hark now, hear the sailor's cry, smell the sea and feel the sky.  
Let your soul and spirit fly into the mystic.*

What do we do with death? That's this verse here.

*When that foghorn blows, I will be coming home.  
When that foghorn blows, I want to hear it.  
I don't want to fear it.*

In our story today, Jesus is going to wash the disciples' feet, which is a very strange story. He's about to die. He's about to be executed. Who would think of the comfort of guests at a time like that? But the introduction to the moment is very important. Knowing, it says, where he was coming from and where he was going.

That's that yin-yang that the Christian symbols are supposed to lead us to. Where we come from, where we're going. There's nothing to fear along the way. So he chose to act in kindness.

And I think also what this symbol means is that's always the right response. When we're surrounded by cruelty, we are kind. When surrounded by lies, we are the ones who are honest. When surrounded with ugliness and devastation, we create. What gives us the power to do that is the mystic, the sense of our roots going deep into the cosmic process itself, a tie that binds us together with all animals, all plants, everything, and then the sense that life itself addresses us, and guides us.

Christianity jettisoned the mystical in many places, but it's never died. You find examples. D.H. Lawrence wrote a wonderful poem. He said,

*What a catastrophe for humanity when we cut ourselves off from the rhythm of the year,  
from our unison with the sun and the earth. Oh, what a catastrophe, a maiming of love,  
when it was personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and setting of  
the sun and cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and the equinox.*

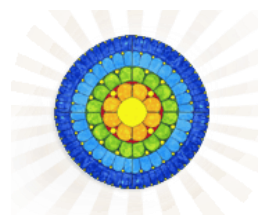
So one understanding of the Resurrection is that one body 2,000 years ago got up. Another mystical interpretation that I would invite you to consider is what Jesus knew, that we are born before the wind, younger than the sun. We are invited to let our souls and spirits fly into the mystic. I invite you now to your reflection on these words.

## Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

Jesus, like Shiva, tells us, "Do not be afraid." May we release our fears and sink into the larger life of which we are a part. May we delight in the cosmic music that sings through each one of us. Now go in peace to love the world into the fullness of its being. May it be so. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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