

How many of you are fond of drinking coffee?
How many have heard of “Doomsday Preppers”?
How many of you have heard of the book, “Saving Paradise”?

The subtitle of Saving Paradise is “How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire.” In the book, co-authors Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker write about their discovery that early Christians were focused on **this** world, rather than on securing a place in some afterlife.

Brock and Parker visited dozens of the most-ancient Christian churches, but they could not find a single depiction of Jesus’ crucifixion. What they did find were beautiful pictures of gardens and oases and a living Jesus encouraging his followers to work together to create a paradise on this earth.

It was not until **much** later that kings and Popes and church bureaucracies twisted the teachings of Jesus to focus on his sacrifice, giving rise to the judgment and atonement theologies of modern Christianity.

Unlike the poet in our first reading, who describes the “incurable pathos” of our human condition, the early Christians were more hopeful, and cooperative. They were not delusional; they knew that life is hard and that we humans are imperfect. These truths did not lead them to despair, however. They viewed them through the teachings of Jesus, to find salvation by working together.

Brock and Parker write, “Within their church communities, Christians sought to help life flourish in the face of imperial power, violence, and death. Though persecuted, they refused to surrender their identity as members of the church.”ⁱ

The authors continue, “early Christians cultivated acute attunement to the life around them...[they] struggled to stay grounded in love, in justice, in nonviolence, in wisdom, and in freedom, to live together as humanity in the garden of God. Church communities helped everyone to share resources, to cultivate wisdom and honesty...and to care for each other in sickness and need. They created systems of restitution, rehabilitation, and restoration that acknowledged human failure and expected [everyone] to take responsibility for their uses of power.”ⁱⁱ

Early Christians interpreted Jesus’ teachings less as dying for each other than as **living** for each other. They did not worry much about the right things to do, or to believe, in order to get into heaven, because they were all too busy actually creating a paradise in the world around them. For these people, the miracle of Jesus was the promise—and the lived reality!—of joy, peace, justice and hope even in the midst of oppression, poverty and violence.

This was the message of Christianity for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Even as it became the official religion of Rome, it retained much of its central message of caring for others. But just as the powerful leaders had used their old gods and old practices to maintain their own power, they did the same with their new religion. Some used Christianity as a tool to rule over—and control—the masses.

Seven hundred years after the death of Jesus, Charlemagne forced the Northern European Saxons to convert to Christianity or be killed. Other rulers followed suit. Many kings and Popes learned to combine

Christianity with violence. Finally, when they needed armies to attack the Holy Lands, some clever tactician explained to potential warriors that Jesus had died for their sins, so there could be no higher honor than for them to go to war and die for Jesus the Christ. As the various leaders slowly twisted the story of Jesus to fit their own needs, theologians worked to make it all seem consistent and necessary.

Until today, when we have two billion Christians, all over the world, celebrating Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection—his atonement for their sins, their salvation through his suffering.

Brock and Parker wrote their first book together on how problematic such "atonement theology" can be. They demonstrate how easily it can be used to oppress other people. Their book, "Proverbs of Ashes" shows how the virtue of self-sacrifice can be co-opted to lead people to accept all kinds of mistreatment and abuse.

Perhaps as a response to such criticism, or perhaps as outreach to a more scientific world, some twentieth century theologians have suggested that the real miracle of Easter is the survival of Jesus' message. Even though he himself died, and his apostles were killed—usually in extremely painful ways—Jesus' teachings survived. The power of ethical, joyful, peaceful living is so compelling that it continues to grow, two thousand years after the death of all its original proponents.

Finally, another understanding of Jesus is that he is one of many prophets and teachers. Even though Jesus can be "1000 times more frightening than the storm," so can others be that powerful, that compelling.

In our second reading, we heard about Frederick Douglass, and all the "lives grown out of his life." We tell stories of Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela, of Cesar Chavez and Susan B. Anthony. We can think of others who worked diligently to create a world where none would be "lonely, none hunted, [no one] alien."

Easter, according to this understanding, is no less miraculous. Such loving work is still transformative. In the words of UU minister, Robert Walsh, "Easter invites us to trust in something more amazing even than the coming of spring. Can we trust this: that love is more durable than life? Can we believe that love casts out fear?"

In a way, this understanding of Easter is a return to the original. It is a celebration of our work "to stay grounded in love, in justice... and in freedom, to live together as humanity in the garden of God."

...And speaking of the "garden of God," the garden of which we are supposed to be good stewards, this Tuesday is Earth Day. Unfortunately, for the 45th time in a row, Earth Day finds our planet in worse condition than it was the previous year.

According to a reportⁱⁱⁱ released three weeks ago by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (www.ipcc.ch), climate change *is* occurring, human activity *is* making it worse, and if we do not act decisively, very soon, the effects will be irreversible.

Global climate change is not just about worse weather, although that is certainly part of it. (Anybody want to see last winter become the norm?) The report states, “Throughout the 21st century, climate-change impacts are projected to slow down economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, further erode food security, and prolong existing and create new poverty traps, the latter particularly in urban areas and emerging hotspots of hunger.”

As one blogger interprets^{iv}, “Heat waves, droughts, floods, wildfires, more intense storms and other extreme weather, rising seas, saltwater intrusion, whole islands made uninhabitable, ocean acidification, reduced fish populations, crop yield declines, food shortages, species extinctions, severe health effects from spreading disease, massive displacement of human populations and violent conflicts...will all worsen even if action is taken immediately. And get much, much worse if it is not...[As always,] the poor will catch it worst.”

Furthermore, according to an article^v in *Scientific American* last month, the infrastructure in our United States is “alarmingly vulnerable to the shocks of climate change.” Quoting a report^{vi} by the U.S. Department of Energy, the article notes that our power grid, health care system, roads, air and sea ports and our communication infrastructure could all experience failures that would make any climate change issues worse.

The report warns of “cascading events,” where the failure of one system causes other failures to occur. For example, on September 9, 2011, a heat wave in Arizona affected an electrical power line, which caused a chain of events in the electrical grid which eventually shut down the San Onofre nuclear power plant, which resulted in a regional blackout, which affected the sewage treatment system, allowing seven million gallons of untreated sewage to flow into the water system. And the blackout disrupted emergency communications, so many people were not notified and ended up using the contaminated water, without boiling it first.

Let the congregation say, “ick!”

This may seem to be a rather depressing conversation to be having on Easter morning, but it is actually the perfect time to talk about this. If Easter is the holiday that celebrates the triumph of life over death, then Earth Day must become the celebration of love over selfishness, of difficult truth over comfortable denial, of communal effort over survival-of-the-fittest. Easter and Earth Day must be combined, to resurrect our own human race from the mess we are creating.

In order to save ourselves, we have to face this new reality. We must embrace *both* the struggle *and* the hopeful aspects of our current situation. It is not yet too late, and we humans have a long history of rising to the occasion. Once we finally roll away the stone of our denial, we often find the angels of creativity and cooperation waiting to help us.

And here is your hopeful Easter message: this is already beginning to happen.

Multinational corporation Procter & Gamble just announced^{vii} an extensive “No Deforestation” policy. Bowing to pressure from various environmental groups, the company has committed to harvest its palm oil *sustainably*. This is good news for several reasons, because trees help to remove carbon from the environment and because Procter & Gamble’s previous methods actually caused forest fires, adding

tons of carbon to the air. Now there will be less carbon added, and more trees to absorb the existing carbon.

Corporations already understand that “sustainability” is a good word to use in their advertising; the more they actually practice it, the more that other companies will have to actually do it, too.

In other encouraging news, the United States Navy can now manufacture jet fuel from sea water.^{viii} The process could eventually create relatively low-cost, carbon-neutral gasoline. Such a fuel would not *reduce* the amount of carbon in our environment, but it would no longer *increase* it, either. This could buy us a little more time for battery technology to improve and for wind and solar and geothermal energy production to become more practical.

Just as importantly, we, too, can make a difference. By working to reduce our own carbon footprints, we can make a positive impact on the environment and make a positive impact on our own lives. Even small actions can generate confidence and hope in ourselves.

The two most effective approaches to reducing carbon monoxide are driving less and eating less meat.^{ix}

Taking public transportation, carpooling, riding bicycles, walking, and combining errands are all obvious ways to reduce our own carbon footprint. We can also plan our vacations differently, to require fewer flights or automobile travel.

Some of us are already vegetarian or vegan. And thousands of Unitarian Universalist carnivores participate in the Meatless Monday initiative. MeatlessMonday.com has many great recipes and lists of restaurants who go meatless, for those of us who don't want to cook—on Mondays or any days. The site also has tips on how to demonstrate the health benefits (and the ecological benefits) of Meatless Monday to your school or workplace.

Finally, let us make ourselves ready for what the Native American leader Black Elk called the coming “Earth Changes.” We do not need to become full-blown “preppers,” with underground bunkers full of freeze-dried food and tons of ammunition, but we can get better prepared to ride out the next winter storm, the next power outage, or the next hike in gasoline prices.

The “ready.gov” website has an excellent checklist for creating a basic disaster supply kit.^x They recommend such things as flashlights, batteries, cellphone chargers, and first aid kits, as well as food and water—at least one gallon per person per day, plus water for food preparation. The ready.gov list suggests storing enough supplies for three days; it can't hurt to have more food and water, just in case.

For those of you who drink coffee, you should include an extra half-gallon of water per day—and you should start buying coffee now. Climate change is already having an adverse effect on coffee growers.^{xi}

The last step—or the *first* step—in emergency preparedness is to get to know your neighbors. Let us get to know the others in this congregational community, and get to know the people who actually live around us. By deepening these relationships, we learn to whom we might go if we need help—and whom you might *want* to help in the event of a short-term emergency.

Again: we're not talking about an apocalypse. But we cannot be in denial any more, either. Things are going to get more difficult. There will be more winters like last year. There will be more droughts, more power outages and higher food costs.

And we can learn from these things. We can come together to co-create a better society, one that is more equitable and more aware of its interdependence with all living things. We can continue to create the paradise on earth that Jesus and his early followers proved possible.

How many of you ever finish a project much before the deadline forces you to? We are now reaching our climate change deadline. We are rolling away the stone of denial, may we find creativity and cooperation on the other side.

In closing, here is an excerpt from a poem by the Rev. Ms. Margie Allen^{xii}:

"...Let us rise again from the dark places, our life-stunting ruts and patterns, the brokenness we think we're doomed to, shed the colorless shroud of our despair, kick away the stone, step into the morning light, this spring.

Let us rise in that light, good company, take hands and courage, and find together the beckoning beginning hidden in every ending we thought we'd come to.

Let us rise again, sprouting grounding root and sun-seeking slip of green, open to the light, the breeze, the space to set real fruit, winnow real grain, touch earth made fertile through our love. Let us, faithful in earth-keeping, learn again to feed the world from never-emptied baskets.

Let us rise again together to resist the relentless push of empire, the treacherous undertow of money and commodity, of things we want but do not need, the blindness of corporate greed, the drive to divide, the violence that grows in disconnection.

Let us rise from the ashes of our lost dreams to dream again. Let us rise again in our weariness, our doubt, our discouragement, to join hands on the journey.

Let us rise and walk in love, in joy, in confidence; let us join hands and walk together back toward Eden, the paradise we were born to inhabit and tend."

So may we be!

--"Roll Away the Stone" written by Rev. Chip Roush
service celebrated at First Unitarian Church of South Bend, Indiana, on April 20, 2014.

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ⁱ Saving Paradise, xviii

ⁱⁱ Saving Paradise, xix

ⁱⁱⁱ http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/IPCC_WG2AR5_SPM_Approved.pdf

^{iv} dailykos.com/story/2014/03/31/1288604/-IPCC-Climate-change-impacts-will-kick-our-butts-and-the-poor-will-get-it-worst

^v scientificamerican.com/article/infrastructure-threatened-by-climate-change-poses-a-national-crisis/

^{vi} eenews.net/assets/2014/03/06/document_cw_01.pdf

^{vii} theguardian.com/environment/2014/apr/09/procter-gamble-bows-to-pressure-on-palm-oil-deforestation

^{viii} dailykos.com/story/2014/04/07/1290380/-Navy-lab-makes-gasoline-from-seawater-as-low-as-3-per-gallon

^{ix} salon.com/2014/03/31/we_cant_stop_global_warming_unless_we_start_eating_a_lot_less_meat

^x <http://www.ready.gov/basic-disaster-supplies-kit>

^{xi} dailykos.com/story/2014/03/08/1282767/-Climate-Change-Is-Now-Messing-With-The-Coffee

^{xii} pronounced with a hard “g” She posted this to Facebook, with permission to share it with attribution