Today’s topic, “Mission Possible: This Message Will Not Self-Destruct Should You Choose to Accept It,” an obvious allusion to the old TV series, *Mission Impossible*, might seem strange for an Easter Sunday service, even for a Unitarian Universalist church. *Mission Impossible*, which originally ran from 1966 to 1973 on CBS, was revised briefly from 1988 to 1990 on ABC, and has since spawned four feature films starring Tom Cruise. It’s about a group of IMF agents—that’s Impossible Missions Force—who use their special skills and cutting edge technology to covertly protect national interests. The show always begins with a mysterious recording stating, “Your mission, should you choose to accept it,” then details what must be accomplished, always warning that, “should you or any of your I.M. Force be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions,” and famously concludes with, “This message will self-destruct in five seconds...” four... three... two... one... Happy Easter.

But for me *Mission Impossible* and the Easter story are both versions of an ancient myth that’s been recurring throughout human history. They are stories of hope, reassuring us that no matter how desperate or difficult our circumstances appear we’re going to make it, even in the wake of something so seemingly final as death. The Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, perhaps our oldest surviving myth, includes the story of King Gilgamesh’s impossible quest to discover the secret of immortality so he can resurrect his dead friend Enkidu. The Egyptian goddess Isis also goes on an impossible mission to save her husband/brother Osiris even after his body had been rent apart and placed in a sarcophagus by his evil brother Seth. The Norse Alfather, Odin, for whom Wednesday is named, is crucified and descends into the underworld where he gives up his right eye in pursuit of wisdom. And Persephone, the Greek springtime nymph is lulled into the realm of Hades where she is held captive with no hope of ever escaping. Yet, with what is, quite literally, a herculean effort, the impossible happens and she is eventually freed from the underworld.

The great mythologist, Joseph Campbell referred to the “Belly of the Whale,” motif, during which the hero is swallowed up by death with no hope of salvation. Most of us are familiar with the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale, but another good example comes from Longfellow’s poem, *Hiawatha*, about the legendary founder of the Iroquois Nation.

Mishe-Hahma, King of Fishes,
In his wrath he darted upward,
Flashing leaped into the sunshine,
Opened his great jaws and swallowed
Both canoe and Hiawatha.¹

In such myths, “The hero,” Campbell explains, “is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died.”² This myth is even prominent in children’s fables. Pinocchio is swallowed by a whale. Little Red Riding Hood is swallowed by a wolf. Tom Thumb is swallowed by a cow. As in the Jesus story, all these protagonists are trapped in the maws of death, be it in the belly of a whale, wolf, cow, or in an outright sarcophagus, tomb, or some version of the underworld itself. Whatever the circumstance, the finality of the situation seems certain, for death is about as hopeless a situation as there is. As the inscription upon the gate of Hell in Dante’s Inferno states, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Nevertheless, Dante does manage to escape Hell and returns to Earth on, what else, Easter morning, just before sunrise.

The story of Jesus’ resurrection also began as a metaphor of hope among his early followers. In Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, the story simply ends with an empty tomb and a few of his confused followers wondering what it could mean. It was but a clever literary device suggesting that even though he is dead, perhaps, in some way Jesus lives on, maybe through his teachings. But by the time Matthew was written just a few years later, the resurrection account shifted from metaphor to a belief in his spiritual resurrection, complete with stories of a few literal Jesus sightings, like Paul encountering him as a flash of light on the road to Damascus. But if his spirit still roams the Earth, why aren’t more people seeing him? Why doesn’t he appear to us? The author of Luke resolves this problem by adding an ascension account. Jesus is no longer seen because he’s ascended to Heaven to be with his Father. But people must have still argued over whether the resurrection was literal or figurative for sometime because by the 2nd century, when the Gospel of John was written, the account is turned into a physical resurrection with doubting Thomas actually touching his scars and Jesus eating food with his disciples.

The problem with the literalization of the resurrection story, at least as far as I’m concerned, is that the beauty of its original metaphor gets lost. The simplicity of ending with the empty tomb leaves the reader with hope and wonder and possibility, even without any concrete answers. This is why the end of Mark’s Gospel always reminds me of the ending of Steinbeck’s, The Grapes of Wrath, in which, after terrible trials and ordeals, the displaced Joad family’s last hope, Rosasharn’s baby, is stillborn. Yet in the old abandoned barn where this tragedy occurs, they discover a man in the final throws of starvation, and Rosasharn begins nursing him. Both stories remind us that there is always hope, there is always the possibility, as Dr. King put it, “to make a way out of now way.”

² Ibid.
So if there is something in the Easter story that can inspire both believers and nonbelievers—Christians and non-Christians—it is this message that there is always hope even when all seems lost. And that’s why I consider the resurrection story to be among the many myths of Mission Impossible we like to tell ourselves, through action packed TV series and movies, or through tales as innocuous as the children’s fable of the tortoise and the hare. As with all Mission Impossible stories, the end seems determined from the start. There’s no way anyone can pull off such a mission because it’s considered impossible to begin with. There’s no way to defeat death. There’s no way a slow moving tortoise can possibly outrun a rabbit. Yet, through humility and determination, and some unforeseen circumstances, the tortoise makes a way out of now way and wins the race anyway.

Of course, as hopeful as these stories of renewal, resurrection, and beating the odds are, they are all just fables. Perhaps, in giving us false hope by asking us to believe in the impossible, they even do us harm. They could make us magical thinkers, believers in the omnipotence of thought, that we will be saved by miraculous intervention, or that our ideas alone are enough to shape our world, with no need to put our hands and backs into the task. Or they could leave us unmotivated to confront the injustices around us because we believe in a better afterlife. Perhaps such stories, as Karl Marx concluded, really are what make religion “the opium of the masses,” an escape from the harsh realities of life.

More than a hundred years ago the philosopher/psychologist, William James distinguished between what he called “Healthy Minded Religion” and “Sick Soul Religion.” But don’t let the positive term fool you; by healthy minded, he was referring precisely to the kind of thinking that believes all our problems can be solved simply by keeping a positive attitude. In so doing, he said, “We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can... so that the world we recognize... is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world really is.” He also called this “once born religion” because there’s no need to be transformed since we imagine everything is perfect just the way it is.

James preferred Sick Soul Religion, or twice born religion, because it doesn’t deny that suffering and evil are a part of life. “...There is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine,” he said, “because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.” In my own study of the psychology of religion, I too have come to conclude that religion at its worst drives us away from reality and deeper into our delusions, and at its best causes us to be more aware of reality and more present and active in the world.

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4 Ibid., p. 137f.
Yet I still cannot accept that all hope is false hope. That all hope is a denial of reality. That all hope is childish, naïve, magical thinking. Or, in honor of the Jewish Passover which is also celebrated this weekend, that when we come to a completely hopeless place, the bonds of slavery advancing from the rear and a vast ocean lapping at our toes, that we don’t have a right to believe the sea will part before us, helping us to make a way out of no way. For in my studies, I have also found that when the mind dwells wholly upon the negative experiences of life it may also deny reality—the reality of beauty, and joy, goodness, and of our power and responsibility to change the world. Such negativity is precisely why Freud came to consider religion “a universal obsessesional neurosis.” And today researchers say two of the basic characteristics of the fundamentalist mindset are paranoia and apocalyptic thinking, the fearful, depressing view that all is lost and the world is coming to an end. In other words, despair and hopelessness can also reflect a state of denial.

Just last week somebody asked me how I can remain so positive about the future when things are so clearly worse than ever before. My response is that I don’t believe things are worse than ever before. I think things are getting better, despite all the ugliness and injustice around us. I don’t have time to go into my evidence for this, but I will say, after realizing paranoia and apocalyptic thinking are part of extremist thinking, I have worked to be less fearful and gloomy myself. I’m also aware that human beings are fearful by nature. Our rare, feeble, upright, bipedal form has evolved to keep us always on the lookout for the danger ahead of us. Likewise, the parts of our brain that are autonomic include the R-complex, or reptilian brain, that causes us to act reflexively through fight or flight, and the amygdala, or emotional mammalian brain, that is always in a state of hypervigilance and fear. The newest part of the brain, however, the frontal cortex, that allows us to pause and think things through, is not autonomic. It actually takes intention and effort for us to reason. It’s also the part of the brain that consumes most our energy, so, in order to conserve energy, we tend not to use it very much. The result is that our minds, like our bodies, are most usually operating from a position of fear and hypervigilance.

So I think utter hopelessness can also be a naïve a position at times. But I also don’t believe in miracles, which is why any hope we have is tied to our own willingness to confront the evils and injustices of this world head on. I prefer the way Pinocchio used his own ingenuity by lighting a fire to escape the belly of the whale, or how the tortoise remained steadfast and determined to win the race, or the way Persephone bargained her way out of Hell, to stories of simple miracles. For, if the world is to change we must change it. It will not happen magically by itself.

But I’m still talking about stories and fables. So let me conclude with a couple of real life examples of impossible missions. Last November the voters of Washington made it possible for gays and lesbians to marry in our State. To me, this was a Unitarian miracle as profound as a resurrection from the grave or the parting of a sea. For prior to the election we knew that if Referendum 74 was to pass, it would need at least 40 percent of the vote here on the Eastside of Washington. But never before had gay marriage been passed in any state when put before the voters themselves. The odds were against us. And in June, just five months earlier, polls showed the vast majority of voters in our area were against it, by a margin of nearly 15 percent. That means we have only five months to accomplish the impossible, to change the hearts and minds of our own neighbors on this issue. We opened our church doors to phone banks and phone banked in other churches, with the hope of convincing our neighbors one at a time, but the bonds of slavery were still advancing from the rear and a vast ocean was lapping at our toes. Our mission seemed impossible!

But just as all seemed lost, a miracle happened, our brothers and sisters at the Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Seattle took up a special collection and sent us a check for $1200 saying, “Use this in your marriage equality work.” We added some money to the pot, found a sympathetic ad company, Emerald Outdoor Advertising, gathered sixteen community faith leaders together for a photo, and created a billboard campaign stating “People of Faith Support Freedom to Marry. Vote Yes on Referendum 74.” The billboard was then placed in three high profile traffic areas prior to the election.

But we weren’t out of the woods yet. Rick Santorum, a powerful voice against marriage equality, decided to come to Spokane to make sure the polls here already favoring his position stayed that way. We responded by quickly organizing a “People of Faith Support Freedom to Marry” rally in the hope of siphoning just a little media coverage from his event at the Doubletree Conference Center. But we knew Santorum was a big fish in small pond, and that we were in the belly of the whale. Yet when we arrived we found the stone already rolled back and the sea parted before us. For in his fear and paranoia, and that of those meeting with him, Santorum refused to allow the media inside his event. Angry and assigned with making Santorum’s visit their lead story, the news media turned their cameras around toward their only option, twenty ministers and two hundred demonstrator’s supporting marriage equality. That night on the news, as with our billboards, voters throughout our region saw the faces of people they know, their neighbors and their ministers, rallying in support of justice and equality. And when the numbers were finally tallied, voters in our area, who only a few months earlier were against Ref-74, voted nearly 47 percent in favor of it—54 percent in Spokane proper. We did it! We chose to accept an impossible mission and it didn’t blow up in our face! We made a way out of no way! Mission possible!
Also last year, a few of us began wondering about the possibility of putting a few solar panels on our church roof to help offset our carbon footprint. But the odds were against us. It would take financial resources we didn’t have, a lot of research and conversation, and, at best, we figured, it would be a small 15 to 30 panel array that we might build upon a little at a time for many years. But the timing was right, financial incentives opened up, support grew to be overwhelming, and we ended up installing the largest church solar project in the Northwest in one fell swoop! We did it! We chose to accept an impossible mission and it didn’t blow up in our face! We made a way out of no way! Mission possible!

And when a terrible mass shooting occurred at a Sikh Temple in Wisconsin, we wanted to reach out in some way, but didn’t know how we could possibly make a meaningful difference in the wake of such a helpless and hopeless tragedy. Then we got the idea of simply hugging our own Sikh neighbors, and within just six days we organized “Arms of Compassion,” inviting our entire community, who showed up in droves, to physically surround the local Sikh Temple while holding hands as they worshiped safely inside. And this small act of compassion brought our entire community together. We did it! We chose to accept an impossible mission and it didn’t blow up in our face! We made a way out of no way! Mission possible!

Today the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane has chosen to take on other impossible missions. We’re engaged in a larger effort to transform criminal justice in our community; To find alternatives to more coal and more coal trains and more carcinogenic diesel fumes being spewed into our air; To end to the Death Penalty in our State; and to prevent violence, gun related or war related, everywhere.

Today, as we officially begin this year’s stewardship drive to support the ministry and mission of our church, we can look ahead at all the daunting challenges before us with hope and confidence that we will succeed, that we will rise to the occasion, outpace the hare by remaining steadfast, open the empty tomb, part the Red Sea, because we are a people with a history of making a way out of no way, of accomplishing the impossible.

Our church mission, should you choose to accept it, is to join together to create a nourishing liberal religious home and to champion, justice, diversity, and environmental stewardship in the wider world. And I guarantee this message will not self-destruct. I guarantee, with your help, with all of us working together and sharing our time, talents, and resources, this mission, our mission really is possible.