In the reading from the children’s book, Madeline, Miss Clavel – the nanny or governess whoever she was – wakes in the middle of the night, turns on the light, and says “Something is not right.” The story aside, the words themselves can get you thinking. They have for me on many occasions. “In the middle of the night” is like when we have finally quieted our minds and shut down all the distractions – or perhaps realized we are in a really “dark” space. “Turns on the light” could be like awakening to some sense of understanding or clarity. And saying “something is not right” expresses a significant reality of our human experience. Something is not right.

I am reminded of Plato (about 400BC – 150 years or so after Buddha) who wrote a dialogue – known as the allegory of the cave – some of you may be familiar with it – his mentor Socrates is asking the questions – and he portrays “unenlightened” mankind as if chained in a cave, seeing only shadows on the cave wall, knowing nothing else - assuming that what is seen and heard is reality. In this allegory, a prisoner (one who must have thought “something is not right”) with great strength of will breaks his bonds and very bravely turns around and proceeds toward the light - eventually to determine that reality lay outside the cave, and that all that was previously perceived were mere shadows and echoes, not reality at all.

The first thing that often comes to mind when I imagine that we are stuck in a cave looking in the wrong direction – the first thing that comes to mind when I think “something is just not right” ... is our religion, or the awkward ways in which mankind has attempted to answer the great questions of origin, the meaning of life, and ultimate destiny.

On Easter Sunday, our Minister, Wendy Fitting, ventured into the story of Lazarus. And her message was repeated in the May Newsletter. When Jesus called the dead Lazarus rise and come out from the tomb, he then instructed his sisters to “unbind him” because Lazarus was stiffly wrapped with the burial cloths.

Wendy went on to say that we should do the same with Jesus: “Unbind him!” And what I was hearing was that Jesus had been wrapped up tight with cultural and religious and mythological bindings, keeping him all but dead and fixed in our perception.

Is it true that we have kept Jesus wrapped up tightly, all but fixed and dead? Maybe some of us were squirming as Wendy worked with these exclusively Christian stories because many of us virtually fled from churches where fundamentalist Christianity or “check-your-
mind-at-the-door” authoritarianism turned us off and made us want to run away from all of it. But, aside from what others have made of him, is there any reason for us to be afraid or shy about this singular teacher to humankind who concluded it with one comprehensive request: “love one another?”

Maybe some of us squirm because the stuff – the information - that is widely broadcast and displayed by many of those who use the label “Christian” has offended and hurt us. We don’t want people to think we’re anything like that.

I object because the name, “Christian” is tossed about so casually. A mall may have a “Christian bookstore.” A radio station may broadcast “Christian music.” You can find a “Christian” marriage counselor. And, as we know, there are many political action organizations that use the word “Christian” in their promotions. Instead of deepening and broadening the rare and lovely essence that might be compatible with that label, “Christian,” they have cheapened it, made it casual, used it to sell products and most conspicuously, identified it with goods or services that either have nothing whatsoever to do with the teachings of the man Jesus – or are completely at odds with them.

But then – maybe I’m getting worked up – nobody seemed to get it right from the beginning. Nietzsche said “The last Christian died on the cross.” George Bernard Shaw famously said “Christianity is a good idea, if people ever tried it.”

From the very beginning those who were loosely known as Christians, two thousand years ago, split and fought with each other. Much of the conflict was over the contentious belief that Jesus was just a man – or was both man and God – or was actually God incarnate. Lots of blood was shed. Then, after several hundred years, Constantine hijacked the major part of the movement and forced them into conformity – adding the power of the movement to the power of his Roman State. Books and heretics were burned as orthodoxy was defined. We remember dimly from old history classes about the 30 years war and the crusades, and the terrible conflicts between Protestants and Catholics – vestiges of which linger today, and we remember the monstrous witch hunts and endless persecutions of Jews and now, the sexual abuse of children by clergy.

As of this day – there are about two billion people in the world who reportedly are affiliated with churches that say they are “Christian” and about 38,000 denominations. They still fight over silly things like “allowing” women to hold certain offices or do certain things or whether clergy can marry and whether people of differing beliefs or sexual natures can participate or even belong. And they fight over the nature of their very being – whether it is inherently good or inherently bad – or sinful as they would say. They still fight over whether Jesus was man or divine or a combination. They fight over who speaks for God on earth – who has authority.

How did a movement based on love seem to go so wrong? Was it what people made of it – or was the Christian ideal flawed – impossible?
Many times when my children were young and something new and exciting was introduced into the household – something that was intended to add to our fun – sooner or later, someone would be crying. I would wonder, how can this thing which was intended as a good thing now be the source of discord. It wasn’t always just about material stuff. It might have been about who got to sit where, or who got to go first, or who seemed to have a bigger or smaller share of something – or something that they perceived as unfair. It was endless – and I see it playing out in my grandchildren today.

It may be more disguised in our adult relationships. But it is the same. Anything that can be perceived as or used to get ahead, to get more power, to get more money, to get more security – these seem to play into some ancient tribal or survival instinct.

We see it today in our national problems where some of our leaders are so driven to get and hold power and make all the decisions without compromise – that the very ideal of democracy is being ignored. And we see it in the marketplace where some take huge helpings from our common-wealth and try to control the mechanisms of commerce to ensure their future advantage.

So would it be accurate to say that religion has power, or is perceived as having power, so that when it is introduced, we fight – like children – because power means we get what we want, we have security, we survive.

It is quite clear throughout human history that every non-democratic political entity has sought to either abolish religion – and take power from it – or marry up with religion and use it to turbo-boost their authority. Constantine was the expert – and what an unfathomable irony it was that a sword and the cross were conflated to legitimate the absolute brutal power of the State .... in the name of the prince of peace. Likewise, the main “Christian” church – purporting to follow Jesus who said to his disciples – “take nothing with you” – has amassed wealth and power beyond the imagination.

Is the spoilage complete? Like children, or emperors or church authorities, have we taken a good thing and turned it into a bad thing? *Have we – or are we about to – throw the baby out with the bathwater?*

Mahatma Gandhi said: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

What did the Christ, as Gandhi referred to him say, after all: The first recorded saying is “I have come to proclaim release to the captives and to give sight to the blind” (sounds like bringing people out of Plato’s cave). And saying that almost got him thrown over a cliff.

But he was radical – a total radical – and it ended up getting him killed although he never hurt anyone and spoke only for peace. It’s difficult for us today, far removed from his time and culture and context to recognize this fact. In one of the stories, he went to a well and asked a *Samaritan* woman for a drink. If you know the context, this was a spectacular breach of religious and cultural norms. Here’s George Lamsa’s commentary on John 4:27
(he’s an expert on Aramaic language and its idioms and the customs of that part of the world:

“In the east talking to a woman is not only not tolerated but looked upon with suspicion … it is a breach of etiquette and a reflection on one’s moral character. … Many eastern poets speak of lovers meeting at the well or spring. This is why the disciples were surprised when they saw Jesus conversing with a woman at the well and judged him by their own standards.”

A woman, even a wife, was little more than chattel – in the 10 commandments, #10 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.” The wife is lumped together with the ox and everything else.

But he spoke with the woman at the well – and didn’t care what people thought. He treated women with equanimity. He healed a woman who had a continuous menstrual flow. By the law she was unclean and if he touched her he would be unclean and have to go through an elaborate and lengthy cleansing process. He called her “daughter,” said her faith had made her well, and didn’t concern himself with the rules.

He was having dinner with friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus – Martha was the homemaker – taking care of all the stuff in the kitchen and Mary was sitting and listening to Jesus teach. Martha was incensed – “tell Mary to help me” – but Jesus refused – in effect teaching that women were equally entitled to learn and be in the presence of a Rabbi and didn’t have to confine themselves to domestic duties if they didn’t want to! That, my friends, was the dawn of women’s liberation!

Then there was the woman caught in adultery (didn’t go after the man apparently). For many reasons the men who caught her felt compelled to stone her to death. The power of Jesus’ refutation of our – everyone’s – tendency to judge and punish has permeated the ages. Most particularly, it serves as a lesson to stop using religion as a cover for vengeful and inhumane impulses. “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone!”

His stand against vengeance and violence - and the spirituals sung by the choir this morning – remind me of the legacy of Dr. MLK, Jr. But for his following the example of Jesus in leading the civil rights movement – that movement would have become the second American civil war. Can you imagine the bloodshed and vengeance and terror that would have been unleashed if he had been a militant – if he had not stood up to them after Jesus’ example?

Near the end of the gospel writings we see that women were clearly among the disciples – that they did not flee the crucifixion scene as the men did – and that a woman – Mary Magdalene, as Wendy pointed out on Easter, was the first to witness Jesus after the crucifixion – meaning she should have been the first Pope!
Summary:

- We have gathered again to ponder the glories and mysteries of this great gift of life – but, like Miss Clavel, aware that “something is not right.”

- Like Plato, we acknowledge that we must leave the cave of our habitual thought, our certainty that we are right, and turn toward the light.

- Like those who misunderstood Jesus from the very beginning, we must look anew at what was taught – as opposed to what others have made of it. He placed love and compassion above rules and religious traditions. He fearlessly healed lepers, mingled with outcasts, taught those considered unworthy, and rebuked those in power – those who then used that power to savagely kill him.

Our century may witness the collapse of Christianity as we know it – except perhaps for Africa, South America and China. But what Jesus truly taught us, is like a precious baby, a love to be held and experienced close up. And for you women – in this – declared “The Year of the Woman,” and for you mothers, as we approach Mother’s Day, Jesus has already proclaimed your inestimable worth, breaking every boundary that has ever been fabricated to limit your personhood, equality, strength, intelligence, and spirit.

Let us not be overcome by what others may have done in the name of - or by hijacking the power of religion. The teachings and the person of Jesus have been universally misunderstood and misused – as Gandhi said. But the real man – he was the bravest of heroes, but a gentle and wise brother and the truest of any friend. We are the ones to unbind him. He is easily at home here in our UU church. He doesn’t care what name we use or whether we have a cross or a fish or nothing here on this altar. His care is that we learn to love each other. He is among us – and he may be seen in the faces all around us.

Meditation:

*Let us close our eyes and open our ears to the beauty of silence in this place*
*You are loved by an unconditional and everlasting love*
*You are altogether irreplaceable in the mind of God.*

*Nothing can separate us from that love except our own misguided thought*
*In the depth of silence we hear the historic clock ticking*

*The tick of this clock marked the prayers of our forbearers and loved ones – through sorrows and joys, wars and weddings, with hope and faith - we now join our prayers and concerns with theirs*
The tick of this clock announces that this very instant is the time for release and renewal.

The tick of this clock announces that this very instant is a time forgive and be forgiven.

In silence, receive now the blessing which has been held out to you forever.

Amen