

The Joy of Easter

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In the Hebrew Scriptures it is written,

Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.

For, lo, the winter is passed, the rain is over and gone;
the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of the birds is
come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land —

The symbols of passion and mating are all around us at Easter. Thursday morning the sun was shining. The sky was a radiant blue. I had my window open and the wind blew a little. With the new green growth the world seemed very much alive, seemed vibrant with life.

Occasionally black bees would hover for a moment outside my window, like small helicopters, searching for the nectar of the flowers. Yellow and white moths also flew by, they seemed to know where they were going.

The squirrels are a constant presence, running in circles at top speed up the side of a tree, one chasing the other in an intense game of hide and seek. They perform acrobatic leaps from branch to branch thirty feet above the ground never falling, possessing an instinctive knowledge of just how to time the leap and which branches, no matter how small, will hold their weight. Their agility amazed me.

A woodpecker, mostly black with a large red crest, and a long bill, looked for insects in a tree. It had an amazing long neck, able to turn and look to the side without moving its feet. This woodpecker may have a nest nearby because I see it every few days.

Three deer found their way to the west side of the church grounds, just below the window of my office. Throughout the day I would glance up

periodically to watch them eating parts of the plants, spring foliage. The deer stayed for most of the day, finally startling when one of them noticed that I was watching from the window.

The world outside my window was an explosion of life, color and movement. The Spring season invigorates me. It is the time of birth and renewal. Tiny buds form on the limbs of trees. Animals return from winter hibernation. Singing birds begin to build their nests. New colors appear.

In the spring, as the juice of life flows through the frame of the Northern Hemisphere, it also cruises through the veins of the human body, for I am part of creation, responding to the commands of nature like a leaf or a flower. Spring is aliveness!

Easter is an affirmation of life, a rejoicing at being alive in the world. The same feelings of rejoicing are in the traditional myth of Jesus's resurrection that appears in the New Testament. According to Mark's Gospel,

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salomé brought spices so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another "who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He's been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

The myth speaks to a profound and universal need. It speaks to our need to believe that after death there is new life, that life is resurrected.

For many of us, this was the belief of our ancestors. I can trace my own family roots back about 400 years. My ancestors came from places like Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Poland. For centuries, first

as Catholics and then as Protestants the idea of the resurrection of Jesus was central in their religious life. They believed that Jesus was resurrected today, on Easter Sunday, making today a time of joy.

It was only about seventy years ago that this old story of Easter started to lose its magic for my mother and father. The story of the bodily resurrection of Jesus had great meaning for my grandparents and their parents, and so on, going back several centuries. But in the middle of the 20th century this story lost its meaning for my parents.

My father said to me that for him the critical moment came in 1939 or 1940. He took a college class entitled the “Bible as Literature.” He was about twenty years old and learned in the class that there were four versions of the story of the resurrection of Jesus and the New Testament, all of them different. He learned that the earliest story, in Mark’s Gospel, was written about forty years after the death of Jesus, and that Matthew and Luke were written about fifty-five years after the events. The Gospel of John was written about eighty years after Jesus’s crucifixion. He learned that the first Christians copied the story of the resurrection from other similar resurrection stories that were part of other Middle Eastern religions of that time.

So my father stopped going to church although he missed being part of a religious community. One day in the early 1950s he was talking to someone about religion, and the man suggested that my father try the Unitarian Church. There he found people who did not believe literally in the resurrection but did believe that in the springtime of the year, light emerges out of darkness, warmth out of cold, and meaning out of grief. He found a community of people who joyfully celebrated life rising from death in the spring.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience, of letting go of the old story of the literal resurrection of Jesus, but are still feeling joy this time of year.

- I feel joy for the rebirth of life in the northern hemisphere of the earth.
- I feel joy for the renewal of my faith in the future.
- I feel joy for the resurrection of my life.

It is a time for new beginnings. Easter has always been a fusion of ideas, a collection of hopes, a combination of expectations. Yet in every

generation Easter says, listen, awaken to your full potential, the kingdom of heaven is all around you, live, live your life fully.

I mean no disrespect to those who continue to hold the old story of the bodily resurrection as meaningful to them. The example of Jesus still invigorates me. His story of the good Samaritan, his story of the woman taken in adultery, His story of the sermon on the Mount, all these represent the highest morality, the greatest guides to ethical living that I know. Every time I remember these teachings, the life of Jesus is resurrected inside me. The teachings of Jesus inspire me all the year around.

Easter is special because the slushy snow of winter has disappeared, and the warm breezes have arrived. The heavy coats are in the closet. Tiny buds appear on the trees and bushes. Incredible smells drift to my nose. The sounds of insects, birds and frogs fill the air. The joy of Easter is about the resurrection of passion.

The Unitarian poet ee cummings put it this way:

Sweet spring is your
time is my time is our
time for springtime is lovetime
and viva sweet love.

The symbols of mating are all around us at Easter. The eggs on our order of service cover, and the Easter bunny are both symbols of fertility. The renewal of passion is part of the joy of Easter.

On Good Friday morning I went outside to get the newspaper. On my front lawn was a living symbol of fertility in the form of a rabbit having breakfast. I said good morning. The hare looked at me and tried to assess whether I was a threat. As I walked to the street, it slowly hopped away, keeping its distance, but in no hurry.

It is Easter:

- The earth is alive again
- The earth is vibrant again
- The earth is filled with colors, smells, and comforting sounds.

It is wild, and wonderful and primitive. A wonderful universe is out there—may we all enjoy it!