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Easter Sunday Sermon: “Being Reborn”

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I was raised in a small town named Baptistown, New Jersey across the Delaware River from Pennsylvania. In this community, I did all my public schooling until I left for college. Since there were no Lutheran churches in the area, my first real experience of church was in Baptistown and at the Baptist Church for which the town was named. The town was at the time I was growing up, a very rural and an agricultural area. I enjoyed the early experience of church; the services, the community and the fellowship, but in my mid-teens I stopped attending the church over the concept of miracles. Easter of course was the greatest of these conflicts with science. At this time, I believed there were absolute truths which were centered on science and understood the acceptance of miracles as an act of faith was equated with accepting Christianity. I saw no other model of Christianity. The acceptance of many of these miracles insulted my rational mind, so I at that time could not find myself a member of this community.

On Sundays, I started attending the other major fellowship in town that was the Volunteer Fire Department.

Now for a teenage boy this was a considerable sacrifice because it was at the church and not the Fire Hall where all the teenage girls were congregating. What more than balanced this decision for me at the time was that many of the volunteer firemen would meet at the fire house Sunday Morning until noon when the New Jersey Blue Laws would allow the bars to open. Needless to say, there was beer at the fire hall, and for many years I was convinced this served as a reservoir for additional firefighting capacities.

Now this Baptist Church as far as Baptist Churches go was not very fundamental. In fact, the church was an American Baptist Church and rejected many of the more conservative influences of their Southern Baptists brethren, but still the many members who dealt with the youth program had a fundamental approach to the bible and faith and that was very restrictive. When I found Unitarian Universalism in college I brought over my skepticism of miracles and so for many years after have had trouble with the Easter Holiday. I thought for a time that this is not a holiday which we UU's do very well.

Yet, I was very culturally tied to the Christian experience of Easter; the sacrifice, the symbols, the story and certainly the hymns and music like we enjoy today. This formed much of my cultural understanding of myself. So for years I struggled with Easter's Christian meaning within our Unitarian Universalist framework. Finally I came to see there were many understandings for the label Christian. I now divide the understanding of Jesus and Christianity into two camps. The Religion of Jesus and the Religion about Jesus: or the religion that stresses Jesus's relationship and human side and the religion about Jesus death. Different denominations stress different sides of this argument. Most Universalists and Unitarians emphasis the former. This was Jon's Jesus. Mel Gibson's movie the Passion of Christ expresses the death side.

I first found my first UU identity of Easter and its meaning when I was a member of a fellowship in Upstate New York. Here on Easter we celebrated the coming of spring when the sap in the maple trees begin to flow and at Easter the fellowship would have a pancake breakfast in lieu of other worship services. In this area of the country which certainly has its hard winters, the experience of the rebirth of the land to spring was certainly aptly expressed in maple syrup; its sweetness, its aroma while we cooked it over an open fire and its flowing from the trees as the snow still covered the ground.

Many early cultures have an Easter like mythology. Each of these traditions is a composite expression of the many different and diverse traditions of the more basic ideals of Easter.

Even the name Easter comes from a Norse Goddess. Oestre was the Goddess of Spring, the fertile mother to whom gratitude for all this abundant life and beauty are due. The festival of Oestre is celebrated today and is being celebrated with our congregation's children now. It is celebrated every time a child searches for an Easter egg which was left by an Easter Bunny and by every adult who aids and abets these frolics. These are all ancient symbols of fertility, and of the goddess whose responsibility and nature it was. But there are festivals of rebirth older than the Norse Goddess that goes back to our primordial roots, when early humankind celebrated the rebirth and resurrection of the earth.

Egyptian tradition brings another root to the universality of the Easter resurrection and rebirth stories; the Nile gods bringing the spring floods which fertilize the land. This is that rebirth is an inner change much as

Buddhism is totally internal. For a person from our western culture we don't speak very often about our inner lives because our being is dominated by our external lives. But the Egyptian sage tells us "It is a feud of unity against duality, the one seeking to unite and the other seeking to divide." 5000 years later from a psychological perspective, we strive to be whole and complete individuals by knowing ourselves and therefore to combine our unconscious self with our conscious self. These are all feeling that the Easter story may evoke.

The Bird, the Phoenix, who is reborn from ashes was from Roman and Greek Mythology but also go back to a Hindu, Persian and Chinese and Harry Potter past. So the idea of rebirth was well before the Christian Era.

When early Christianity was being debated at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., the resurrection of Jesus was viewed many different ways. Some viewed Jesus as having been resurrected and then he was crucified and died. The Valentinian Gospel According to Phillip from the second century said "Those who say that the lord first died and then rose are mistaken, for he first rose and then died...People who say they will first die and then rise are mistaken. If they do not first receive resurrection while they are alive, once they have died they receive nothing." Phillip represented a gnostic school from Alexandria. For Phillip the resurrection was as the Buddha found enlightenment. Resurrection and rebirth was something that occurred in the inner life of the person or metaphorically and not in a physical dimension. Another rejected Gospel is the Gospel of Thomas that predates the four Canonical Gospels, Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. In this Gospel Jesus requires no physical resurrection for he is a teacher of wisdom and rebirth. It was the rebirth of wisdom and is all around us. Thomas says, "The kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people don't see it." This I believe was the Religion that Jesus practiced.

Before you can have a rebirth you have to have a death. This is the Good Friday part of the story. In any real resurrection or rebirth there has to be a symbolic death. Alcoholics Anonymous has the concept that you have to hit the bottom before you can climb out and defeat the illness. This is the same symbolism of Calvary. God has to come to earth and humanity has to kill God, has to sacrifice the good before it can be moved on to a higher good.

This too is a primordial truth. Any initiation into any new state or consciousness of our lives has a symbolic dying before there can be change. Mohammed had to go to the mountain, Moses to the wilderness, Jung into madness, Gandhi had accept primitive Hinduism, the first Buddha had to become an ascetic and Jesus had to carry his cross. All these are symbolic of death so the new can be reborn. All this is to transit a crisis of Self to be reborn as a better being.

When the church was establishing dogma and picking the writings that formed the canon or law of the Greek Scriptures which formed the Christian Church was a time when the world was much more tied to Greek ideas than the Hebraic ideas. The Greek concept of a god descending from Olympus to take a human form and change human events was established in the thought processes of the world thinkers. It was logical that Greek thought came into the development and systematizing of Christianity. The idea of the soul was a Greek concept, in fact the Greek word psyche means soul. This psyche was the inner life. This is what I believe the Easter story is really about. When we hear the story of god becoming human to save humanity, it is the story of a resurrection of giving of ourselves to help the whole of society. We become more us oriented and less I oriented. This was the story of cavalry. The divine can change us as the spring season changes a barren unproductive world into a world which nurtures plants, animals and people. To accept a Christ as a savior can become allowing yourself to be changed in the significant ways that can change the world, being more accepting, looking to help those sections of society that truly needs our support. To accept a reborn Christ is to turn the tables in the temple and not allow materialism to rule your temple life. To accept a resurrected Christ is to be able to change yourself to a different paradigm for the world that as an individual you will be prepared to protest or work for changes like the elimination of racism, poverty, war or prisons.

Another part of the Easter story for me is the concept of hope. The hope that spring brings forth the growth of the earth. This is the covenant of Easter. A covenant and hope realized in the daffodil shoots we see in the lawn outside and the lilies in our pots. For the Easter story can bring us the hope of rebirth. This is a blessing and a curse. It is blessing when we see it as our permission to change ourselves anew again.

Like the earth we are once again given permission to change, we are forgiven our human characteristic to err and permitted to start anew. This

was the message of the man Jesus who forgave all those who Hebrew Society rejected two millennia ago. But the message of hope becomes a curse when we view ourselves as needing to be redeemed because we have been born with some basic flaw from which we feel unworthy of divine or human love. It is a curse when we have to look to an afterlife as a reward for not having a joyous and fulfilling life in the present.

The rebirth and resurrection of the Easter Story is the symbolic drama of all humankind since we left the trees and trekked the plains foraging for food. Its covenant is in the coming of spring and the rebirth of the earth into a place which nourishes our bodies and our spirit. It is the death of our imperfections, and the resurrection of a changed self in relationship to the world and others and the hope that this rebirth will change the world by our actions.

In an ever evolving and never ending world. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche