

What We Bring Forth
Easter and Commitment Sunday, April 16, 2006
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One of the great gifts of the Universalist part of our faith is that it teaches us to look for spiritual truth not in one particular religious tradition alone, but in many of them. It teaches us to look for lessons in scripture, but doesn't let us think of those lessons as exclusive. It lets us move away from orthodoxies that don't work for us anymore, but pushes us to look beneath them to find the kernel of gold, the core truth, still there underneath the layers of dogma.

But there are perils in Universalism, too. One of them is that if we're not careful, we can sometimes dilute the particularity of each religious tradition. We can look so hard for a common denominator that we end up reducing down to almost nothing the specific beauty of a story, a tradition, a spiritual practice. That's especially perilous at this time of year because the Jewish and Christian holy days of this particular season are intertwined, and always have been. It isn't accidental that the celebrations of Easter and Passover fall at the same time. Jesus and all his disciples were Jewish, after all; and according to the gospel story the last meal they shared with each other before his arrest and death was the Passover meal. As long as Christians have celebrated Easter, they have done it right around the time when Passover is being celebrated.

Nor is it an accident that both of these religious holy days fall in the springtime. As far back as we have records of human beings, before any religions whose names are still known to us, there *was* religion, and it was the religion of the earth. It's not hard to understand why. Even in our times, when we see the sprouts poking up from barren dirt, and the feathery shine of new leaves coming out of what look like dead trees, it's easy to feel worshipful toward the earth itself. The miracles of life open up, over and over again, and the natural turning of our hearts is toward gratefulness.

As Universalists we look for the truths of both Passover and Easter. It is possible to hear the two stories and yet resist the impulse to stir them up together into something vague and unsatisfying. When we do that we find that for all their differences they do, of course, have common themes: hope and transformation, perseverance and faith, among others. But beneath those deep religious themes is another one which, at least in my own mind, links them all together. It's a teaching about what we bring forth from within.

The oldest story we know is about bringing forth. It's the earth's story: how the tilt of the planet toward and away from the sun brings us the death of winter and the renewed life of spring and summer. There are myths from every culture that try to frame in human terms the beautiful mystery of what the earth brings forth: new life, year after year. And as part of the earth, we get to join in the mystery every time we till a little plot and plant seeds, every time we turn our garbage into the richness of compost, every time we take a deep breath of the spring sweetness and let ourselves feel grateful.

But we also share in the miracle by telling our stories about what comes forth, not just from the earth, but from the human spirit. And that's one reason why two of these human stories, Passover and Easter, are told at a time when the spring is spilling out all around us. It makes it easier to believe that we too have some new life to pull from our spirits and offer one another.

The Passover story is one of exodus: the escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. For thousands of years now the story has been retold: Moses demands that the slaves be freed; Pharaoh refuses him until the plagues come, one after another, each worse than the one that came before until the first-born son of every Egyptian dies in the night. The Jews, having been warned to use lamb's blood to mark their doorways, are passed over by this terror; and in the morning Pharaoh, no doubt desperate to see the last of them, finally lets them go.

Any of you who have ever shared in a Passover Seder know that the most powerful thing about this ancient story is that it isn't ever *just* an ancient story. It's a human story, and it gets re-enacted over and over again in our flawed and unjust human world. There are always Pharaohs, and there are always people struggling to find the spark of courage and will that will take them to freedom. The Haggadah, the text that's used at the Passover meal to tell the story, is not something fixed and unchanging. There have been thousands of different Haggadahs, bringing the Passover story of freedom up to date again and again.

Over the years I've heard Haggadahs used that focused on women's liberation and on gays and lesbians; Haggadahs that have drawn on the struggles of the Vietnamese or Central Americans or South Africans, African Americans or the handicapped. Each of them asks: Who are the Pharaohs of our day? Who is called to rise up and leave behind their slavery? Every year the Passover story is an ancient re-telling, and every year it's brand new. But its core is always the same: it's a story about what human beings are capable of bringing forth from within ourselves. It's about what we can do, how we can transform ourselves and our lives, when what we bring forth is vision, and courage, and will.

The Easter story holds one of the central teachings of orthodox Christianity: that Jesus rose up, after he had been crucified, rolled away the stone of his tomb and came out again. Of the four different versions of the story found in the gospels, my favorite is from the least reliable but most poetic, the Gospel of John. It's my favorite because its focus on the grief of one person, Mary Magdalene, lets something shine through that is just human, not miraculous.

In John's gospel, it is Mary who gets up before dawn on the day after the Jewish Sabbath. Her beloved teacher has died a horrible death, and it was only by the unexpected generosity of a wealthy man that Jesus was given even the small, late dignity of a tomb of his own, instead of a pauper's grave.

Because of the Sabbath, the body of the beloved had not been cleaned according to tradition, and Mary set out early with her herbs in order to do this last grieving service. But when she got to the tomb she found that the stone blocking its entrance had already been rolled away, and his body was gone. It isn't hard to imagine her rage and despair, to be robbed of even this last farewell. She ran to the others and shouted, "They've taken away his body and I don't know where he is, I don't know what they've done with him!"

The others, needing to see for themselves, followed her to the tomb. Sure enough, the stone was rolled away and the body gone. They probably stood there arguing for a while about what to do, but there was nothing to be done. Who would you complain to, when it risked your life even to admit that you had known him? The government could do whatever it wanted, and the bitterness of that truth just kept getting more and more clear. So finally they left. It was dangerous to stand there, after all.

But Mary stayed there, alone outside the tomb weeping, maybe something defiant creeping in with the grief, something that made her brave enough to stay. And then she caught something out of the corner of her eye, and she turned to find someone standing there, almost right next to her. "Why are you crying?", he asked. "Who are you looking for?" Thinking he must be the gardener, thinking he must know something, maybe thinking even that he was mocking her, that he knew perfectly well who she wanted, she said, as carefully as she could, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I'll take care of it. I won't tell anyone. I'll just take his body and clean him up so he can rest in peace."

And then Jesus said – because of course in this story it was Jesus standing there, and she didn't know it – Jesus just said to her, "Mary". And then she knew, and she said back to him, "Rabbi."

Within orthodox Christianity, the Easter story is about Jesus coming forth from the tomb. But for those of us who believe that Jesus was a human being like us, we know that when the human body dies, it dies. It belongs to the earth, and it is right, and comforting, to know that we dissolve again into that sweetness. So we need to look for something else in the Easter story.

In the version John tells, Jesus is really not the only one who comes forth from death. *Mary* hears her name called, and suddenly her eyes are opened to a new reality. She is called out from the blindness of her grief and despair, and from within herself she finds a new way to see and to understand what has happened to her. I take that Easter story as truth. It points to the moments that arise all through our lives, when something within us is called, called out, called forth, called to be our truest selves, called to a deeper understanding of our world.

Today, in this bright opening of the earth, in this turning season when new life is pouring out all around us, what will we bring forth from within ourselves? We are a troubled tribe, we human beings. The unfolding story of our time on earth is one clouded with pain

and cruelty, with missed chances, unthinkable heedlessness and indifference, as well as all the bright notes of decency, kindness, freedom and courage.

But the message of our faith is this: we get to have a part in how the story unfolds. What we bring forth from within ourselves changes the whole mix. We do not have an impact on our world only through our obvious choices of action: how we vote, when and how we march or protest, whether we teach or feed or heal or help someone. We also have an impact through the selves we carry *into* all those actions. Who we *are* matters just as much as what we *do*: who we are, what we let ourselves bring forth.

So: in addition to being Easter, and the middle of Passover, and the middle of the beautiful unfolding spring, today is Commitment Sunday. Today we make our commitments for the money we will give to support this congregation in the coming fiscal year. But there is a question to lift up in our minds hearts *before* we ask ourselves what we will give to sustain this faith community. What do we want to bring forth? What do we want to bring forth together? What power, what vision, what courage, do we want to bring forth? What compassion, what generosity, what insight and wisdom, do we want to bring forth?

May we find them all within ourselves, and through the common will we share in this congregation, may we make them manifest in what we do in the coming year. AMEN.