

EASTER: WHO COULD LIVE WITHOUT IT?
 Unitarian Congregation of South Peel
 April 19, 1987

OPENING WORDS

O sweet spontaneous
 earth how often have
 the
 doting
 fingers of
 prurient philosophers pinched
 and
 poked
 thee
 ,has the naughty thumb
 of science prodded
 thy
 beauty ,how
 often have religions taken
 thee upon their scraggy knees
 squeezing and
 buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
 gods
 (but
 true to the incomparable
 couch of death thy
 rhythmic
 lover

 thou answerest

 them only with
 spring)

--e.e. cummings

SERMON by the Rev. Mark Mosher DeWolfe

Some holidays are exercises in faith. Celebrating them helps us get through dark times by seeing in them the beginnings of light. Christmas is like that. When the year is coldest, the nights longest, we remind ourselves that light and warmth are conceived in darkness and cold; that the days begin to get longer. We make that holiday; it is entirely an act of the human spirit; the world provides no reminder that warmth and light are coming. Oh, sure, the days do get longer after then, but around here the weather in January and February is usually worse than the weather in December. So in December, knowing things will get worse before they get better, we remind ourselves that they will get better.

Some -- perhaps even most -- holidays celebrate historical events. Certainly this is true for Canada Day, Victoria Day, civic holidays; it is true for Channukah and possibly true for Passover, at least insofar as we can historically date the victory of the Maccabees and the Exodus. We can't historically prove the miracles associated with them, so celebrating the miracles is not

celebrating the history; but the holidays exist because history happened: the Hebrews left Egypt, the Maccabees overthrew the Seleucids.

Even for these historical holidays, we celebrate them in their human meaning. Passover is about freedom from slavery; Channukah, too, about freedom when your country has been overrun by foreigners impressing upon you their worship and their ways. I would even go so far as to say that our civic holidays have importance because they affirm a national identity, speak of common values and ideals which make Canada a nation. So historical holidays too have their place largely for what they do to the human spirit.

Orthodox Christians maintain that Christmas and Easter are historic holidays -- that the events they record really happened. I doubt it, myself. Jesus probably wasn't born in Bethlehem and the physical resurrection of his body is hardly historically provable. Much more likely that the early church developed these holidays for the spiritual reasons we associate with them: welcoming the light that comes into the world; celebrating the victory over death of the spirit of a beloved teacher. Their historical components are less important; they are the stories which dramatize what we need in these holidays. As myths, they are excellent material upon which to build a religion.

Yet in a way, Easter is different. If we didn't celebrate the civic holidays, we'd lose track of what they meant, lose the history they remember and the identity created by them. If we didn't celebrate the holiday of spiritual hope, of light in the darkness, we wouldn't remember spring's approach until it happened (and boy, would we be surprised!). But Easter is different.

Easter is the holiday of the accomplished fact. It is happening around us even as we celebrate it. We can't claim that Easter is just a product of our own spiritual longing for light, warmth, or freedom. Easter is a joyous singing that life has sprung again, the earth is green, the snow melted and the air gentler on our faces. It has happened to us here and now, this resurrection of the earth.

Easter is not a holiday of hope for those who are still suffering, nor a remembrance of suffering past. Easter is not about an ongoing struggle for justice. Easter is about being freed, here and now, from "winter's bond and pain." Easter is about crying out, "Look around you, it's happened, it's here, it's now, allelujah!"

Easter doesn't just happen on that Jerusalem hillside two thousand years ago. Easter is happening here and now among us. That British pagan goddess, Eostre, whose name adorns the holiday even now, isn't dead with her worshippers, she's being born in those forsythia buds out by the parking lot. Easter, more than any other holiday, is happening right here and right now.

The Catholic and Orthodox Christians have the right sense of it in one of their customs. In many Christian communities, the people greet each other on Easter morning not with "Hello," not with "Good Morning," not with "Where's my coffee?" but with a cheerful: "He is Risen!" And the answer comes back, "He is risen indeed!" This holiday is no tame memorial to a spiritual master dead these two thousand years, it is a present tense experience for them.

Our Protestant ancestors, for all the good they did, forfeited something important when they demoted Easter to a memorial of a historical event. They thought they were being reasonable and scientific, in tune with the spirit of the modern age; as a result they reduced the holiday to a question of whether or not Jesus' resurrection can be historically proven. They lost a fundamental insight into Easter: an insight older than Christianity by thousands of years: Easter happens here and now, on these hills in our days, as the rivers swell, the fish spawn, the birds return and the trees bud, blossom and leaf. Easter is a holiday of an accomplished fact, happening before us as we celebrate it.

This Easter I would urge us to an earthier Unitarianism, a Universalism which binds us to the earth and its seasons. I call us to a faith in the renewing life which is embodied not only in the budding trees, not only in swelling brooks, not only in the returning birds, but even in our own bodies. Let our Unitarianism mean our oneness with the earth which nurtures us, let our Universalism too mean we are one with the world, part and parcel of an evolving, interconnected, interdependent whole. This Easter it isn't Jesus who is reborn, it is you and I in whose veins new life runs, you and I who have rolled away the stones of our tombs.

One of my favourite jokes on the United Church of Canada has to do with the banners which decorate the Metropolitan United Church in downtown Toronto. Metropolitan Church was built to be the cathedral church of Methodism in all of Canada, a Canterbury and a Westminster Abbey for the whole country. Around the vault which frames the chancel are colourful banners, truly gawdy, which bring a sense of earthy joy to the overwhelming uplift of the gothic architecture. The words on the banner are from one of my favourite poems by the American poet e.e.cummings. The joke is that not only was cummings a Unitarian -- his father was a Unitarian minister! And I would close this sermon with those words now -- for me, they express as no other can the spirit of Easter, the spirit of this morning:

I thank you God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and of wings;and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened.)

--e.e.cummings

