

Everybody's Birthday
UUFP

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In the Western Church, between March 21 and April 25, on the first Sunday, after the first full moon following the northern spring equinox, the most important and oldest festival of the Christian Church, is held, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I have fond memories of Easter baskets during this time of year. It was a mini version of Christmas. As children, we'd come downstairs on Easter morning to discover what the Easter bunny had left for us. There were always chocolate rabbits---some years, they were larger than others. And there were those sticky, candy chickens—I think they were always yellow...at the time I liked how they would kinda melted in your mouth. Hard boiled colored eggs. And the gift that never seemed to disappear, those little candy eggs that came in many colors---jelly beans.

I knew that Easter was about the resurrection of Christ, but somehow, that never seemed the central story. It was boiling and dying eggs, by the dozens. And we always got a new set of clothes to wear to church.

I found the story leading up to the crucifixion pretty compelling...it had drama and all of that. But the part of Jesus on the cross was hard to take and the idea of him being put in a cave and flying off to heaven just never resonated for me. It was too fantastical for even my child's mind.

It seemed there were lots of people then, and still, who simply dismiss the story of the resurrection and who focus much more on Easter baskets, chocolate and dying boiled eggs. But like many things that have little meaning as a child, as an adult, I've come to believe there is something of value in that story...whether it is understood literally or as a metaphor.

I found a blog posting by Kathryn Slattery, in which she tells a story of how a church community helped young people engage the Easter story. They bought a number of caterpillars, weeks before Easter. They let the kids hold them and put food out for them and care for them. They watched as the caterpillars spun themselves into a cocoon---as if by magic they were transformed into something that looked nothing like their prior selves.

They then let time run its course and lo and behold, something magical, something miraculous appeared, a butterfly. The children let the butterflies go; they set them free, free to escape the earthy plane and fly off into the sky, maybe even up to heaven. Slattery says the church elders asked the kids what was the difference between Christmas and Easter.

An astute young fellow said that Christmas was Jesus' birthday but Easter was everyone's birthday. The church elders knew that child had gotten the essential message of Christianity. An opportunity of rebirth for each and every one of us---the saint, the priest, mother, father, the drunk, the poor, homeless people, and in some denominations, even gays and transsexuals.

More important than the birth of the Christ child is the resurrection, not just the death of Jesus, but the resurrection of Christ, proving himself the son of God. The resurrection is what becomes the central story of Christianity.... representing victory over death, eternal life for those who believe.

Some talk about him as the lamb of God, the sacrifice of God's only son to forgive the sins of the world—at least for those who believe. Others talk about the resurrection in terms of new life, eternal life---a new life in heaven with the redeemer.

The book of Jeremiah calls it a new covenant. Chapter 31:31-33, reads, *"The day is coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband," says the LORD. "But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the LORD. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

Another significant holiday that occurs in the spring is Passover.

Passover begins on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Nisan and lasts for seven days (eight days for Orthodox, Hasidic, and most Conservative Jews). In ancient times, this was the time of the first ripening of the fruit of the barley. Jewish people celebrate Passover to commemorate their liberation, by God, from slavery in Egypt and their freedom as a nation led by Moses.

It took ten plagues to be inflicted on the ancient Egyptians before the Pharaoh would release his Israelite slaves. With each plague more severe than the last, the tenth was the death of the Egyptian first-born. The Israelites were told to place a mark on the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a slaughtered spring lamb so that the spirit of the Lord would know to “pass over” the first-born in those homes.

The Israelites were said to have fled so quickly there was no time for their bread dough to rise. Passover has therefore been called the feast of unleavened bread, as no leavened bread is eaten during Passover. So this too is a celebration of a resurrection of sorts, of new life unfolding. In spring time!

There seems to be little debate that Easter incorporated Pagan festivals of spring. The word Easter comes from the Saxons. Sacrifices were made to Eastr, the goddess of spring at about the same time as Passover. There are a number of theories about the relationship of Easter to pagan celebrations.

One references a Sumerian legend of Tammuz and Inanna, the myth of the “Descent of Inanna”. Tammuz dies and goes to the underworld. His wife, eventually goes after him and is killed while in the underworld. Her disappearance causes the earth to lose its fertility, things stop growing, animals stop reproducing.

Fearing the death of the earth, gods of the earthly plane send the plant of life and water of life into the underworld to resurrect them---just long enough for them to return to earth as the light of the sun for six months. The cycle continues bringing death in winter and life in the spring.

Another story tells of Eastre, also known as Ostara and/or Austra, as the goddess of Spring, representing the Spirit of renewal. As the bringer of light after a long dark winter, the goddess was often depicted with the hare, an animal that represents the arrival of spring as well as the fertility of the season. She was celebrated at the Spring Equinox, marking the day when light is equal to darkness, and days will begin to grow longer. The egg is also associated with spring, fertility and renewal. There is something about this thing called Spring!

While in seminary, I took a course on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. At the end of each segment we were asked to write a paper on the religion. We had very specific instructions: write from the perspective of an adherent. In other words, we were asked to climb into the religious beliefs, take them on as our own---what made sense, felt right and was believable? What was uncomfortable, felt uneasy, that we couldn't adhere to? What was the power in that faith belief and where was it weak?

The instructions were intended to change our reference point. The point was not to go to an Italian restaurant and compare the food to the Chinese or Mexican food we might be fond of. He asked that we engage the faith beliefs on their own merits. He asked us to view the religion from the inside out, not the outside in.

All too often it seems, we view faith beliefs from the outside in. The net impact is that we have a tainted view. We view faith beliefs too often from a scientific or logical perspective and deem them lacking. Or we superimpose our particular perspective and distort their true meaning.

On this Easter day, I suggest we spend some time with the Easter story, as a new meal, to be experienced on its own merits. Discard your tainted glasses, engage the meaning of the story. Where is there merit, where is there wisdom, what can we take away as a gift of discovery. Then and only then, assess where the story leaves you lacking, maybe unfulfilled.

What is the value of being in a covenantal relationship with God, or a god? How does it serve us to know that we will not be forsaken? Is it comforting to know there will always be a home for us, no matter our missteps and frailties? Is there something to be learned from this God-man, who walked the earth, who always demonstrated love and compassion?

If we are known by our deeds, what will we be known for, what will we be disciples of? What does it mean that the first shall be last and the last shall be first? How might it apply in today's world?

I see new life unfolding all around me. I see people who have been resurrected from long dark days and nights, from grief of loss and disappointment. I see renewal of the Spirit, growth in character, deepening of relationships, affirming commitments. I see a willingness to speak the truth to power, a willingness to risk standing on the side of love.

It's Spring time. New growth abounds. Will you let it inspire you? Enliven you? Renew you? Are there relationships that should be resurrected, watered and fed? Where in your life have you been dormant? Is it time to come out, time to be more of who you truly are?

Let us choose to be swept up in the season and truly come alive. Let us know the warmth in our own hearts.

May we each blossom into who we were meant to be.

Amen