

2006-04-16 Easter
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Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate life together
in the splendid spring of the year.

How fly the years! Another Easter is upon us!
Once again the glad music of life!
Once again the flowers and festivity!
Once again the summons to be who we are!

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Exultet:

Seed. Hard and round, like an eye.
Root. Soft, pale, like a hair.
Shoot. Sharp, elegant, like a finger.
Stem. Proud, strong, like a muscle.
Bud. Folded, rounded, like a fist.
Blossom. Radiant, delightful, like a laugh.

Exultate! Iubilate! Levate omnes in hoc dies.
Exult and rejoice! Rise up all on this day.

silence for a time

Memory. Like a deep lake in which we float.
Hope. Like wings that lift us in a dream.
Sisters and brothers. Everyone.
On this great day, we lift up the names
of those who have gone before us who
paved the road that led us to this moment.
Making in our mouths the sound that is their name, or beating out, with the rhythm of our silent
hearts, their presence within us,
we bring them into this, our celebration of life.

naming

9 AM

From seed to flower runs the course

of the earth. From tight bud to open and wild rose runs the hope of the world. Holy, holy, holy is
blossoming of
flowers and human hearts,
sanctus, sanctus, sanctus...
is the rose that is opening onto the golden world.
Hosanna, alleluia and amen.

The First Reading *is from the North American theologian Paul Van Buren. He wrote these words a long time ago, which is again to remind you that the things which the Jesus Seminar and others have been saying recently are only the newer and more substantiated forms of what was said decades ago. His book, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, was a trail-blazer.*

We shall summarize our interpretation of the language of Easter. Jesus of Nazareth was a remarkably free person in his own life, who attracted followers and created enemies in a manner comparable to the effect of other liberated persons in history. He died as a result of the threat that such a free human being poses for the insecure. His disciples were left no less insecure and frightened. Later, Peter, and then other disciples, had an experience. They experienced a discerning situation in which Jesus, the free person whom they had known, themselves, and indeed the whole world, were seen in quite a new way. From that moment, the disciples began to claim something of the freedom of Jesus. His freedom began to be “contagious.” For the disciples, therefore, the story of Jesus could not be told simply as the story of a free human being who had died. Because of the new way in which the disciples saw him and because of what had happened to them, the story had to include the event of Easter.

The Second Reading *is a marvelous spring poem by the great New England poet, Mary Oliver.*

Mysteries, Four of the Simple Ones

How does the seed-grain feel
When it is just beginning to be wheat?

And how does the catbird feel
When the blue eggs break and become little catbirds?

Maybe on midsummer night’s eve,
And without fanfare?

And how does the turtle feel as she covers her eggs with the sweep of her feet, Then leaves them
for the world to take care of?
Does she know her accomplishment?

And when the blue heron, breaking his long breast feathers,
Sees one feather fall, does he know I will find it?
Will he see me holding it in my hand?

As he opens his wings
Softly and without a sound—

As he rises and floats over the water?

And this is just any day at the edge of the pond,
A black and leafy pond without a name
Until I named it.

And what else can we do when the mysteries present themselves but hope to pluck from the
basket the brisk words that will applaud them,

the heron, the turtle, the catbird, the seed-grain
kneeling in the dark earth, its body
opening into the golden world?

Sermon

Easter always prods family memories. There were the elaborate family dinners, certainly, at the scented homes of my beloved grandparents, the home-made spinach ravioli and stuffed spring artichokes, the chocolate in the baskets, the sweet uplift of spring lilac in the air. But there was the religious part of Easter too, for me, and I am not talking about doctrines. I'm talking about the mysterious Easter weekend rituals at the church of my youth, where instead of the usual Latin, we suddenly started chanting ancient Greek *Agios Ischyros, Agios Athanatos eleison imas*. The great Easter candle was brought out at Saturday midnight, studded with grains of incense, carved with red Greek letters, then, once kindled from a new fire struck from flint, was plunged into a deep bowl of water as incense rose in the candlelit dark. It was the night of the resurrection. It was the night of transformation. It was about things not staying the same, but being transformed. It was very intense, and very, very, very mysterious.

Paul Van Buren, although he might certainly have enjoyed the mysterious rituals which used to accompany my childhood Easter, explains clearly that the Easter event was not about something staying the same...i.e. the same body coming back after it died. No, he says, Easter is about something new, something different: a transformation. The transformation of a human teacher, a remarkably free human being who died, into something else...a community of women and men and children trying also to be free.

A "contagious" transformation Van Buren calls it. Contagious, that is, unexpected by them, and out of their own conscious control...or the control of others.

Such transformations are far more mysterious and wondrous to me than what Easter has been reduced to over the years by folks who confuse the religious life with magic, and the promise of their own personal salvation.

Mary Oliver walks out to the pond near her house in Provincetown, and finds mysteries too. Not preserved from ancient times, but fresh as the morning. No Greek, just sweet silent imagery.

What does she find? The seed, transforming slowly into a stalk of wheat, which looks nothing like a seed. The round blue egg giving way to a moist baby bird, which looks nothing like an egg. The turtle trustingly covering up her rubber-soft eggs, which resemble not in the least her

hard and crusted shell. The magnificent blue-feathered heron, aloft in heaven, great wings akimbo, looking nothing at all like the little furry chick it once was.

I don't think it was Easter morning at Blackwater Pond, but the beautiful and thorough transformations Oliver paints...the four mysteries, as she calls them, do not strike me as terribly different in metaphor than the ancient resurrection story.

Indeed, the early Christians, who had not yet fallen into catastrophic literalism in their religious lives, would have understood Mary Oliver to have written a most excellent Easter poem. After all, their catacombs in Rome, where they laid their own dead, were decorated on the walls with paintings of natural imagery, butterflies, roses.

Because they understood that butterflies and roses speak of transformation, of things not staying the same. The undulating caterpillar and ovoid pupa look nothing like the spreading orange wings of a Monarch butterfly aloft in the air. The seed or cutting that produces a rose looks nothing like the whirling dervish of velvet petals and fragrance that is a rose. And, in the same way, the new world, which the students of Jesus saw some time after he died, looked nothing like the world looked on the day he died. All of this is transformation. All of this goes against expectations. And all of this transcends ordinary human cunning and control.

The powers of the world, according to the story, decided that the very human and remarkably free person, Jesus, was not to *be* Jesus anymore. He was to be as they wanted him to be. Under their thumb. Controlled by their unquestioned custom. Controlled by the systems of a violent society. Controlled by fear. Controlled by terror. Controlled by power and might. Controlled by shame. Controlled by threats to his identity, threats to his security and peace.

So when he *continued* to be himself even after all the warnings, they killed him, the story goes.

But, the point of Easter is this: they did not control him, even then. They did not confine him to being only a corpse rotting in the earth any more than the sheer power of growth and life in the natural world of which were part can confine the rose to the seed, or the butterfly to the pupa. Because it's transformation and growth and becoming which are the central activities of the world, not changelessness. There is not changelessness. Whenever something claims not to change, begin to be suspicious. Someone is trying to control something.

What makes the Easter story a religious story to me is that the change goes in the direction of love, in the direction of health and wholeness, and, in the direction of others. Van Buren calls the mystery of Easter a "contagion." A word that implies that Easter is not an event that happened to an individual, but to a multitude.

Now Paul Van Buren would be the first to note that such an Easter doesn't necessarily have to do with Jesus, any more than Mary Oliver's hatching birds and rising seedling have to do with Jesus. Eastering, transforming, went on before Jesus even lived, and after Jesus died, and it happens without reference to Jesus at all.

Let me give you an example from the lifetime of Jesus, but not about him. Four years before Jesus even died; there was a clear example of what I am calling an Easter event, of a multitude of

people refusing to be controlled, bullied or ridiculed. An event where courage...great courage...was contagious. And where life triumphed.

The new Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, had arrived in the Province of Judea. He resided on the sea coast in the quite beautiful resort town of Caesarea, a city named after his boss, Tiberius Caesar.

The Roman garrison in Jerusalem was small. But at certain holiday times, the need for military control of the unruly populace was greater, by Roman calculation. Pilate seems to have arrived in time for such a holiday, and so sent a whole new troop of cadets down to Jerusalem while he remained in Caesarea.

Now Pilate was not known for his genteel politics. He was a ruffian, used to controlling his world. On being told that the Judean people were different from all of Rome's other conquered people, he refused to go along with the program. Instead, he insisted that conquered people remain conquered, and stop asking for special privileges. So, even though he was told that, for Judeans, it was an affront and insult to claim that any human being was God, so that the traditional Roman standards claiming that Caesar was divine were not used in Jerusalem, Pilate nevertheless did send them into Jerusalem under cover of night, and had these votive shields set up on the wall of the Antonia garrison which overlooked the temple itself.

As soon as the citizens of Jerusalem awoke, and first light glinted off the profile of Caesar with the Latin word DIVI (of God) inscribed over him, a fierce anger rose within them. They took their beef to the commandant in the garrison, but he insisted that the governor, the Prefect himself, had ordered this.

So literally thousands of Jerusalemites left home and work, and marched the 120 kilometers up to Caesaria-on-the-Sea, a three-day trek. Their upset was contagious, and, as they walked, they gathered folks from all the towns along the way. Soon they arrived at Pilate's palace in Caesaria, and they began to protest outside his door: "Take the shields down. They are an insult. They are telling us not be ourselves anymore. They are telling us we should be like you, worshipping a human being as god's son. But we do not do that. We are not you. You have your ways. We have ours. Do not try to make your ways our ways. We will not put up with it." Pilate refused to see them or listen to their appeal, even though he was apparently quite shocked by the sheer number that showed up. After five days, he reached a very high level of frustration. He came out to speak with them. At a signal, he surrounded them all with his soldiers, who drew their swords. "All right," he said, "enough of this nonsense. I have the army. I have the power. I have the money and I have the authority. Go home right now and stop this stupid protest or I will have you all killed." They all looked at each other, and conferred, then they threw themselves down to the ground, exposed their necks, and said together, "You may kill us if you must, but you may not make fun of our way, our religious practices, or our culture."

Of course, even so controlling a man as Pilate was smart enough to know he could not begin his governorship by a wholesale slaughter of ten thousand citizens. So, with grinding teeth and a red face, he ordered the shields to be taken down. Immediately, the Judean citizens went back home to their towns and cities.

These people had been transformed, no less than a seed which becomes a rose. And their transformation was contagious. From citizens, not eager to rock the boat because of the threat of

control evidenced by the Roman Army's presence, to a courageous and non-violent community of identity and power, unafraid of death, threats or unelected authority, these citizens were transformed. Who would have expected it? It was a surprise.

A beaten down people, a mere colony one moment, and then, first thing in the morning, a whole community of courage and strength.

First thing in the morning...a resurrection, a transformation. Sounds like Easter to me.

There is no evidence in this story that the Judeans wanted the Romans to become like them. If the Romans wanted to believe that a man like Caesar was God's son, or that Fate governed all things, fine. In their own homes. Their own cities. But there was no reason to trot out their religious convictions in other lands and to try to control other religious convictions.

Sometimes people ask me if I wish that everyone would be a Unitarian Universalist. I say no, wishing for impossible things is a waste of my time, and wishing that all people would become Unitarian Universalist is not much different than me asking to be spared death, or asking for a billion dollars in cash to rain from the sky, or wishing for world peace to break out tomorrow, by a miracle. I do not think such a thing is even possible...or even desirable. I am sure there will always be people who have different religious sentiments than I do, who may choose to believe that a certain man is a God, or that the world was created in seven days, not in thirteen point five billion years. Their friends love them, perhaps, just as much as my friends love me. They are loved. And I am loved. But in order to make a world together, and to live side by side, no one group of people, whatever their religion or politics, and no matter how much their friends love and praise them, can claim control over all other groups of people. Any control. Control by fear. Control by terror. Control by lying. Control by innuendo. Control by ridicule. Control by swagger. Control by a sense of entitlement. Or control by violence.

Easter for me is the proclamation that even when the Lords of Control try, quite literally, to nail down a teacher of love, the body may be killed, but the love cannot be stopped. The love will look different afterward, like a butterfly looks different from a pupa, or a bird looks different from an egg. Like an unexpected contagion, love will strike unexpected, unforeseen. And like the perfect rose, or narcissus, or daffodil improbably rising from a hard and homely little bulb or seed, Easter itself blossoms, the seed totally transformed. Easter, in short, names control for what it is, mere bullying, and calls for a life that transcends such cruel nonsense, a life, an Easter life, in fact, that nature demonstrates with almost embarrassing extravagance each and every April.

In many ways, my Easters have not changed much since when I was a child. My grandparents are gone, my parents are far away, but I will still gather loved ones around my table this afternoon. The feast will be Mexican, not Italian, but it will be equally memorable, I hope. And the church rituals are different, but equally mysterious, and certainly as beautiful as the ones I knew growing up...no meter-high candle, or ancient Greek, but the Flower Ceremony is both mysterious and poignant. Yes, poignant. After all, its creator, the Czech Unitarian Norbert Capek, was also courageous, even when the Nazis told him to shut up, or die. Though he did die in Dachau in 1942, his love, his courage and wisdom may also prove contagious, I hope, to those of us who live in this hard modern age, when school, court and legislature are now the battlegrounds where some people...even religious people...seek control over other people. I am telling you this because Easter is not just for Jesus, you see, or the ancient Judeans, or for nature poets like Mary Oliver, or radical theologians like Van Buren, or for long dead Unitarians like Capek. Easter is for us too. The living.

Everything is ready now. Therefore, let us keep the feast.

Offering

As our children prepare to come back and join us, let us offer our pledges and gifts for the support of the life of this congregation, which so nourishes us day after day. Blest is this time of giving and receiving, another way to make small seeds of giving bloom at last.

Flower Ceremony:

Consecration of the Flowers

The Capek Blessing and Hallowing of the Flowers

One hand is extended over the flowers as each person reads:

Minister:

In the name of the providence which implants into the heart of the seed the future of the flower, and which implants in our hearts that unrest which will not be quenched till people live lovingly with each other, we bless these flowers.

East Voice

In the name of the highest, in which we live and move and take our being, and in the name of the deepest, which makes father and mother, brother and sister, lover and loner who they are, we bless these flowers.

South Voice

In the name of the prophets and sages, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of the age of mutual respect, we bless these flowers.

West Voice

Let us renew our resolution, sincerely, to be sisters and brothers, regardless of the barriers which estrange.

North Voice

May these flowers be for us the sign of the glory and variety to which we aspire, knowing the whole while that we are one family, the family of spirit and nature.

Together:

In this holy resolve may we be strengthened by the spirit of love, that we ourselves may bloom, bloom in splendor of a joyful life, and endeavor to be ever more perfect in our days.