

## **‘HERE COMES MAY ! (we hope)’**

The homily at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.  
on April 20, 2003  
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

We gather in celebration to remember holidays, to greet the warmth and beauty of spring as we begin our final approach to May at last. Those of you who were here on the first Sunday of the year, as the cold, relatively dark months of January and February were upon us, may remember that I closed with these words, “I would not lie to you. I tell you two things: even in January, duty and joy are there to be found, [joy] even if you don’t ski, [duty] even if the prospect does not seem promising. And May has never failed us yet.”

And that wasn’t exactly a lie, exactly. There is a force in nature we might call May that is a pull toward life reborn, toward renewal and growth. Hal Borland wrote, “Simple as sunrise, May is still a fundamental force that eludes our analysts and researchers, for it is a basic fact of life, and of the earth itself. It is the burgeoning, the resurgence, the promise-fulfilled of life insistent. It is – well, it is May and altogether wonderful.”

But May never failing? What about 1816?

The early spring had been cold and dry, and that continued through early May. Then, “On the 12th of May, the first in a series of late Spring cold waves crossed in ... from northeastern Canada. By the 15th, frost had penetrated as far south as Pennsylvania and Virginia. The cold in New England lasted” for days.

After a warm spell, the frigid air returned on the 29<sup>th</sup>, extending to Rhode Island and Connecticut. Then came June and things got worse, because farmers really needed to be getting their crops in. But on June 6, “cold northwest winds and snow squalls were replaced by heavy snows in northern New York and New England.... Connecticut, eastern Massachusetts and southern New England also received measurable snowfall.” And after that ... well, 1816 is known as the year that summer never came. At the time it was commonly referred to as “eighteen-hundred-and-froze-to-death.”

Fuller accounts are easy to find. One writer claims that “July was cold and frosty, ice formed as thick as window panes in every one of the New England States. August was still worse; ice formed nearly an inch in thickness, and killed nearly every green thing in the United States and in Europe.”

The crop loss wasn’t quite that total, but very nearly so, compounded by a drought. Crop after crop failed. They were most dependent on corn: the harvest was only 10%, and that unhealthy. The possibility of starvation was real. The town in northern Maine where I used to live [Houlton] received emergency food supplies from the government of New Brunswick across the border.

That summer (or non-summer) was particularly memorable in Maine both because conditions there were so severe and because they came when Maine’s future had looked so bright. Mainers were trying to separate from Massachusetts and have a state of their own, which they would still accomplish in 1820. But immediately after 1816, many “were attracted by advertisements for fertile lands and a warmer climate in Ohio and the (old) North West territories. Individuals, families and whole communities

packed up and moved out of Maine. The exodus is estimated as high as fifteen thousand people.”

So it's just not as simple as March and April getting us ready and May marching in. You may have noticed that yourself this spring (!). Emerson burst on the literary scene with talk of a “refulgent spring.” That means shining, radiant. And we've had days like that, we've got one today. And we've had gray skies and snow. Eight steps forward, seven steps back. And then there was 1816, eight steps forward, nine steps back. May tried to take over, but gave way to December instead.

If it had happened a hundred years before, they'd have been convinced that the lack of a summer was divine retribution for something they'd done. Actually, it's hard to say why it happened for sure. Many attribute it to the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia the year before, the largest eruption anywhere in all recorded history. Others think it was just the worst year in a cycle of cooler weather.

Or maybe it was divine retribution, but I doubt it. Lots of times, life just works that way. You've got the seed, you've got the get-up-and-go, you're ready to plow the fields ... if they just weren't covered with snow, maybe because of plate tectonics on the other side of the globe.

The Easter morning message about nature being reborn, praises sing, familiar in our congregations (certainly in any one where I'm one of the ministers), probably works best if at least on occasion we allow as how the life we celebrate doesn't always triumph, at least not always in some neatly ordered way. There may be deserts to cross before we find an oasis, and then we'll have to leave and just hope we find another [as in the Exodus narrative]. A time as filled with expectation and cheer as April can be by now, may not always end in happy fulfillment.

The best-known example of high hopes ending up in disaster is the tale told by Christians about events one April almost two thousand years ago, from the exaltation of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem to his killing by the state. Eight steps forward, a thousand steps back.

And yet the story is told as a tale of advance. Sometimes, life works *that* way, too. For Jesus himself, the ending is the end, at least in our usual way of thinking about it. But for his spirit, for his message, and for his movement and its members and the dozens and then thousands and then hundreds of millions who would join that movement, Good Friday was anything but the end. It was the prelude to Easter, and Pentecost, and all that came after, the ongoing challenges and the oases along that journey.

Life works both ways. High hopes can fall unfulfilled, years can go by as if wandering in an arid land. But even our small deaths, the lamentable losses we go through, sometimes contain the seeds of new life to be. Even in our wanderings we may find freshets along the way, and eventually home.

And though 1816 reminds us that even May, even summer, can fail us on occasion, praise be: such years are blessedly rare. Mostly spring arrives on time, even early. And here comes May, “the burgeoning, the resurgence, the promise-fulfilled of life insistent ... and altogether wonderful.”