

## **EASTER, 2005**

At the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

### **The Easter Message for All Ages**

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You know how on your street there are people who belong to many different religions? Well, maybe you don't know that. It's not like people paint their houses different colors depending on their religion, so Catholics live in yellow houses and Unitarian Universalists live in purple ones.

But unless there's something unusual about your street, the people who live there belong to many different religions.

So here it is, Easter morning, and only a few hours ago, people were waking up all along your street. Well, some of us Unitarians Universalists woke up even earlier, to attend the outdoor service that begins on Easter every year just before the sun comes up, watching the sun come up and the day begin.

But then came the usual hour the people wake up, Unitarian Universalists and Jews and Buddhists and Lutherans and the Greek Orthodox and Muslims and Roman Catholics and Presbyterians and people who don't have any religion at all... I could go on and on. In fact, I just did. Everybody was waking up and beginning their Sunday. Easter is always on a Sunday.

But it's a whole different kind of a day for different people, because they belong to so many religions. Catholics and Presbyterians and lots of other folks were getting real dressed up to go to church. Even if they don't go to church very often, a lot of your neighbors are probably going today, because it is Easter, and in a lot of churches, that's an even bigger deal than Christmas.

That's because they believe that Jesus, a man who lived a long, long time ago, far, far away, was not just a man but God, too, and they believe he showed he was more than a man by coming back to life a few days after he died, on the first Easter morning.

So chances are, the Methodist church is filled about now, along with the Catholic churches and the other Protestant ones.

But the Greek Orthodox church is maybe not so full, because they celebrate Easter on a different Sunday.

And Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Pagans and Hindus and others, aren't celebrating Easter at all. Well, maybe a little, like if there is a neighborhood Easter egg hunt.

But they don't think that Jesus was God. They have their own religions, and Jesus isn't so important to them. At all.

Plus they don't go to church on Easter Sunday because they go to places called temples or mosques or shrines, and they don't go on Sundays but on Fridays or Saturdays, maybe, and when they have their own holidays, like Jews had Purim on Thursday and Hindus had Holi on Friday.

And then there's us.

We're in the middle, doing things our own way, not better, not worse, just our own way.

Because Unitarian Universalists do go to someplace we often call church, and on Sunday morning. After all, here we are! And we do talk about Jesus sometimes, and try to remember what great things he said and how he lived a brave and loving life. And we do celebrate Easter, in our own way, being happy and hopeful that spring is coming, amazing spring, and remembering Jesus, too.

But we don't have to believe that Jesus was God, and almost all of us don't. And we think the way things really work in this world is that people who die never come back to life three days later.

Unitarian Universalists believe that Jesus died all right, but what he said didn't die. His message that people should love each other didn't die, and his message that we should treat each other kindly didn't die. Jesus gave people hope that life could be kinder and that they could be kinder; and they got together in churches after Jesus died to keep that hope alive. And sometimes we remember that hope at Easter, here in our church.

But the Jesus story isn't the only hopeful thing on our minds these days, if we want. And that's how we do Easter. We talk about things that are hopeful, so that they will be more on our minds, so we will think more about being kinder, and also so we will pay attention to the amazing thing that just starts to happen as spring arrives.

The snow is going to go away, and I'm sorry if you just love to ski, but in return the trees will burst into flower and leaf, birds that went south for the winter will return, summer will come and the sun will be warm when you go to the beach. We can count on it. We can smile and enjoy the day's fun.

People on your street are doing what they do on Easter morning, and we're doing what we do: celebrating this day of happiness and hope.

Have a happy, happy Easter.

## **THE EASTER HOMILY**

Over half the earth, celebrations of the earth's renewal begin. Whatever the terms, whatever the customs, with eggs or bonfires, with dancing or decorated trees, the northern hemisphere shrugs off the fading darkness and cold and shouts its joy.

In other years, as the pagan element has been so strong in our sunrise services, I have kept alive the specifically Christian roots of our own celebration here by paying a degree of attention uncommon for a Unitarian Universalist to the biblical Easter narrative, one that I do think has important continuing truths that I have tried to recall.

But this morning I decided we needed to hear the Eastertide message at its most clear, and the message is not theological and is not creedal and it is not even narrative. The message of Easter is joy.

Those who seem to die live on among us, the biblical version goes, and the message is joy. For Jews the season declares that God leads us out of our captivities into freedom and new starts, and the message is joy (not to mention the fun of Purim). A Unitarian Universalist in New Jersey named Roshan Chadda wrote this

poem called "A Thanksgiving to Spring" to tell of the ceremony of Holi that is celebrated where he grew up in India:

Fulfilment of spring at nearly full moon  
Holi, it comes soon  
Color, joy, friendship and more  
Blue, green, yellow and silvery saffron galore  
Old clothes, giant water pistols and surprise  
Children with mischief and gleam in their eyes  
Holi, it's finding the cleanest shirt in town  
And messing it up, without invoking a frown  
Lads watching young silhouettes ...  
Unrecognizable faces, equality among all  
Home, neighborhood and town - Celebrations every place  
Meeting strangers at your street corner with warm embrace  
Friends, relatives altogether meet  
Laughter, gaiety and many, many sweets  
Making up, reconciliation and prayer  
All relationships, it is time to repair  
Bonfire, singing, dancing and rejoicing  
Holi, its riot of color, sound and goodwill

And the earth itself dresses in fresh beauty and the human heart sings joy.

The Christian, the Jew, the Hindu, the naturalist may all take added strength and delight from the thought that the love which lives on and triumphs over death, the power that breaks the captive bonds, the laughter that overflows the happy heart, and the greening force of springtime's renewal are at the very heart of life's reality.

It is a fiction, of course, which means that it's only true in sort of a way. Other people could say, if they wanted, that just as near the heart of the world is the killing frost, the hateful sneer, the violence which triumphs over life, the oppressor's endless quest for victims.

But Easter is true as well, springtime is true and renewal is true and freedom is born again and again and maybe, just maybe, that is a reality more powerful, a tendency more persistent, than all that leads away towards tragedy and greed and tyranny and all the ills of mortal life.

At least we are free to believe it, to cast our lives on the side of hope and try to live in touch with hope's creative power. And at least there comes at least once a year, at least in the Holi festivities, at least in the stories retold around Passover tables and Easter altars, at least in the indominability of skunk cabbage and willow catkins, an intimation that the force of life more abundant and the hope of a future more full yet to be are as real and fundamental as all else that life and the fickle year will throw our way.

The message of the Eastertide is not an argument. It is not a catechism. It is more powerful and elemental. It is a shout, and the shout is for joy. Halleluiah.