

“Rebirth and Renewal”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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You may have heard that Easter has pagan roots. Easter, a term that emerges from the ancient Anglo-Saxon word *Eostre*, was linked to a pagan goddess of the same name by the Venerable Bede, a 7th century historian. However, today’s scholars doubt his account, preferring instead to understand *Eostre* as a term signaling the “month of opening.”ⁱ I like this account—this depiction of Easter as a moment of opening...the month that celebrates the opening to a season of greater warmth, of longer days, of new life. While the holiday may not be named after a pagan goddess, Easter certainly marks a season in which life emerges anew.

As a Christian holiday, Easter traditionally celebrates the resurrection of Jesus and the defeat of death by the life-giving power of God. Bodily resurrection is, of course, a claim that many today struggle to accept. Rather than accept this claim as historic fact, liberal religious folks—including liberal Christians—are more likely to approach this claim as a metaphor. The life and vision of Jesus came to life again through the teachings and communities of Jesus’ followers. Jesus lives in all that follow him generation after generation.

Yet, for many Christians, Easter is not metaphor. Easter is fact. God’s power resurrected Jesus. Life triumphs over death—a bold claim unlike no other and worthy of *great* celebration. For me, and perhaps for you, this is what Easter once meant. Growing up, Easter was the pinnacle of the year. Sure, there were more presents at Christmas, but Christmas was so quiet—gentle hymns and candlelight. Easter was magnificent—brass and organ and choir exuberant in song; lilies saturating the sanctuary in scent; and a kaleidoscopic dance of color in the attire of the congregation. Easter was a party.

Part of the explosive power of Easter morning lay in its contrast to the days and weeks preceding Sunday. The prior Thursday soberly recounted the betrayal of Jesus by his followers—we all knew that we too had fallen short in ways small and large. Then, Good Friday reminded us that Jesus had to die for all those ways we had messed up. He got what *we* deserved—a cruel death and a descent into the punishment of hell. Saturday was, well, a day to do laundry and chores, to take a breath, and, perhaps, to consider what life would be like if this really was the end of the story...Jesus dead and buried. But, you didn’t worry too much, because you knew how the story *really* ended. Sunday was coming.

Sunday. *Easter* Sunday. The day Jesus came back to life. Easter brought the assurance of hope—the promise that life will not end in a death of despair and punishment, but in the delights of a

heavenly resurrection. Not just alive again—but free from Hell and headed to Heaven. This is something to celebrate. This was the promise we lovingly held.

Easter was the pinnacle of the year because its promise and hope oriented one's life. Without the hope of escape from certain despair and punishment, how would one go on living? Why would anyone bother to do anything good, make anything better, or, perhaps, even bother to live if the end game was certain desolation? Easter gave the biggest answer of all—the reason for living.

In some way, don't we all seek a kind of heaven, of paradise? Don't we long for the assurance of a good life, a meaningful life, a purposeful life? Religion is about the search for these answers . . . what makes life worth living? What makes life—makes *me*—good?

As Unitarian Universalists, we don't give you these answers. Rather we ask you to wrestle with *your* answers. Even our 8th grade Coming of Age class are challenged to write and deliver their own *credo*. While *credo* literally means *I believe*, the Coming of Age *credo* statements are rarely presented as a litany of beliefs. Indeed, I feel that it's important to think of religion not simply as statements of belief, but also as actions that shape our life. For me, a *credo* statement is more like a compass—it expresses the values and/or way of approaching the world that orients the direction of one's life.

In the Christianity of my youth, the compass pointed to Easter. And, Easter pointed to Heaven. The compass always pointed beyond this Earth. Beyond the people inhabiting the planet. Beyond the rocks and animals, the plants and oceans. Beyond this world and towards another.

What about you? As a child, were you handed a compass and taught where it pointed? Perhaps it pointed to science, dismissing religious claims as irrational. Or, maybe your compass pointed to the Mass or to the Confessional—to rituals that would remind you that you had fallen short *and* a path towards setting it right again. Perhaps some of you received a compass that pointed you towards the importance of family or of making money. Maybe the compass pointed to staying safe or working hard. Wherever the compass you received pointed, I suspect that many of us started testing the accuracy of the compass we were handed. Will this really lead me to happiness? Towards feeling good, fulfilled, purposeful?

Eventually, I set down the compass I had inherited. Instead, I wandered for a bit. Searching. Exploring. A bit lost. But then, I began to identify landmarks in my life—places that felt solid and secure and stable. The freedom to ask questions became one landmark. I needed intellectual openness as well as introspective reflection. And, the need for love became another landmark. I longed for people who knew me intimately and whom I knew well. People who cared about my well-being and I theirs. Other landmarks that emerged included the importance of time spent

outside in places of beauty and wildness, as well as the opportunity to delight in sensuous pleasure like a ripe strawberry or the scent of cedar. As these particular landmarks emerged to orient my life, my gaze reoriented from looking beyond the horizon of this world and settled instead on the contours of the landscape of the here and now.

In their book *Saving Paradise*, scholars Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker argue that the Christian story *is* one that can orient people to the paradise that is here and now. Pointing to Early Christian depictions in art and text, they illustrate how early images portrayed abundant gardens and a *living* Christ walking within this world. The promise of Christianity was not escape from this world to another, but rather the view that following Jesus showed a way to live that brought people into joyful community. The promise of abundant life became real by living with others in relationships of justice and love. Abundant life here and now meant taking delight in the garden of this world with trees bearing luscious fruit, rivers of clear water, and verdant landscapes of rich harvests. Such early Christian images reflected the most basic visions of the good life: food to eat and people to share it with.

Brock and Parker's depiction of early Christianity orients the religious compass towards a renewed vision of paradise. They portray lush images of beauty and delight, even as they challenge the notion that "paradise is life without struggle, life free from wrestling with legacies of injustice and current forces of evil." Paradise is not an escape from any challenges in life. Rather, paradise is the capacity to perceive the beauty and the goodness that is here and now... even amidst the challenges and struggles, sorrows and losses. Because amidst all the hardship that life can bring, there is also the presence of beauty and love, of gratitude and empathy.

When I abandoned the traditional view of Easter, I felt disoriented. The pinnacle to which my spiritual compass pointed was gone. But slowly, Easter was reborn in my spiritual lexicon. For at its core, Easter had always been a celebration of the great gift of Life. The power of the story lay in its promise to deliver abundant *Life*. And so, today, Easter is again the spiritual pinnacle of the year for me. It is a party celebrating the gift of Life . . . of being *alive* on this wondrous, beautiful planet amidst a community of people who never cease to amaze me.

Arriving in the opening month of the year, Easter is a moment to be reminded of the gift of life ...our own as well as the renewal of life in nature happening all around us. As Unitarian Universalists, we draw upon the Christian story of Easter and its celebration of Life *and* we can draw upon the "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." This turning towards the wisdom of earth-centered traditions is our sixth source. We recognize the wisdom of those who have set their spiritual compass not to a point beyond this world, but have oriented

themselves to the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. A spirituality whose landmarks are the circle of the seasons as well as the cycles of life and death.

Perhaps Easter is not rooted in the worship of an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess, but its arrival in the season of renewal and rebirth seems to connect it with an earth-centered spirituality. The Christian story of Easter is another way to frame the hope of life ever renewing, returning again and again in new forms, even after death has arrived. Throughout our days, life and death inevitably dance with one another. We must face the deaths of those we love, as well as deaths of hopes and dreams, of connections to places, of abilities and capacities, of what we believed and who we thought we were. And, again and again, life seeks to conquer death. The longings for renewal and rebirth emerge like the shoots of a plant awakened by the sun after a winter beneath frozen soil. Like bare branches swelling into buds to reveal the life within, the sorrows and losses that laid us bare can give way to a new life. We experience death...and we experience opening.

Paradise is here and now. And, paradise is not without its struggles. Paradise, like the earth that sustains us, is comprised of cycles of life and death, of life-giving and life-destroying dynamics within and around us. Living in paradise is to live within this sacred circle of life—grateful for the gifts of delight, beauty, and love, even as we struggle against that which would harm the flourishing of life in ourselves or in others. This is the paradise I believe we can celebrate on Easter—a full-throated, open-hearted embrace of a Life we know is full of delights, but not without struggle. And so this is my credo and my compass: *I believe in communities that promote the flourishing of life in people and the planet that sustains us.*

Knowing that Life brings both struggle and delights, may you hold fast to an Easter faith that promises the renewing power of life to sustain us through the seasons and circle of life. And may you too know your compass, your landmarks, and the spiritual pinnacle to which you orient your life.

So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2009/april/was-easter-borrowed-from-pagan-holiday.html>