

Second Boat of Easter

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse
on 08 April 2007 Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS / OPENING HYMN Good morning, and Happy Easter to you. We UUs often have a difficult relationship with Easter. On the one hand, few of us believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; on the other hand, it's a holiday with a *lot* of chocolate. And we do embrace the message of rebirth, and renewal and hope for the future that is the central idea at the core of this and most Spring celebrations.

Since our Unitarian and Universalist roots are from the Christian tradition, Reverend Kevin and I thought it might be interesting to trace our evolving relationship with the Easter holiday. We decided to sing the tune, "Easter Hymn" using a verse from several different versions of the song.

Now, some of these verses have a pretty high Christology, which means that they do perceive Jesus as god, as more divine than the rest of us. If you don't want to sing some of these words, I affirm your right to abstain, but I do encourage you to join in on the "Alleluias"

Please rise as you are willing and able and join us in singing the Easter Hymn lyrics printed on the insert in your order of worship.

We'll sing one verse at a time, with some commentary between each one.

*"Christ, the Lord, is risen today, Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth, reply, Alleluia!"*

That was the original, from 1739. It has such a high Christology that we don't even use the word "Jesus"— we *only* sing about "Christ" and "Lord." That's a little toned down in our next verse:

*"Jesus Christ is risen today,
Alleluia! Earth and heaven in chorus say,
Alleluia! Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!"*

This is the version in our hymn book. Besides removing the hierarchical word, "Lord," they also took out the gendered language. The next verse, also in our hymnal, goes a lot farther:

*"Lo, the earth awakes again,
Alleluia! from the winter's bond and pain,
Alleluia! Bring we leaf and flower and spray,
Alleluia! to adorn this happy day, Alleluia!"*

The song isn't about Jesus at all, any more, but about the miracle of Spring which I'm told is still occurring, somewhere beneath the foot of snow outside...

But notice also: we've moved from "raising our joys and triumphs high" to adorning this "happy day." It feels like we've lost some of the exultation, that is the point of the holiday. Not to fear, it returns in the third verse of this version:

*"Change, then, mourning into praise,
Alleluia! And, for dirges, anthems raise,
Alleluia! How our spirits soar and sing,
Alleluia! How our hearts leap with the spring! Alleluia!"*

Alleluia, indeed! For the next hour, and for the rest of our lives, may we be aware of the Spirit, soaring and singing within us, somewhere, deep inside us, even on the most dreary and desperate of days.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

(as told to me by the Rev. Dr. Lindsay Bates) Once upon a time, long ago in a land far north, there was a little girl called Mara. Her family lived in a small but comfortable hut, made of tree branches and animal skins, with a place for a big fire to keep them warm in the long cold months when the sun was far away.

One of Mara's chores was to gather wood in the Great Forest to keep the fire going. She went out early in the morning, found an armful of wood, and returned home quickly – because it was awfully cold outside the family's hut!

One morning toward the end of the cold season, as she was picking up a piece of a dead branch, Mara thought she heard a faint bird song. So she looked -- and she saw in the dried twigs a little bird, shivering horribly, its feathers all puffed up, trying to stay warm, trying to sing the way birds are meant to sing.

"Oh, you poor little thing!" Mara said – and she dropped all her wood, and she picked up the little bird, and she ran home as fast as she could.

Her father was in front of the hut, fitting a new wooden runner to a sled. He looked at the little bird and said, "Oh, Mara, that little one's back too early. The birds shouldn't come before Sun God returns and the Lady of Springtime awakes from her winter sleeping. If they do -- well, they belong to winter. That bird is a wild thing, and we can't have it in the hut. Take it back to where you found it, and get the wood for the fire."

Mara was so sad -- she knew if she left the little bird in the woods, it would die in the snow and the cold. As she walked through the snow, she cradled the little bird in her hands, and she cried, "O Lady of Spring, please come! Please come!" When she reached the place where she had found the bird, she breathed her warm breath on the little creature and cried again, "O Lady of Spring, please come! Please come!"

And as she put the bird back in the branches – she cried as though her heart would break, and she just couldn't do it -- she couldn't leave the little bird there. And again she cried, and her whole heart was in the crying, "O Lady of Spring! Please come! Please come!"

And as she knelt there in the snow, holding the shivering little bird, the strangest thing happened. The cold wind stopped blowing. The sun looked through the clouds. And Mara looked up – and there standing before her was the most beautiful Lady she had ever seen. Her eyes were as green as the new-budding leaf, and her hair the color of fresh willow branches, and her voice laughed like springtime breezes as she said, "Mara, Mara, child, why have you called me, and woken me up?"

Well, of course it was the Goddess, the Lady Eostre of Spring. Mara was very frightened (for it's dangerous to call a goddess, unless you're very sure you want her to appear!), but she held out the little bird and said, "Lady, this little one came back too early. It thought you were awake -- and the cold has almost killed it. Please, Lady, bring the springtime back so this little bird can sing again!"

The Goddess looked at Mara for a long, long time. Then she said, "When the birds come too soon, they belong to the winter. Never before has anyone called to me to wake up for their sake. You have a loving heart, child, and a lot of courage to wake up a Goddess. Let Springtime come!"

Immediately, the air began to grow warmer – and almost like magic, the snow began to melt, and the trees began to bud. The Sun God heard the call of his Lady and rose higher in the sky. The little bird smoothed its feathers, stopped shivering, flew into a tree and began to sing a beautiful song about springtime and flowers, and warm sun light and new life – and Mara smiled and clapped her hands.

And from that day on, the Goddess of Spring has slept a bit more lightly in the last days of winter – so that when the eager birds return to the cold lands, she hears their singing before Winter catches them, and then she wakes up, and the Sun God comes back to join her, and Spring returns again.

There is something more to the story. That little bird became the Lady's special pet. She gave it a magical gift – that its eggs would be all the colors of springtime and rainbows and flowers – and because the Lady did love children, she and her bird would often appear to them and play with them in the spring.

One day, when the goddess and her bird were playing with a group of children, the children begged her to show them something magical, something no one had ever seen before. The Lady thought and thought – and then she turned her bird into a rabbit. The children were delighted of course with this miraculous creature, so soft and cuddly and still able to produce such amazingly colored bird eggs.

Now, no one is exactly sure what happened next – maybe it was because the children were so pleased with this magical rabbit, or maybe it was because the bird/rabbit itself was pleased with the change, or maybe the Goddess's magic got stuck somehow – but she never did turn the rabbit back into a bird, and it continues to this day to deliver its colorful eggs to children, to let them know that the Goddess is ready to return and play.

FIRST READING

The Rev. Lisa Friedman currently serves the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato, Minnesota, and she used to be in our district, at the UU Church in Flint. She is a member of the Ohio River Group, a study group of several dozen UU ministers who meet annually to write, read and discuss scholarly papers. This is from the paper she presented last year, "The Jewish Quandary: Exploring Jesus from the Jewish Perspective and as a Jewish Unitarian Universalist." "It happens every year. I prepare for Easter Sunday with more care than ever. The flowers are beautiful. The choir is gorgeous. The congregation is decked out in their pastel finery. My Easter message centers on the gospel story and its message of hope. And on the way home, I turn to my husband, a well-educated Congregationalist in his youth, and ask, "How did I do? Did I get Easter this year?" He pauses in thought and answers, honestly, "You're getting closer, but you're not quite there yet."

It's true. Every year I try...but fail to fully understand Easter. I [cannot] fully articulate why. The Christmas Jesus comes very naturally to me, especially as a mother. Who cannot see the Holy embodied, literally and metaphorically, in a tiny babe...The Good Friday Jesus is as real and concrete to me as the thought of every Jew who marched in line to the gas chambers of Dachau and Auschwitz, or the despair for every victim of cruelty and injustice...But the Easter Jesus, the Resurrected Jesus, the Jesus who returns after death to his disciples, eludes me at some deep place in my soul, even when I have tried to welcome him in. I feel as though I have journeyed to the end of a long dock on a beautiful, inspiring sun-lit lake, only to see the boat sail off into the sunset without me, just beyond my reach."

SECOND READING Robert Hunter was one of the principal lyricists for the Grateful Dead. He was born in California, in 1941; this is his poem, *Cupful of Rain*. I've been to sea in a cupful of rain On a boat that fell out of the blue Paddled for life with the blade of a knife In a wind reminiscent of you

Danced in the dark on the head of a pin With a sackful of bones in my arms Found nothing more than I knew to begin God bless you and keep you from harm

The tent has been folded and stowed on the train The circus rolls off in the night Only the marks of its passing remain In the chill of the cold morning light

A drop in the bucket, a coal in the fire A cupful of rain in the sea A rose in the mire, a voice in the choir, What else would you want it to be?

Sing your song with the whole of your heart Believe what you need to get by It's only ideas that keep us apart On these boats that fell out of the sky

HOMILY ONE "second boat" How many of you skipped, or hummed, or somehow cringed during at least one of the verses of our opening "Easter Hymn"? How many were glad to sing the traditional words? How many enjoyed singing all the versions?

So, a friend of mine is a pastor in a more fundamentalist Christian church. One week, he was going to preach on industriousness, and preparation, so he prepared a children's story about a squirrel. He started out by saying, "I'm going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is." The children nodded eagerly.

"This thing lives in trees and eats nuts..." No answer. "And it is gray or black... and has a long bushy tail..." The children were looking at each other, but still nobody answered. "And it jumps from branch to branch... and chatters and flips its tail when it's excited..."

Finally one little boy tentatively raised his hand. The pastor breathed a sigh of relief and called on him. "Well," said the boy, "I know the answer must be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!"

In this culture, in this country, we can barely escape the message that the "answer must be Jesus" and, for me at least, that can make it difficult to appreciate Easter.

Now, I truly love the man, Jesus. I respect his teachings, and the way he lived his life, so much so that I hold an annual communion service, to remind us to live more like Jesus did.

But I reject so much of what the dominant culture has done to him, and how some people— not all, but some people— have distorted his original message, that now, sometimes, when I hear "Jesus Christ this" and "Jesus Christ that", it just makes my teeth hurt.

I want to like Easter, and I do appreciate and need the message of life returning, of life appearing in places where we do not expect it.

But because I feel differently than most people in my family, and because I certainly feel differently than most of the signs along our roads and highways, I, too, feel like I've missed the boat, and I'm standing next to Lisa, at the end of the dock in our first reading.

Fortunately, there is a *second* boat of Easter.

In fact, there are many more boats. Lots of cultures have stories and legends about a hero who returns to life. Virtually every culture has a myth celebrating how the seemingly-dead world springs back to green vibrance. So there are lots of boats that Lisa and I—and any of you, who wish to— can sail away on.

There are even other boats within Christianity. The Orthodox Greek church celebrates Easter on a different day, with different customs- they have their own boat of Easter.

With all of the first-century documents, discovered in the last several years, such as the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, and the more recent Gospel of Judas, we can see that this has *always* been the case. Although the dominant culture in the Christian church tried to squelch dissent— to the point of torturing and killing the dissenters— there have always been folks who questioned the "party line."

Even in the first century, according to the Gospel of Judas, some early Christians were disagreeing with the idea that God required his son to sacrifice himself, to atone for the sins of humanity. At least a few of these first followers of Jesus considered that to be a misunderstanding— a contradiction, even— of his message of love for all creatures.

We can hear more about these early gospels, later— please tell me if you are interested in a sermon, or an adult RE course on them— but the point today is, there are, and always have been, many boats of Easter.

I cannot ride in that first boat of Easter, at least, not in the same way that my niece does, joyfully and serenely and sincerely, nor in the same way that my friend the pastor does.

But one of the miracles of Easter is, that there is *always* *another* boat.

And a deeper miracle is, that they are all the same boat. As we heard in our second reading, "it's only ideas that keep us apart, on these boats that fell out of the sky." It's only my ideas that make me uncomfortable on some of those boats, and ideas that make others uncomfortable on mine. Maybe someday, I will really understand, deep down in my bones and gut, that it's all the same boat; and I'll be as serene and triumphant on that first boat as is my niece. And someday, she might soar and sing along on my boat.

For now, I'm content with riding in my second boat; and I'll keep working on becoming more tolerant and more accepting of all the other boats in our human fleet.

HYMN While we're out sailing, in our metaphorical sea, let us give thanks for whatever boat we are riding, and sing a few joyful alleluias. Please rise as you are willing and able and join in hymn #1036 *Calypso Alleluia*

{singing—until 12 minutes left} Please be seated.

HOMILY TWO “of Easter” So, we’re all sailing about, on our various boats of Easter, which are the same boat, if only we recognize it, and we’re all singing “Alleluia”

Why are we singing?

I know why my niece is singing— her savior has conquered death, and she will live forever, in Heaven, with her family. But why am I singing?

Probably, each boat has its own reasons for singing. The people on each ship all share a common purpose, a common motivation to sing “Alleluia” at the top of their lungs.

I understand, at least theoretically, that each boat’s reason is valid and worthy. And still I ask myself, why am *I* singing “alleluia”?

Some people sing because it is springtime. They are thrilled to see the sun and the color and the joy they feel is turned into song. Especially, I imagine, if folks are growing all or most of their own food, spring is a powerful reason to rejoice.

Some may sing because life flourishes even in places that seem impossible. In the arctic sea, under thick ice in barely-liquid water, there is life. At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, where the tectonic plates are separating, jets of extremely hot water pour minerals and sulfur into the surrounding sea. The water is too hot, the pressure is too crushing, and the sulfur is too poisonous for life to exist there. Not only that, but there is no light whatsoever, that far into the depths. And...there is life. Bacteria, crabs, fish and shrimp, all share in their own little lightless habitat.

It isn’t exactly an empty tomb, but we did expect the deep ocean to be empty of life. And yet life flourishes.

For that matter, we could be singing because life appeared from a life-less universe in the first place. That there is *something* rather than nothing, is a worthy reason to sing.

Some say alleluia because, despite the soul-crushing burden of depression, they were able to crawl out of bed, and face another day. Some deal with a deadly disease; some fight addiction; some struggle with a history of abuse— each time they make a life-affirming decision, it is a step away from their own metaphorical tomb, left empty behind them. For getting up, each time we fall, we say, alleluia.

According to some liberal theologians, the real miracle of Easter was not a bodily resurrection of Jesus, but the fact that his message was not killed with him. That his disciples continued to live and act as he had taught, although they knew they might be tortured and killed for it, is fairly miraculous. That other humans continue to live and act in humane and compassionate ways even when brutalized themselves, in death camps and torture chambers and ghettos around the world, for those humane behaviors many people on many boats sing Alleluia. I know of at least one small boat, who will rejoice upon receipt of this envelope {*show envelope*} which contains the Unitarian Universalist pamphlets requested by a man in Gaylord, who cannot travel to our congregation, but found us on the web, and wants to share our liberal religious message. Being connected, however tenuously, with our congregation, may cause him to sing.

And in the last boat that I will talk about today, a story I read on email, from www.heroicstories.com:

“The mother watches, expressionless, instinctively she reaches for them, her children who will never again be children. How far they’ve come in just weeks – not just in miles, but in years, ages, pain and horror. The children’s cheeks and eyes are less haunted now, the youngest even leaving his father’s arms.

His sister who had ceased to speak now breaks silence somewhat, but still won’t talk about *IT*. Counseling, suggests a friend. We’ll see, says her mother, braiding her child’s hair. A French braid is also counseling.

They aren’t receiving aid from organizations. Every so often they call the Hurricane Katrina survivor aid number, but have never reached a human being, or been called back.

Yet they’re lucky. Funds were raised to purchase a year’s rent in a low-end, cookie-cutter townhouse. Cramped, the kids sharing a bedroom, but better than four in one room in a stranger’s house. They have no possessions, but furniture arrives. Used -- but usable. Here, says a plump matron, these dishes for

four, a gift, never used. The little boy's jaw drops, "WOW!" at the colorful rooster decorations. His mother hugs the lady. She doesn't cry; she hasn't shed one tear.

At the paint counter, mother gently shows a satin rosette. All that remains of their previous life. "From our wedding." Father says, "Just match it." By sunset, the little dwelling has a facade of palest apricot.

The children (those around decide) need more attention than public school provides, but – no money. Inquiries are made. The "progressive" school has no transportation. The Catholic School says no. The Mosque School says yes, has a bus.

An old turbaned man arrives. "We're Catholics," says mother. "Yes," he replies, then says to the boy, "Soon you'll be a Catholic who can read." He smiles at the girl's look, reading her mind. "Not required, just modest dress."

An elegant white-haired lady whisks mother and daughter off to shop. Outside an old brown man plants pansies, masses of them. Those hanging curtains and art from every continent have also stocked the kitchen with a global selection of edibles. The gracious lady returns. "Tea," she orders her driver, her great-grandson.

A fearsome street gang of young men from Mexico and Central America arrive in a burst of shouts, tattoos and alarming automotive sounds. They demand beer and rides home, leaving an automobile they made for father to drive to his new printing company job. Proudly, they concede it hideous and noisy – but promise it goes forward and backward. "De puras partes, lo hicimos!"

The mother looks around at her new neighbors, her new family, in soft white cotton robes of Ethiopia, in saris, salwar kameez, jeans and T-shirts, low baggy pants revealing underwear waistbands. The teenaged street gang, the antique couple, all ages between. She goes quickly to the kitchen. "I don't think we have beer," she begins, then opens the refrigerator, to find beer from Lebanon, Belgium, India, Mexico and Palestine.

And she leans against the open door, unable to stop the tears."

That all of these stories, all of these boats, show the Spirit of Life bursting through them, flowing in and through and among us, healing us, connecting us, requiring kindness and reciprocal care from us, that is why we sing Alleluia.

So may we be.