

# RESURRECTION AND REBIRTH

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## SERMON PART I: REBIRTH (A DISCUSSION WITH THE CHILDREN)

What happens in the Spring? What do you see, hear and feel outside this time of year that's different from other seasons?

Every year, in the Springtime, the Earth goes through a cycle of renewal—things that go to sleep for the winter wake up and create new life again.

Why does Spring happen? Our planet is tilted in such a way that as it goes around the sun, the length of days gets shorter and longer in a cycle. The shortest days are in winter, and the longest ones are in summer.

Spring is an in-between season in which we see what happens when the days start to get longer again: the air gets warmer, plants bring forth new leaves, and many animals have their babies (so that they might be old enough to survive by the time it gets cold again).

And after a long, cold winter in which nothing much was growing, it's good to celebrate Spring. A lot of different cultures celebrate the first day of Spring.

In some places, like Iran, the new year is celebrated at the beginning of Spring—the period of new life in the world was taken as the beginning of a new year—a time to start things over. All over Eastern Asia, different cultures celebrate the beginning of Spring with festivals, too.

And a long time ago in northern Europe, the ancient peoples there celebrated their goddess Eostre at this time of year. In their stories, Eostre was the goddess of the moon, and of fertility, and she was the goddess who looked over babies of all sorts—baby animals as well as tiny, new plants and the new leaves of Spring.

Does anyone here know what those people called the holiday they celebrated at the beginning of Spring? They called it Ostara.

Ostara. Does that sound like any other word you know?

If you think it sounds a lot like the word “Easter,” you're right—it's the word that Easter comes from. You see, when Christians were trying to convert the people in northern Europe, they took their holiday's name and attached it to a very different holiday. And though Easter's date always comes in the Spring, it is a rare year when it falls this close to the first day of Spring, which this year was Thursday.

And while all of this might seem strange to us today, it's true. And so here we are today with two very different holidays that have very similar names. Confusing, right?

This story gets even more confusing, believe it or not. What do you think those ancient pagan people used as symbols for a holiday that celebrated the rebirth of Spring? Flowers and eggs (from which baby birds come) and baby bunny rabbits. Things with bright, beautiful colors that were like the colors that return to the Earth every Spring.

So, many of the things that make Easter so colorful were originally symbols of Ostara. Pretty much everything except the candy, which I'm guessing is your favorite part. Am I right?

While I'm going to talk about Easter in a little while, I want to take a moment to celebrate Ostara with you.

At Ostara, we get to dye eggs bright colors and hide them for our friends to find. We get to decorate the house with brightly-colored flowers. At Ostara, we are glad because the Earth is getting warmer again after a long, cold winter. Just like it does every year. And that's pretty cool.

So, in honor of Ostara, I dyed my own batch of hard-boiled eggs as gifts to you. Now, you might be tempted to call them Easter eggs, but remember, they're not, really. They're a symbol of the first day of Spring, and of all of the new life we're about to start seeing. I hope I have enough for all of you. (distribute eggs)

After the service, we're going to have an egg hunt right here, just for all of you. But for now, you can go back to your seats while we talk about Easter just a little.

#### READING: FROM THE GOSPEL OF MARK 16: 1-8 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

<sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

<sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'

<sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

<sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

<sup>6</sup>But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

<sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'

<sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## SERMON PART 2: RESURRECTION

Easter, in my experience, is one of the hardest Christian holidays for most Unitarian Universalists to relate to. Those of us who come from Christian backgrounds have likely left behind a theology that includes the literal resurrection of the Son of God from the dead, and those of us from other backgrounds probably have no sense of connection with the story at all.

Yet, Easter is the holiest of holidays to a billion Christians, and historically, at least, Unitarian Universalists have found inspiration in the teachings of Jesus as written in the Christian Scriptures, if not with his divinity. Easter is, therefore, a holiday that must be taken seriously.

The story of Easter is, to those in the Christian faith, the story of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Passion story of Holy Week tells us of the events that led up to Jesus' crucifixion, but Easter is the day that really sets him apart: the day his followers arrived at his tomb to find him gone. Jesus, who had died three days before, was alive once again.

Unitarian Universalists often talk about rebirth on Easter, clinging to the Pagan origins of the English word, origins that tie it to the beginning of Spring, the origins I talked about earlier. And since this year, the Easter holiday comes close to the turning of our seasons, I thought it important today to also look at the holiday Ostara, in which the rebirth of the Earth is celebrated.

While Ostara is about rebirth, though, Easter is not. Easter is about resurrection. Someone who is dead being brought back to life.

Rebirth is a very natural process. It happens every year. It is tied to the natural cycles of the Earth.

Resurrection is the opposite—it is, in fact, one thing that certainly doesn't happen in nature. The Rev. Frances Manly describes resurrection as “something that only happens once, a radical break in the natural order of things, leading always to transformation.” (Rev. Frances Manly, “Rebirth and Resurrection,” in *Quest*, found on-line at <http://cf.uua.org/quest/2003-04.html>)

Resurrection is something that happens only to someone who is supernatural—someone who is outside of the ways nature actually works. So the Christian story of Jesus' resurrection—the story that is the basis of the holiday of Easter—was meant as a symbol that Jesus was more than just another human.

Stories of Jesus rising from the dead were meant to confirm to people of his era that he was a great teacher and prophet—that the church built on his teachings was blessed by God.

What those who take this story literally lose, however, is that stories of resurrection were not uncommon in those days—many religions in the Ancient Near East had stories that involved the resurrection of their Gods and prophets from the dead. Stories of resurrection were not *meant* to be taken literally in most of those religions.

They were, however, always meant to be symbols of important and holy forces at work.

If we're really going to take Easter seriously, we have to talk about resurrection, and the resurrection of Jesus as celebrated by Christians, at that. It won't do to confuse it with Spring.

If we, as our Unitarian forebears would teach us, claim that Jesus was not part of God but a human messenger with a divine message, we must also accept that his death was that of a human. If we see all of the stories of the Bible as literature, and not history, we might even believe that Jesus himself never actually walked the Earth, and the entire story of his life and death is meant to be taken figuratively.

Whatever we believe about Easter, if we reject that Jesus was *literally* resurrected from the dead on this day, we are called, as people whose religious heritage (if not our current theology) includes Christianity, to understand what the symbolism of this day means.

I had the chance to discuss the meaning of Easter with my family a few years ago. Now, my family is usually up for a good argument about most anything, but, I have to tell you, theological discussions are rare. In this discussion, my brother Andrew suggested that the story of resurrection could be understood as a metaphor for teachings that live on after death.

And I believe that this is a good metaphor to go with—in fact, I believe it to be historically accurate as well: the story of Jesus’ resurrection was very likely meant to indicate that his teachings were important enough to survive his death.

So what are the teachings of Jesus that his followers thought were so important that they needed to live on as teachings of someone so holy that he was resurrected from the dead?

There were many, and I would be here for days if I were to list them all.

This Easter Sunday, I’d like to take a brief look at just one of the teachings that made Jesus dangerous to those in power—in Roman governance and in Jewish society. Dangerous enough that he was put to death for them.

John Dominic Crossan, a Jesuit historian, in his book *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, writes about Jesus’ core teaching being one of radical equality, and writes that it was a teaching that was very threatening to those in power.

One example of this can be seen in the list of people with whom Jesus shared food in the many stories of the Bible. These people include women, lower-class people, and many others outside of his society’s very rigid power structures.

Today, this might not seem so strange, but back then, who you ate with defined your respectability, and your respectability defined your standing in society. This standing was often a matter of life and death. If you crossed the lines, you were likely to be killed for it.

And Jesus, in eating with those who were different from him, was basically saying “all people are equal in my eyes, all people are equal in God’s eyes, and neither God nor I has any use for this society’s rules about gender and class.”

I think it’s important, in looking at this lesson, to understand that it was not something that Jesus just talked about. He didn’t just give a sermon and go home, trusting that those who had listened would understand and change.

He practiced what he preached by sitting down for meals, again and again, with those with whom he was not supposed to break bread.

His practices were practices of hospitality, of openness, of radical equality. Were we to try to follow them today, Jesus' practices were fundamentally those of anti-oppression work—giving voice and power to those that society has deemed unworthy, or less than.

I was reminded of the importance of that practice this week, in listening to, of all things, a political speech. Whatever your personal politics, whoever you or I ultimately support in this year's Presidential race, what Barack Obama had to say this week ties directly to the practice of radical equality. And while I want to be very clear that I mean nothing partisan by bringing this into our worship, I think what he had to say bears directly on the lesson of practicing what we preach, especially when it comes to race and racism.

At one point in his speech, Senator Obama said this:

"In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds – by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations." (Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," from a transcript at [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com))

This week, our entire nation was challenged to put radical equality into practice.

And, remarkably, this challenge came just a few days before a billion Christians around the world celebrate Jesus, whose message of equality and justice got him killed.

So what, then, do we make of the stories of resurrection that are, at their heart, what this day is about?

It is not hard to see why Jesus' followers—most of whom had no power in the society of the day—used common stories of resurrection to mark Jesus' revolutionary teachings as special, as holy, as sacred.

And it is important that we who claim the left wing of the radical side of Christian teachings, we who claim that our faith is practiced in the ways we combat oppression in our society, we who come together in the hope that we can practice just a little bit of Jesus' radical hospitality, it is important that we take Easter Sunday seriously, whatever we think about the literal truth of the story of Jesus' resurrection.

It is important that we use Easter Sunday as a time to resurrect those radical notions of equality and shared power from the tomb of bygone notions. It is important that we roll away the stone and let them out.

And it is important that we start to take up Jesus' revolutionary example of living each and every thing that we claim to be true. I can only hope to live up to the awesome responsibility of this in *my* life and my ministry, and I hope that you will help me in this quest.

May it be so.