

Eostregeneration

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Unitarian Church of Staten Island
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Easter Sunday

Regeneration: making new life out of the old. It is a fitting symbol to contemplate in this church at this time, as you are on the brink of getting a new settled minister. This church is like the crocuses, bursting through the surface of the earth with all kinds of new possibilities.

Celebrations of regeneration at springtime go back long before Christianity and existed alongside of it in many places and times. The English name for Easter Sunday came from a pagan goddess, whose name was Eostre (which is pronounced, Easter). She is mentioned in a history in the seventh century as having given her name to the whole month which we now call April. When the early English converted to Christianity, they celebrated Jesus' death and resurrection by giving it the name which was already associated with that time of year.

We don't know much about Eostre for sure, but there are some legends about her. In Germany she is known as Ostara.

The story goes that once Eostre or Ostara came upon a bird whose feathers were frozen to her body, so to save the bird's life, she turned it into a rabbit. But it was a miraculous rabbit and it laid eggs, to the delight of all the children of the realm. Later when Britain was converted to Christianity, they kept the celebration of Ostara, but they said it was in honor of Jesus' resurrection and they called it Easter. This is why bunnies and eggs are some of the symbols of Easter, and why Easter is celebrated according to the Lunar calendar, being set at the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox.

Ostara was the goddess of fertility, and in an agricultural society there is nothing so worth celebrating, so worth praying for, as fertility. You want your cows to have lots of calves, your horses to have lots of colts, your pigs to have lots of piglets. You want your crops to come up in abundance so there will plenty to harvest later. And you want your people to have lots of children so there will plenty of hands to work the farm.

Nowadays, with overpopulation looming, we should perhaps praise fertility of the imagination more than physical fertility

Now in the title of this sermon, I ran the name of Eostre the goddess right smack up against the word regeneration, and this may cause some to wonder whether there is a link between the word Easter and the female hormone estrogen. There is no direct connection, but there is a fascinating link. When this particular hormone was identified in the 1920's, they put together the word estrogen out of generis, giving birth to or causing, and estrus. Now estrus is the period in the reproductive cycle of mammals other than humans, the period when they are sexually receptive. Humans don't have an estrus, as such; nevertheless, the name was selected and it stuck.

But to dig a little deeper, it appears that the word estrus in Latin and in Greek means gadfly, and in Greek mythology, estrus refers to the gadfly that Hera sent to torment Io, the goddess of the dawn, who had been won in her heifer form by Zeus. Later it came to mean a wild frenzy, which is why it was adopted for the hot part of the reproductive cycle of animals.

But you see, in these very words we are associating the dawn, the East in which the dawn appears (lo is linguistically cognate with East), and fertility. Linguists don't make the jump to the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre, but I think they should. Many people rise at dawn to celebrate Easter.

The egg is a symbol of Easter. It is really amazing if you think about it. Folded up in this smooth envelope is all you need to make a chicken. It is life in potential. So the whole season of the goddess Eostre is pregnant with the possibilities of life, and that is undoubtedly why the Christian church chose it to celebrate Jesus' victory over death.

Now there are at least two ways to think about time. In our modern world, we are inclined to look at time as a line, stretching from beginning to end. It may surprise you to realize that we get this view from our Jewish and Christian heritage. The Bible starts in the beginning and then proceeds to the end of time. Our stories have this form: the classic form of drama is introduction, complication, climax, resolution and denouement; our symphonies and sonatas also have a definite form proceeding on a line. We tend to think of our own lives as a line from the beginning, at birth, to the end, at our deaths.

But this is not the only way to think of time. Rural people, people who live close to the cycles of nature, are inclined to think of time as a circle, like a snake swallowing its tail. Dawn is followed by midday which is followed by afternoon then evening and nightfall, to be followed by dawn again. Spring is followed by summer, fall, winter, spring again. In agricultural societies, the cycles of nature are what count a lot more than the calendar. And the music of the peasants, traditional folk music, often moves in cycles: a tune might have two parts, called A and B and you play each part twice and then when you finish the second B you start with the first A part again.

I think the song John Barleycorn sprang from an agricultural community, and in the song, death and regeneration are part of the cycle of growth of the grain. The grain goes round and round from the seed to its fruit to its flower to its harvesting to its milling, to its fermenting, to its presence in the ale, which will give the farmers the sustenance to go out and plant more grain.

John Barleycorn has an eerie echo in one of the greatest Christian texts on resurrection, the Fifteenth Chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which reads as follows:

36: What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

37: And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

38: But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

But quoting Paul brings up the stark contrast that I haven't mentioned. Our Christian neighbors today aren't celebrating regeneration; they are celebrating Jesus' resurrection and looking forward to their own bodily resurrections. What's the difference?

Nature gives us the picture of regeneration – part of an immense cycle of life that has no discernible beginning or end? Isn't this the message of the crocuses and the Robins and the earthworms and the buds on the trees? Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain.

But is this equivalent to the Christian resurrection? Nothing more than the crocuses coming up and the buds bursting from every limb? Is this the only hope we have to offer for immortality?

Well, yes and no. The natural world gives us regeneration, new life being generated from the remains of the old. But if you measure it against the story which is being told in most Christian churches this morning, it doesn't quite measure up. The hope of

Christianity is a personal coming back to life after death, body and soul. Christianity's authoritative statement, the Nicene creed, says, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

The advantage of natural regeneration is that it's a lot easier to believe. It doesn't violate any natural law. And people have always found the Christian story of resurrection hard to swallow.

In the Second Century there was a lawyer who tried to make sense of religion, and his name was Tertullian. Tertullian had a keen mind expressed in a breezy, entertaining and often sarcastic writing style, and perhaps his most famous quote, in a long piece defending Christian belief is *credo, quia absurdum* – I believe, because it is absurd.

The whole passage reads as follows:

The Son of God died: it is immediately credible--because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain--because it is impossible.

Part of this quote expresses the feeling that many if not most UUs bring to this question of Jesus's resurrection: most of us tend to think it is absurd and impossible. But unlike Tertullian, we don't think that it is therefore likely to have happened; we don't see the absurdity of the claim as any reason to believe in it.

Philosophers tell us that in his reasoning, Tertullian was following Aristotle, for in his *Rhetoric* Aristotle shows that an argument from probability can be drawn from the sheer improbability of a story: some stories are so improbable that it is reasonable to believe them. Another way to put it is: who would make something like this up?

But this is not persuasive in light of what we now know about the composition of scripture. There were plenty of people who had an incentive to make it up, to make Jesus divine in order to keep alive the Jesus movement. I don't blame Tertullian for not having the skill of modern Biblical scholars, but those scholars today are expert at dissecting the various layers of scripture and showing which groups had an incentive to shade the truth their way. I won't bore you with the details this morning.

But what are we left with here as our Easter message? A model of regeneration from the natural world which has limited application to our questions of life and death, or a totally unbelievable account put forward by orthodox Christianity. Is there any middle way?

I think there is. To describe it, let me try to say what it is that separates us from the rest of nature. We are a part of nature, but humans have some special attributes. We have large brains and those brains contain the ability to manipulate symbols. We are the only species which has an instinct to make meaning of things, because we are about the only species which can.

One of the things which challenges our meaning-making instincts most strongly is the experience of death. I think this is because of our brains' unique abilities to read the minds of others.

What do I mean by that? I mean that we have evolved the ability to understand another person's emotional attitude by reading their body language, perceiving their smells, listening to their words and particularly in reading their facial expressions. Evolution has given us this whole way of dealing with others which is different from that of other animals. We are able to be self-conscious, and to project onto the other something of this self-consciousness. To recognize that the other person is in some sense "like me" is the foundation of all religion and ethics. It is also the basis for companionship and love.

We rely on the people around us. They become part of our support system. And if one of them dies, it is like a big hole

suddenly opens up in our world; we are hit at a very deep level, and for a time nothing in the world makes sense, and then gradually we begin to reconstruct meaning. Though other animals exhibit behavior that looks like mourning, the human is the only animal that tries to explain death.

As I try to make sense of my own eventual death or anyone else's, my strongest urge, the one which makes most sense to me, is to consider it as the end of the body, the end of the brain, the end of a thinking self. But what lives on after the death are the words and deeds that the person has done. And as Fred Small's song says, the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done.

We don't have to accept a bodily resurrection of Jesus to know that his ministry was about love. He is the one who preached forgiveness and not judging and loving your enemies and loving God with all your heart and soul and your neighbor as yourself. It is a curious thing, if those around Jesus considered him the Messiah, why they would have continued as his followers when he so conspicuously failed. He not only did not deliver the Jews from the oppression of the Romans, but he suffered a humiliating and horrible death at Roman hands.

No, there must have been some kind of spirit that the early followers could sense that led them to keep on. It is described in the Book of Acts as the Holy Spirit. I think it is the spirit of love, and that is what I think is strong enough to survive death. It will not save your individual life; it will only make it worth while having lived it.

I think this is the sense in which the regeneration in nature connects to our lives. The regeneration of life in the springtime can point the way to a regeneration of the spirit. Not bodily resurrection, but a rising again, a determination to live life to the fullest while we have the chance. It's like the boat, the Mary Ellen Carter, in the song. That boat is lying on the bottom. It isn't going to get up to the top without a whole lot of help from its loving crew. But with that love and with that effort, it, and you, can rise again. No matter what you've lost, be it a home, a love, a friend, like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again.

In January, I got to meet a colleague whom I had often seen from afar, Forrest Church, the retired minister of All Souls in Manhattan and prolific author. Forrest was gracious enough to host the annual Holiday Party for the UU ministers in the Metro New York District at his beautiful apartment on the East Side. I had a long talk with him about his work on the religion of the Founding Fathers and he gave me a copy of his book. I had heard that he retired because of health and asked him how his health was and he told me that the cancer was in remission.

He was wrong. A week after that party, he got the news that the cancer had come back and metastasized, and there was no stopping it. He told All Souls that he was measuring his life in weeks and months.

Last Sunday, this minister who is facing his own death, preached a sermon on love and death. Though it was Palm Sunday by the calendar, this was his Easter sermon¹. It is remarkable talk. In it, Forrest tries to sum up what Jesus has meant to him, not as the Son of God but as a spiritual guide. He said this:

¹ Online at <http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/publications/sermons/fcsermons/love-death-and-Easter.pdf>

Death is love's measure, not only because at a loved one's death our grief, however we express it, is equal to our love, but also because, when we ourselves die, the love we have given to others during our own brief span of days is the one thing death can't kill. Jesus taught that the opposite of love is not hate, it is fear.

Because we and our loved ones manage to devise so many ways for fear to bind our hearts – fear of intimacy, fear of disappointment, fear of embarrassment, fear of confrontation – because our fear of pain or possible pain manifests itself in so many guises, we often hurt one another without really meaning to. We hurt one another and ourselves by learning, over the practice of a lifetime, how to protect ourselves from pain. Add to this all the mistakes we make, and all the mistakes others make, and only one solvent can loose our hearts from self-protective captivity. Only love. And only a forgiving heart, one capable both of accepting and bestowing forgiveness, is open both to give and receive the saving power of love.”

The saving power of love. I talked in my newsletter column this week about practicing resurrection. To practice resurrection is to overcome the fear of loving, to open our hearts to the possibilities of this moment. The only measure of our words and our deeds will be the love we leave behind when we're done.

This church is on the cusp of a new era; if you open your hearts to love, if you let the love in, if you embrace your new minister with all the love you have shown me, you can't help but blossom in the new day that is dawning. Blessed be. Amen.

Song: The Mary Ellen Carter, by Stan Rogers

1) She went down last October
in the poring driving rain.
The skipper he's been drinking
and the mate he felt no pain.
Too close to Three Mile Rock
and she was dealt her mortal blow
And the Marry Ellen Carter sitting low.

There was just us five aboard her
when she finally was a-wash.
We worked like hell to save her
all headless of the cost.
And the groan she gave as she went down
it caused us to proclaim
That the Mary Ellen Carter'd rise again.

2) Well, the owners wrote her off,
not a nickel would they spend.
"She gave twenty years of service,
boys, and met her sorry end.

but insurance paid the loss to us,
so let her rest below",
They laughed at us and said
we'd had to go.

But we talked of her all winter,
some days around the clock,
She's worth a quarter million,
a-floating at the dock.
And with every jar that hit the bar
we swore we would remain
And watch the Mary Ellen Carter rise again.

Refrain:

Rise again, raise again,
Let her name not be lost
to the knowledge of men,
For those who loved her best
and were with her to the end,
We'll make the Mary Ellen Cater, rise again.

3) All spring, now, we've been with her
on a barge lent by a friend.
Three dives a day in a hard hat suit
and twice I've had the bends.
Thank God it's only sixty feet
and the currents her are slow
Or I'd never have the strength to go below.

But we've patched her rents,
and stopped her vents,
dogged hatch and porthole down
Put cables to her 'for and aft
and girded her around
And tomorrow, noon, we hit the air
and then take up the strain
And watch the Mary Ellen Carter rise again.

Refrain

For we couldn't leave her there,
you see, to crumble into scale.
She'd save our lives so many times,
living through the gale,
And the laughing, drunken rats
who left her to a sorry grave,

They won't be laughing in another day.

And you, to whom adversity
has dealt that final blow
With smiling bastards lying to you
everywhere you go
Turn to, and put out all your strength
of and heart and brain
And, like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!

(Last refrain only) 2x
Rise again, rise again,
Thou your heart, it be broken,
your life about to end,
No matter what you've lost,
a home, a love, a friend,
Be like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again.

John Barleycorn (Traditional)
JOHN BARLEYCORN

There were three men come out of the west
Their fortunes for to try
And they have made a solemn vow
John Barleycorn must die (2x)

Fa la la la, it's a lovely day
Fa la la la lay o
Fa la la la, it's a lovely day
Sing fa la la la lay

They plowed him in three furrows deep
Laid clods all on his head
And they have made a solemn oath
John Barleycorn was dead

Well then there came a shower of rain
Which from the clouds did fall
John Barleycorn sprang up again
And so amazed them all

Well then came men with great sharp scythes
To cut him off at the knee
They bashed his head against a stone
And they used him barbarously

Well then came men with great long flails
To cut him skin from bone
The miller has used him worse than that
He ground him between two stones

They wheeled him here, they wheeled him there
Wheeled him into the barn
And they have used him worse than that
They bunged him in a vat

They worked their will upon John Barleycorn
But he lives to tell the tale
We pour him into an old brown jug
And we call him home-brewed ale