

The Awakening Earth. Our Awakening Lives

“Lo, the Earth Awakes Again.” These five words, which we’ll sing a bit later, sum up quite well the original, and the continuing, reason for this season—a season of rebirth and reawakening. Our earliest human ancestors in this part of the world surely knew that the earth would waken once again around this time of year. They had lived through enough seasons to figure that out. But even so, I’m guessing that they may have felt a little more urgency in their welcoming life back to a seemingly dead earth since their relationship to the world of nature was, by and large, considerably more up close and immediate than our own. So when they sang or chanted or danced to their own version of “Lo the Earth Awakes” they were affirming their continued survival as creatures of the earth.

They had their stories to tell as well about this season. We saw one of them dramatized here earlier in the service—the story of Persephone being allowed to return to the Earth from the underworld, as a bearer of spring—a bearer of the Earth awakening.

As the centuries went by more stories came to be added to the celebrations of this time of year. More stories about awakenings—about a newness of life growing out of a time of death, real or metaphorical. The Jewish Passover—which we recalled in our Seder here last night—tells of the death of enslavement and the promise of a new life in a Promised Land. The observance of this event—the major one on the Jewish calendar—is set in the springtime when the earth itself shows the promise of new life.

Then there is the Christian story—a rather late addition actually when it comes to the many celebrations of this season. It still intrigues me that the Christian Story that came to be added to these seasonal celebrations was given a name that derives from that of an Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess, Eostre. Eostre—Easter. Our dear Puritan ancestors, for this very reason, forbade the use of the term “Easter” when it came to their observances of the resurrection of Jesus. They, of course, believed in the Biblical accounts of this event, but they avoided any pagan attachments to it.

Be that as it may, we’ll never know for sure the events behind the resurrection accounts in the Gospels. My sense is that they have nothing to do with what happened to the body of a man who had been cruelly put to

death. They really had to do, as I read it, of an awakening that took place on the part of the disciples. The earliest version of these accounts, as told in the Gospel of Mark, ends with the disciples being scared in the aftermath of the death of Jesus and running off and hiding. The last line of the original (or as original as we can get it) text ends with the line: “They [the disciples] were afraid.” That is where, as New Testament scholars tell us (and I believe them), the original Gospel of Mark ends. A brief resurrection narrative was later appended to it.

To return, then, to Mark’s Gospel, its original ending actually portrays a pretty typical response to any kind of a great loss, or death-in-life, we may encounter; that is to say, to just hunker down and hide out. Sometimes we even need to do that after a difficult or painful loss—we need to just go and hide out for a time. And there is nothing wrong with that...up to a point.

But then comes a point when it’s time for a reawakening; and I think that’s what happened to the disciples. They had a reawakening and decided they did have something still worth living for, still had a message worth carrying forth even if this teacher and prophet who so inspired and motivated them is no longer physically present with them.

My take on this story then—as told around the world in Christian churches today--is that what became mythologized as the resurrection of a human being was really a resurrection, or a reawakening, in the lives of those who knew and loved him deeply; and who found a new sense of commitment which then allowed them to move forward.

I said last Sunday that I believed in resurrection. I should have pluralized that. I believe in resurrections of the spirit—resurrections that need to occur at various times throughout our lives and in the life of the world around us. One of my colleagues in the UU ministry, the Rev. Mark Harris, puts this very well when he notes: “We Unitarian Universalists celebrate the many resurrections of this season. We celebrate the glories of the earth when birds take to wing and crocuses force their way through the crust of snow to announce the arrival of spring. We celebrate the untold number of courageous individuals and groups who sacrificed their lives to liberate others from oppression and create a more just and loving world. We celebrate the ability of the human heart to overcome terrible personal tragedy or handicap and affirm once more the ability to love or excel when many others would have given up hope. Easter celebrates the times of

witnessing, experiencing, and creating the resurrections of human life.” Very well put, I feel.

To Mark’s words I add these of the novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez: “He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over to give birth to themselves.”

Life obliges us, as Marquez has it, to give birth to ourselves over and over. Each time such a rebirth happens is an Easter moment; a time when we get a chance to re-awaken—a chance to give birth, once again, to ourselves. It might come after a time of loss or defeat or from the deaths-in-life that inevitably come our way.

Such an Easter moment also presents us with an Easter challenge. The challenge is: Are we ready to respond when the call to awaken comes to us? It is true that you cannot rush a resurrection or a reawakening. Just as we have to wait for the earth to come back to life; there are times when we have to wait for life in its fullness to come back to us. But when it does, when the Easter moment arrives, when the reawakening time comes, we have to be ready to respond. That choice is in our hands.

This gets me to one of my favorite Easter stories, which does not come from any Biblical account. But it is a part of my personal scripture. Its central character is a bear. The name of the story is *The Nine By Nine Foot Cage*. It’s something of a folk tale, and I do not know its original source.

Once upon a time—as stories of this kind begin—there was a bear who traveled with a circus. He wasn’t trained to do anything in the way that the performing bears were. His only role was to sit, or pace around, in a nine by nine foot cage that would be placed beside the road near the entrance to the circus itself. He was like a living billboard or broadside. People would see him and then they’d know that the circus was in town. Because he was more or less expendable the bear was not especially well cared for, his cage was seldom cleaned, and he was fed whatever was left over once the performing animals had been taken care of. All he ever did, day in and day out, was walk around in a square—nine feet in each direction.

As things turned out, this was not a very well run circus and eventually it went bankrupt. All the equipment was sold off, the performers had to find

new jobs, and the animals were either sold to other circuses or sent off to zoos. Since our bear had no value as a performer he was shipped off to a zoo. And by a great stroke of fortune it was one of these zoos that are built in such a way that allows animals a lot of freedom of movement in areas that resemble their natural habitat while also being protected from the visitors to the zoo. So there were no cages. The bear was free—free, that is, to wander as he would within the larger confines of his surroundings. And yet, so this story goes, for the remainder of his life the bear never ventured beyond an area of a nine by nine foot square.

The story, of course, does not require a great deal of interpretation. The bars were gone. The stone—to use another metaphor—had been rolled away. But the bear still had to choose life again. He still had his bars to deal with. In this case the bars that still remained were the bars of his mind and spirit. These bars proved to be as real as the physical ones that had once confined him. It was these bars, these boulders, of the mind and spirit that he had to get rid of in order to truly know a resurrection or a reawakening.

Of course the bear didn't have unlimited freedom. He still had to live his life within certain boundaries—as we all do. And yet within the confines of our time bound lives we, like our bear, are given opportunities to know rebirth and reawakening, particularly after those times when life may have wounded or diminished us. Such is the promise of this Easter season.

I finish with this: While a personal God is not a part of my personal theology, I do believe in a Creative Power that is at work, or can be at work, both in our lives and beyond our lives. I've even been known to call this Creative Power "God" on occasion. It is this Creative Power we each and all possess, I believe, that allows and enables us to keep saying "yes" in the face of the many "no's" we encounter. It is this Creative Power that calls us from our times of retreat and hiding, and back into re-engagement; back to a reawakening.

When it comes to the rhythms of our earth, as already noted, we do have to wait for a resurrection. We have to wait for the Creative Power to bring us the blessings of spring, just as we did over the past month. But when it comes to the rhythms of our lives, in all their great glory and in all their deep tragedy, we are the ones who must be agents of resurrection. We are the ones who still have to reawaken when our bars of the spirit are lifted. We are

the ones who have to do the shaping in order that we may fulfill the promises of our own lives.

I cited a reading by Rev. Mark Harris a little earlier. I'd like to return to it now as a way of closing these thoughts. He writes: "If we believe in a creative power which shatters the icy tomb of winter with the life-giving miracle of spring, we have seen a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power which moves tens and then tens of thousands of people to cry out against injustice, enabling the downfall of hatred, then we have created a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power within each human breast which enables us to break the bonds of personal pain and know the hope of new tomorrows, then we have experienced a resurrection."

Such is the challenge and promise of living in this season of the year and in all the seasons of our lives: That we possess a creative power that allows us to reawaken when we need to, and continue to create and discover meaning until the end of our days.

On that note—a Blessed and Happy Easter to all of you.

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