

Eggs and Bunnies: UU's and Easter. What's wrong (or right) with this picture?  
March 23, UUCG, Rev. Ann Marie Alderman

It has always been surprising that an Easter bunny brings eggs. I mean, really, bunnies are mammals aren't they? They don't get familiar with each other and make bird eggs do they? My curious, logical mind wants to know how a bunny got associated with eggs... What do bunnies and eggs have to do with Easter anyway? Isn't Easter supposed to be a Christian holiday that celebrates the resurrection of Christ?

(It is interesting to me how many UU's must believe that is the "real" reason for Easter and stay far, far from church on this Sunday. Perhaps the preacher might talk about something that confounds many of us who so want our religion to be reasonable and logical!)

If Easter Sunday is really about celebrating the day a dead man rose and came back to life as God, why would Unitarian Universalists celebrate Easter, when so many of us find the associated Christian story of the resurrection historically questionable?

Perhaps it is because we know that Easter, like so many of the "Christian" holidays that the Western world celebrates, has origins way older than Christianity. We know that humans have been ritualizing the renewal of the natural world in spring time for thousands of years. It is enough for many of us to be here together just to delight at the splendor of nature, like the ancients did...celebrating the unmistakable natural evidence that what had appeared lifeless has renewed itself...

Many of us are quite aware that the Christian story was laid on top of so much that was already there.

Did you know that the word "Easter" only appears in the King James Version of the Bible? It is now widely understood by modern biblical translators that the writers of the KJV misapplied the word Easter to a word that really meant Passover. Later translations of the Bible don't use the word Easter at all.

There is a growing movement among some Christians to stop using the word Easter altogether. Many are using the term, "Resurrection Day", in an attempt to make what they celebrate, stand out from universal spring rites.

"Easter" comes from the Scandinavian word "Ostra" and the Teutonic (or Saxon) word "Ostern" or "Eastre". All of these words are names for the goddesses who signified the dawn, spring and fertility. Festivities honoring these goddesses were held in the

spring on the vernal equinox. Some trace the word even further back to the Greek and Latin Astarte, and a dozen other similar goddesses throughout the Fertile Crescent, all having to do with dawn...the return of light to the world after the darkness of winter.

Symbols associated with these festivals were sunrise, flowers, eggs, and the young lamb. All sorts of things representing fertility were associated with these festivals, including the hare. What has become our Easter Bunny, was originally the hare. Born open-eyed and furry, hares were considered to be the messengers of the goddess Eastre. The Easter Bunny was introduced to America just after the civil war by Germans immigrants. It soon became popular for the Easter bunny to deliver eggs to children on Easter morning.

Illogical perhaps, but we've gotten used to the combination of eggs and bunnies.

Might there be some fundamental human experience, some yearning, connected to this time of the year, that all these seemingly incompatible symbols and customs, share? Does one have to believe that Jesus literally arose from the dead to believe in resurrection?

What human energy fuels all that is Easter? What do the legends and folk tales and stories tell us about ourselves... that is worth knowing?

The ancients must have known, as we do, that spring comes every spring, right after winter,...yet they never seemed to have a "ho hum" attitude about it! Spring has always been a big deal!

What is it about Easter that makes it so special? ...Special enough for some to avoid? ...Special enough that more folks go to church on this day than any other?

What are your stories of Easter? What do those stories reveal about you?

One of my early memories of Easter was being a little girl in a fancy new dress. It wasn't like Easter was the only time I got new clothes. But I do remember that I always had something new to wear. I remember being dressed as if I was going to be put on parade. I liked the attention. I liked how special I felt. I liked being put on parade, even if it was only in front of my relatives at Grandma's house for dinner after church. I felt like a spring flower, saying look at me, look at me, somebody loves me enough to dress me up!

Some think the Roman Emperor Constantine in 300 A.D. or so, was responsible for beginning the practice of wearing new clothes on Easter. We do know that he issued a decree that the members of his court should wear new clothes on Easter. There is an even earlier origin for this practice. Researchers have found that in the very early Christian church, it was a common to baptize new believers on Easter and dress them in white robes. The new converts would wear these white robes throughout the whole Easter week as a symbol of their “conversion”. Those who had been baptized in previous years didn’t wear white robes, but they were expected to wear new clothes. Early Christians wore new clothes as a public symbol of their understanding of that they were recipients of Easter grace, having been saved from the power of death. Wearing new clothes was a way to go public about their delight at what God had done for them. Look at me, I’m special!

The Easter parade probably had its start in the Middle Ages. After Easter Mass, people in villages and towns all over Europe would process about in their new clothes as a way to declare their delight in their new life in Christ, showing that they were loved.

I was raised in the South, by Southern women. I remember hearing the rule that Easter was the first time in the New Year when one could wear pastel colors in public. In the old South, it was not “proper” to wear light colored clothes Easter. It wasn’t until later that I learned that one didn’t wear pastels until Easter, as a form of respect, waiting for the day of resurrection to be joyful in one’s dress. It was cultural drama, that most participated in, drawing out the contrast between winter and spring to make a point about the circle of the year!

I also grew up hearing the legend explaining why the dogwood tree conveniently flowers at Easter. I was told that it was because the wood of dogwood tree was used to make the cross upon which Christ was crucified. According to this legend, before Jesus’ death, the dogwood tree used to grow very large and tall, like an oak. Jesus recognized the distress the dogwood tree “felt” because it’s wood was used for the cross and “decreed” that forever more the dogwood tree would be short and twisted so that it’s wood could never be again be used to build a cross. This legend explains why now the dogwood tree’s blossoms have what appear to be brown bloodstains on their edges and a thorny cross in the center.

I just love this legend. It is a perfect example of the power of human projection!

The power of the human imagination has always delighted me! Time and time again, in story after story human beings give meaning to the world. We all do it!

Nature springs forth with new life, and our imaginations go with the flow...creating story after story...some of the stories are just absurd, yet delightful none the less, if you just let love for human beings fill your heart!

Have you heard the one about the Easter lily? It is said that white lilies sprung up in the Garden of Gethsemane wherever Christ's sweat fell to the ground in his final hours of sorrow and distress.

The human spirit will not allow suffering and death to be final. When life and that which is "life-giving" returns; we don't usually feel ho-hum about it.

We feel comfort, relief, surprise. The delight we feel when hope is renewed is what we celebrate today...

Do you always remember from the year before how magnificent a flowering dogwood will look? When you see a blooming tree do you think ... "Oh, big deal, I saw that last year?" Or is your reaction, "wow", what a pleasant delight! What a surprise! What grace to live in such a beautiful world...

Eggs, in particular have always represented the source of life. The egg, signifying the mystery of the origin of life, has always been related to the rites of the revival of nature. It was common practice among Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans to dye eggs for their spring festivals. Hoping for renewal of human life, Egyptians and Greeks buried eggs in their tombs. A Roman proverb says, "All life comes from an egg".

Throughout the span of history the egg has represented mystery, magic, medicine, food and omen. The egg like many other symbols and customs became closely entwined with the Christian Easter, but it was honored during many rite-of Spring festivals long before the Christ story. Romans, Gauls, Chinese, Egyptians, and Persians all cherished the egg as a symbol of the universe. As the universal symbol of Easter in celebrations throughout the world, it has been dyed, painted, adorned and embellished.

With the advent of Christianity the symbolism of the egg represented, not only nature's rebirth, but the rebirth of humankind. Christians embraced the symbol of the egg and used it to represent the tomb from which Christ arose. The eggshell came to be seen as a nurturing, life giving shelter from which a living being came. The discovery of the empty tomb at sunrise coincided nicely with the symbolism that dawn, the rising of the sun, represents the return of light to the world.

Perhaps, it is important to know that the coming forth of a live creature from an egg was a **surprise** to people of ancient times. They had no clue, like we do, about the mechanics of fertilization. They hid the egg to enhance the element of surprise. What was logical was not so important. What was, and is important, was the drama!

The egg is my favorite Easter item. It represents the best blend of customs and traditions. I like eggs at Easter because the shells signify the empty tomb.

Maybe I like it so much because I have always been uncomfortable with the symbol of the cross. To me the use of that symbol is like stopping before the story is over. It is like ending the natural wheel of the year with winter.

I see the natural rhythm of life. Birth is followed by death and death by birth. Yet, rarely have I nor have I met a human being who greeted new life in spring with a ho-hum attitude. When new life appears, we just don't seem to have the capacity to take it for granted. Resurrection/that which gives life is perceived as a gift, as grace, as unexpected, as a surprise.

Let us celebrate Easter as the resurrection of all that is life-giving... whatever its source.

Let us be chalice people, holding the open shell from which life springs as our symbol of hope.

Alleluia!