

**Jesus and Rabbits**  
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
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I remember the Easter mornings of my childhood. Yes, there was an egg hunt and some chocolate. But what I remember most clearly were the new white gloves, the new white woven purse and matching hat, and the white socks. I recall that those were very exciting. On those Easter mornings, my family would go to church, and I wore socks instead of tights. I wore a lightweight pastel coat, and a new hat and purse. It all felt so exciting, so liberating. Gone were the heavy winter garments, replaced by the brighter and lighter spring wear. As I recall, Easter was when my younger brother was able to wear his tartan dress shorts for the first time of the season. As my family left the house, there was no mistaking it. We believed, oh we believed, that spring had arrived. But of course, we know that here in Southern Ontario that astrological spring doesn't always correspond to meteorological spring. A few years ago, I had an inch or so of snow blanketing my yard on April 21<sup>st</sup>. Our climate's stop-start springtime reality didn't dampen the Thomson family's eager embrace of the season. Easter was the day when we started acting, and dressing (at least on Sunday mornings) like spring had arrived.

For many of us, Easter is synonymous with Spring. Many traditional Easter traditions seem to firmly root it as a celebration of spring. Rabbits are an ancient symbol of fertility – it is hard to argue with that. The Easter bunny seems to have come to this continent, in the 1700s – via Germany. Eggs, too, are a logical symbol of fertility and rebirth – ‘the which came first, The Chicken or, in this case, the egg? riddle affirms our understanding of the cyclical nature of life. Chocolate and candy were delicious additions to the celebrations Christians added... after a long winter and the Lenten season of dietary restrictions one can understand the impulse. The English word Easter, it is argued, comes from the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring and fertility, Eostre. East, the root of the word, is where each new day is born, the seeming source of the sun.

The story in the Christian scripture, of the death of Jesus, requires a springtime connection for Easter. In Matthew 26, verses 18 and 19, Jesus directs his disciples to make arrangements with an acquaintance, sending the message, “ I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house. So, the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.” The story of the death of Jesus is clearly linked to the Jewish celebration of Passover. Passover always happens in the Spring in the days and weeks following the Equinox. Therefore, the Christian Easter observances must also always happen after the Spring Equinox. In the early Christian church, Easter, the festival which

celebrates Jesus rising from the dead was not as fixed as it is now. In some churches, it was on Passover, and in others, it was near Passover. And then, at the Council of Nicaea, in 325 in the Common Era, the formula we use today was standardized. Easter, in case you don't know always falls on the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the Spring Equinox.

Passover and Easter are only two of the spring festivals, modern and ancient, that humans have observed. That feeling and excitement I had as a child, so happy to celebrate the beginning of spring is one that seems to me, to be universal. The stories vary across traditions, but there is always an element of new beginnings and new possibilities in the mix. Passover celebrates liberation from slavery, Easter the rebirth of a saviour – one who will save and liberate us. In the Thai spring water festival, the streets, and the people in them are washed clean. Holi, from Northern India, is a festival of colour, timed with the emerging colours of the spring. A Central Asian spring celebration starts, as does Passover with a thorough cleansing of homes.

I sometimes wonder if my assertion that I'm happy to live in this climate because I'd miss the seasons is completely accurate. If I'm honest I think I'd refine the statement and tell you this climate is worth it, because what I'd really miss is the spring. Winter makes spring all the sweeter. Gerard Manley Hopkins, Victorian poet and Jesuit priest wrote,

*Nothing is so beautiful as Spring –*

*When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;*

*Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush*

*Through the echoing timber does so rise and wring*

Hopkins got it. Spring is exquisite.

Candy, rabbits, a risen Jesus, meals designed to remind us of an escape from slavery – each of these, along with stories and customs from other traditions fits with the season. That which seemed dead is actually alive. Crocuses and snowdrops are bringing colour to the garden. The willow trees are showing a blush of green. At the core, this season and its celebrations are about promise, potential and hope. It is exhilarating. The season is about hope. Alleluia!

Yet if we focus too much on the alleluia, on the rabbits and coloured eggs and flowers it begins to seem too cheerful, too simplistic. The reason we find spring thrilling, the reason the Passover story and the Easter story are so important and compelling for so many is that they represent hope, and promise that comes after some real, and at times crushing hardship. Winter is no joking matter. Even in our modern times, with heating systems and electricity people struggle. Some find the dark days almost overwhelmingly

depressing. Snowstorms still bring real challenges. Passover is a story of a thrilling escape, from the crushing reality of slavery. Jesus lives, but he was still captured and executed. Stories of hope have meaning when they are contrasted with the challenges that proceed the happy ending. Hope, I think, by its definition requires brokenness. Hope is what we do, even when it sometimes seems difficult to imagine. Hope isn't a given. And I know there are times when it seems so very difficult to muster. Hope, at the heart of the seasonal stories and the spring imagery, is something we need to cultivate.

I was talking to a friend the other day. He was feeling down. The family's beloved dog had just died, and a good friend was facing a very difficult diagnosis. He'd reacted to a situation with a co-worker in a way that left him disappointed in himself. He found the news, understandably, profoundly unsettling. We've all had similar days. Days when it all just seemed too much. Sometimes it seems like we can't even imagine a path to hope. I did what I think we all need to do when we are with a friend who is feeling down. I listened. I told him I understood that things were hard. I told him I loved him. I can't fix it for him, I can't make him feel better. Maybe, though by acknowledging the hurt and the brokenness I made it possible for him to feel less alone, and maybe to find something – perhaps a faint glimmer of possibility, that can help him find his way back to a more hopeful place.

The Christian Easter may be something that used to hold meaning for you, as it did for me. I certainly don't understand that story in the way I used to, but when I consider the symbolism in it and the messages in it, it can still hold real meaning for me. The tomb was empty. What is remarkable about the story, fact or myth, accurate or inaccurate, or true or false, is that it is a story about what *wasn't* found. The tomb was empty. The story isn't about death – it's about life.

It's my belief that life – the choice to live and to hope, is the point of it all; that the choice for a life that puts us in better relationship with ourselves, with others and the world, is the point of it all.

So what might a Unitarian Universalist Easter look like? Is there a place for rabbits and Jesus in an exploration of easter? The answer, of course, there is, *if* you want there to be. The truth is we have no official teaching or understanding about a theology of Easter, resurrection, or any element, found in teachings from another faith tradition. At one point in time, of course, Unitarian Universalism was a Christian tradition. And for those early Unitarians and Universalists the Easter story would have been understood differently than it is for many of us today. Christian stories and traditions are still an important lens for many of us, but they aren't central, and they are not required. So where does that leave us this morning?

I can't speak for you... but for me, the kid who wore her new socks and hat to the Presbyterian Sunday School of her childhood, I still find much of value in the Easter story.

Easter is at the core, a story of life. It is a story of life in spite of tragedy. As the Christian scriptures describe it, the days leading up to Easter are dark. Betrayal, persecution, public humiliation, execution. It doesn't get much darker. Easter doesn't deny the hard and sometimes brutal realities of our world – it suggests that our task is to find a way, in spite of it. Layered on ancient spring festivals, and the Jewish narrative of liberation it invites us to consider what restoration might look like.

It seems to me, the contemporary message, the compelling direction that comes from the Easter, and the Passover, stories, is that we all have a responsibility to repair the world, to bring life and redemption back. The questions for me, are 'What can you do, here, now and today to embody Easter?' and 'what steps can you take to liberate yourself and others?' And so, I invite us all to pause for a moment and ask ourselves, "what can I do to bring some hope, some good news?"

The season invites us to shake off the chains that bind us to old ways of being, and to set a new course, perhaps to a new approach, a new purpose and a new understanding of who we are. Each year we are encouraged to hunt for the sweet morsels and to savour them – to find new and improbable forms for being present. A renewed relationship or a new beginning is probably more likely than a Rabbit who delivers chocolate eggs. Why should we deny possibilities?

I know hope isn't easy, I know it isn't cheap. I know that for some of us, because of our current reality, it is, at least for now, out of reach. And that is ok, that is why we do this together. Maybe today you need to rest and I need to do the work of looking for hope. Hope looks easy from the outside, but it isn't. It can certainly be elusive. Hope costs us something. It demands something of us. I consciously work to find ways to feel hopeful, and someday it is hard work. There is much in this world to make hope seem like folly. And if I'm honest I'll admit that maybe it is. But I'm not sure that I can live that way. I think there is something in us, a natural impulse that keeps reminding us to choose life, to kick back the stone of the tomb, to gather the unleavened bread and find a way to keep going.

What does your search for hope look like? What makes your heart gladden?

- A walk on a cold morning, listening for bird song
- A new resolve for kindness, for tenderness
- Knowing that someone is speaking up for the disenfranchised
- Finding spring on a day when an unwelcome frost finds its way into our neighbourhoods or our hearts.
- Seeing someone show up, with what is needed, to be present to others

We do all of these things and more because hope and Easter require it of us. Hope doesn't guarantee an outcome. Part of the Easter story is of women who went to the tomb because they loved the man who had died and because their tradition told them that to go was a way of showing respect. They went, with heavy hearts because it was the right thing to do – they found life in the process. I can relate to that. Can you? There are times when I've done something, not because I thought my actions or my choices would help. Sometimes they haven't, and sometimes they have. We hope and we do the hopeful thing because we can and because not doing it ensures that things won't get better.

Each year the magnolia by my front door, blooms, because that is what it does, so beautifully. Exquisite pink flowers. And with some frequency in the days after the blooming, cold wet snow falls, blankets the flowers and turns them brown. And this morning, it is getting ready again, the fuzzy buds are swelling– flowers in waiting. This morning I did some worrying for it, checking the long-range weather forecast. It looks hopeful. I think, I hope, that the disappointing end won't happen again, or at least not this year. I did the worrying for the magnolia, because of course it not possible for it to reason, 'hey wait, maybe we shouldn't bother, this didn't turn out so well that last time.' Even if it could hesitate or hold off, even if it could withhold the lovely pink, it wouldn't, it isn't in its nature.

We know because we have seen the hard stories, because we've lived a 'few' years, that things don't always turn out beautifully – Rabbits, pretty flowers and chocolate eggs and a happy ending aren't the whole story. An empty tomb isn't the whole story. They represent the possibility.

And because I've seen the hard stories, I've lived some of them, and because I've lived a few years I know something else too. I know that often the possibility for a happier ending doesn't exist unless we help encourage it along

Our job is to do what we can, to cultivate hope... even when we know we can't know how the story will end. Sometimes it will end badly – heartache and tragedy are real. That reality doesn't mean that we've failed. But just as they are real, possibilities are real. The willingness to see the world with soft eyes, with compassion is real too. The ability to dare to hope, to look for wonder, to hope is real. Today I'm going to keep my eyes open for chocolate eggs, for green shoots in the garden, for an empty tomb... And I'm going to do what I can to live the promise and hopefulness of Easter tomorrow too. Alleluia. Happy Passover. Happy Easter.