

Celebrating Easter and Earth Day

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April 24, 2011

It is not uncommon for Unitarian Universalists on Easter not to focus on the resurrection of Jesus which, after all, is the centerpiece of the Christian holiday. Not believing in the literal truth of that biblical story, we seek a way to extract some symbolic or metaphorical grain of truth for the basis of our celebration. And so we look to the world of nature, the turning of the seasons, and in particular the new life that emerges and blooms around us each Spring.

All of that bears little resemblance to the biblical Easter story that is about the crucifixion – the execution – of a human being, and his subsequent return from death to life. Some would consider our approach a trivialization of that original story. “Easter Lite” if you will. There’s a little story that illustrates our lack of connection to the biblical roots of Easter.

One Unitarian Universalist minister decided to check on how much the 1st grade Sunday school class knew about Easter, so she asked them who new what Easter meant. One little girl raised her hand and asked if that was when you had the turkey dinner, and the minister replied that, no, that was Thanksgiving.

A boy raised his hand and said that Easter was when you stayed up late and made noise at midnight. The minister explained that that was New Year's Eve. This went on for a while and the minister was getting quite concerned. Finally, a girl in the class obviously had an inspiration. "I know, I know!" said the girl, "Easter was after they had killed Jesus and put him in a cave. On Easter morning he rose from the dead, came out of his cave, saw his shadow, and there was six more weeks of winter!"

I hope we’re doing a better job than that in our Religious Education program. We may not embrace the Easter story of resurrection as a factual account. But it is a story embraced by millions and millions of our Christian brothers and sisters. And so I think it is worth our while to seek some universal message, even as we would from the myriad other stories and tales that come to us from our own and other cultures.

And while it is appropriate for us to celebrate the natural cycles of life and the seasons, the deeper truths plumbed in the Easter story go beyond that. The idea of resurrection, as portrayed in the Easter story, is not simply about the natural cycle of things. Plants re-sprouting after a winter of dormancy. Flowers blooming. The birth of a new generation of animals. No, resurrection is about a special happening in special, perhaps one-of-a-kind circumstances. It is about the return from death, or from hopelessness and despair, to life anew.

At this time in the history of our species and our planet, I think there is a special relevance to the idea of death and resurrection. Two days ago was Good Friday, the day on which Christians commemorate the crucifixion – the death - of Jesus. It was that occasion that set the stage for the central event of Easter – his resurrection or return to life.

This year, that day coincided with our annual celebration of Earth Day. How appropriate might that be? I think it’s not too far-fetched to consider that, for some time now, we humans have been crucifying the earth. On Earth Day, we not only celebrate this planet, but we also mourn what we have been doing to her. And in recognizing the damage we have done, the question arises: from where will come the earth’s resurrection? Its return, if not from death to life, at least from critical illness to renewed health and vitality.

I’m not going to spend a lot of time and words this morning convincing you of the critical state of the health of our planet. You all are aware of what’s been going on with global warming

and climate change. If you aren't already alarmed about the state of things, there are books you should read. I'll mention two in particular this morning. First is Bill McKibben's latest offering, from last year, called *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. McKibben makes the case that it's already too late to get the earth back to where it was, and so now the burden is on us to be able to adapt to a different planet than we grew up on.

The other book I'll mention is a new one, just out this year, called *Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth* by Mark Hertsgaard. This book, too, paints a gloomy picture about where we are. In fact, it quotes Martin Parry, co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as follows: "Working on climate change used to be about saving the world for future generations. Not anymore. Now it's not only your daughter who is at risk, it's probably you as well."

Remarkably, as alarming as the situation is, as described by both of these, and many other, books, both authors refuse to give up hope. And both provide pieces of a roadmap for our future. Another common element is the (unspoken) implication that what we *cannot* do is sit around and wait for a miracle from God to set things right. *We* are the hands of God in this world. It is we who have created the mess we are in; it is we who are responsible for turning things around.

But we have a lot of work to do, and a lot of choices to make. President Obama's science advisor, John Holdren, put it like this: "We basically have three choices: mitigation, adaptation, and suffering. We're already doing some of each and will do more of all three. The question is what the mix will be. The more mitigation we do, the less adaptation will be required, and the less suffering there will be."

We know there is already suffering going on. Extreme weather events triggered by global-warming-fueled climate change have wrought death and devastation. Mass extinctions have begun and will continue. Coral reefs and polar bears, among others, are in particularly perilous situations.

As conditions change – as they get worse – we will adapt as best we can, because we have no other choice. It's "adapt or die." But as the health of our ecosystems deteriorates further, the choices for adaptation narrow as well. And so, we definitely need to focus more attention and energy on the option of mitigation. How can we make a difference?

In *Hot*, Mark Hertsgaard has a short section called "How Individuals Can Make a Difference." He addresses some issues of adaptation, like planting shade trees in your yard and painting your roof white to better cope with increases in temperature. But he also writes about mitigation. For instance: "The average U.S. household could reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent within six months by making a few changes in daily routines, such as walking or biking to work instead of taking the car."

But of course, as you're probably thinking, an individual really can't make much of a difference. That's right, but populations of individuals *can* make a difference. Both in terms of their own habits and practices, and in terms of their ability to influence public policy.

And so, perhaps the most important foundational step toward saving the planet is a widespread shift in consciousness. Recycling your paper and plastic, riding your bike to work, using less air-conditioning, etc., etc., will not, in and of themselves have a great impact. But the fact that you are thinking about, and always seeking additional ways to reduce your carbon footprint, is important. And when multiplied across millions and millions of individuals, the cumulative effect does become significant.

It is a source of hope and encouragement that there does seem to be a shift occurring in

public consciousness. Forty years of Earth Days have kept the issues in the front of our minds at least once a year. Advertisers have begun to see the value in highlighting the “green” qualities of their goods and services. Many, but not all, governments have made commitments to reduce the levels of greenhouse gas emissions. That is probably the most crucial task facing us now: demanding that our elected officials and leaders take the situation seriously and act responsibly in formulating public policy.

One of the strengths of Bill McKibben’s message is that he has managed to articulate very succinctly one of the primary imperatives of our time. The simple number “350” provides both a rallying cry and a concrete objective. The scientists tell us that an ecologically sustainable planet earth requires less than 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in its atmosphere. The level is currently 390 ppm and is still on the rise. Thus it is not enough simply to stop the increase. We need to reverse the trend and get it back to or below 350.

Using that basic, easy to grasp idea as the focus, Bill McKibben and his organization 350.org are working to build a global movement to solve the climate crisis. As McKibben put it in a speech last Saturday night at a Washington, DC March for Clean Energy, “We fight not just for ourselves, we fight for the beauty of this place. For cool trout streams and deep spruce woods. For chilly fog rising off the Pacific and deep snow blanketing the mountains. We fight for all the creation that shares this planet with us. And now, more than ever, we fight together.”

Together. That is the key. Knowing that there is a growing movement, which I can support, and in which I can participate, allows me to maintain hope for the future. And that is a source of great joy on this Easter morning.

I close this morning with a “Prayer of Healing,” first presented as part of a United Nations Environmental Sabbath Program in 1990. This text was also set to music for the third part of *Earthsongs* by David Brunner, the first two parts of which our Choir sang this morning.

A Prayer of Healing:

We join with the Earth and with each other.

To bring new life to the land
To restore the waters
To refresh the air

We join with the Earth and with each other.

To renew the forests
To care for the plants
To protect the creatures

We join with the Earth and with each other.

To celebrate the seas
To rejoice in the sunlight
To sing the song of the stars

We join with the Earth and with each other.

To recreate the human community
To promote justice and peace
To remember our children

We join with the Earth and with each other.

We join together as many and diverse expressions of one loving mystery: for the healing of the Earth and the renewal of all life.

So may it be.

References

Hertsgaard, Mark *Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

McKibben, Bill *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2010.