

FALLING AND RISING

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Trappist Monk Thomas Merton wrote:

“Suddenly, there is a point when religion becomes laughable. Then you decide that you are nevertheless religious.”

My friend and colleague Rob Hardies adds:

“People flock to religion not in spite of the fact that it’s laughable, but precisely because of it. The reason people come to church on Easter is to look for hope.... The church is the *repository* of human hope.... The church is the place where we stash away those stories of hope for when we and the world need them most.”

As a religion, we have our roots in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. We, too, are a People of the Book. Yet we have expanded well beyond our Christian roots. Generally, if we are followers of Jesus, it is of the teacher who tells us that we are all children of God and calls us to justice, not the man-god who died on a cross and was resurrected three days later, thereby redeeming our sins.

Yet Easter Sunday consistently has the highest attendance of the year in many of our congregations, and sometimes I have to wonder exactly why? How is it that the holiest day on the Christian calendar is also, apparently, one of our holiest days as well? A part of this is tradition and heritage (and modified Easter hunts after the service for children), but I think it also has to do with hope.

The Easter story, which stands in a long line of celebrations in the springing of the year, reminds us that rebirth and resurrection are always possible in a human life, in human history. In spring, all the earth is indeed made new; it is a glory and a wonder and it never grows old. Resurrection is always possible, even in the direst circumstances.

Whence arises Easter? The name comes from the Germanic fertility goddess Eostre. When the Eostre worshipping tribes became Christian, the goddess’ spring celebration merged with the Christian celebrations of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The date of what we now call Easter was set in the year 325, when the Roman Emperor Constantine called all the bishops together in Nicea to settle many doctrinal issues in the still-new Christian Church. After a long and disputatious debate, the famed Council of Nicea gave us the Trinity and the Nicene Creed which affirmed it. Yet after getting through the tough stuff, the bishops put their minds to setting the date for Easter. They landed on the first Sunday after the first full moon that falls on or just after the vernal equinox. It seems the difficulties of travel in ancient times led the bishops to schedule this holiest of Christian holidays at a time when a bright moon could assist a traveling pilgrim. Very practical of them, I’d say, but if it also sounds awfully pagan, well that is no coincidence.

The bishops were no dummies. They knew that to convert pagan communities to this new faith, they would need to integrate it into their lives. It’s tempting to make the Catholic church into a sinister group intentionally subverting pagan holidays. Yet why not place the archetypal story of this new religion – a story of rebirth and resurrection – at the time when people already celebrated rebirth and resurrection?

Humans have always celebrated an Easter of one sort or another by many names, and it has always been in the spring. That alone probably explains the high attendance on this Sunday.

Yet we will always have Easter because the human condition will also always require hope. A tomb may be no place to stay, but we humans manage to create many tombs in our lives.

In her book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, Rebecca Parker tells a story of rebirth and renewal, about a time she was so deep in the tomb that she saw no way out but to take her own life. She had ended a pregnancy in hope of saving a marriage, and in the end she lost both.

She writes:

Everything I most loved had slipped out of my hands. I felt there was nothing left to hold on to—not my marriage, not my child, not my faith.

I spiraled into grief and self-directed anger. One night I came to the end of my will to live. I just wanted the anguish to stop. It was a cold, clear night. I lived at the top of a hill above a lake and sometime after midnight I left my house and started walking down the hill. The water would be cold enough. I could walk into it, then swim, then let go, sink down into the darkness and go home to God. The thought was comforting. I had no second thoughts. I was set on my course.

Yet when she got to the familiar lake, she saw what “looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses, all along the shore.” As she got closer, she saw a bunch of people all bundled up against the cold. “The stick shapes weren’t sawhorses,” she writes. “They were telescopes. It was the Seattle Astronomy Club. Before I could make my way through the line, one of them looked up from his eyeglass and, presuming me to be an astronomer, said with enthusiasm, ‘I’ve got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look.’ I didn’t want to be rude or give away my reason for being there, so I bent down and looked through the telescope. There was Jupiter, banded red and glowing! ‘Isn’t it great?’ he said. It was great. Jupiter was beautiful through the telescope.

I couldn’t kill myself in the presence of these people who had gotten up in the middle of a cold night, with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes, to look at the planets and the stars.

The beauty of the night sky, the dew-wet grass at my feet, and the Seattle Astronomy Club kept me in this world.

It would be wrong,” Rebecca goes on, “to think of this moment as one in which joy triumphed over despair, good came out of bad, or love of life defeated desire for death. I did not defeat negative feelings of anguish and despair because I saw something more lovely and good. My heart was still breaking with grief, but I became able to feel more. I was able to place that grief within a larger heart, within a wider embrace that could hold sorrow and joy, loss and illumination, death and life.

Rebecca’s story is a reminder that rebirth and resurrection are possible. Being alive and being human means that we have the capacity to experience wonder and delight – to view distant Jupiter through a telescope. Yet great sorrows also crowd our lives, crowd the world around us. When we lose hope in the face of those sorrows, we can fall into despair, we can enter the tomb of the soul. Easter is a powerful reminder that there are other realities.

There are two sides to the Easter story – rebirth and resurrection. They’re not simply two sides of the same coin. Rather these two Easters are, says Rev. Frances Manly, “grounded in at least two different realities, two different aspects of the human condition.” We tend to use the terms as synonyms, but in truth, Manly says, “they make very different promises to our spirits and our souls.”

Rebirth is the spring side of Easter, the knowledge so deeply held in the human heart, indeed in our very DNA that spring always follows winter. Whether it be the cold and snow and darkness of a physical winter, or a winter of the soul. This is Easter as fertility celebration, the one that gives us Easter eggs and bunnies. Its promise lies in the cycling seasons of the earth, the unpredictable cycles of the soul.

As poet Langston Hughes says, it is the promise of the “time of silver rain [when] the earth puts forth new life again, green grasses grow, and flowers lift their heads,” spreading the wonder “Of life, Of Life, Of life!

Spring comes even to the coldest winter of our hearts. No matter how bad it gets – no matter the grief, no matter the pain in our aching bodies, no matter how desolate the heart. Rebirth is inevitable. Life renews itself again and again, and we can take hope and comfort in knowing it.

Resurrection, Manly says, “is very different: it is something that happens once, a radical break in the natural order of things, leading – always – to transformation. It is not a waking from sleep but a return from the dead.” The story of Jesus’ resurrection is a story of such a radical shift. It speaks metaphorically of the kind of transformation that is also possible in our lives.

“A tomb is no place to stay.” And yet we do enter the tomb, caves where it seems no light or hope will ever penetrate. Has something ever died inside you? Have you ever hurt so badly you wished you could die? Perhaps it was a deeply personal despair or a despair at the state of the world. Have you ever felt sealed away in a tomb? A tomb of circumstance or perhaps even a tomb of your own making?

The story of Easter tells us that the stone can roll away, it holds out hope that that which has died can yet come to life again. Rebirth happens whether we will it or no. Resurrection requires some agency. We can take steps toward resurrection.

As Rev. Scott Alexander tells us, “No matter what particularly befalls, afflicts, limits, pains or confounds you, practice resurrection. Make a judgment for life over death.... Trust that Easter is true. Trust that life remains a promise and a possibility. You are free this day – any day – to practice resurrection!”

Yet the power of resurrection does not rest solely in our hands. Rebecca Parker’s story of her encounter with the Seattle Astronomy Club that saved her life is a story of resurrection.

Some might say that we need God to be resurrected. Rebecca, it seems, only needed the Seattle Astronomy Club. But who really can say that they were not God? I like the image of God as astronomy club far better than God the Father in a distant heaven. While there need be no divine intervention for the radical transformation that is resurrection, we do almost always need something more than just our individual selves. We need something larger than ourselves – be it community or devotion to a higher cause, or the “larger heart” Rebecca felt embraced by. The transformation of resurrection can feel so radical that some call it the hand of God. Call it what you will.

Rebirth is inevitable and resurrection is possible. Let your spirits soar with the rebirth of tree singing forth with new leaves this spring and Easter season.

And let resurrection be a real possibility. Its promise is not that the stone *will* be rolled away, only that it can be.

In these times it can be hard – even laughable – to have hope. Have hope anyway. Let this Easter morn and beyond remind you that hope is never lost. Rebirth and resurrection are such powerful forces in a human life. They can and will happen.

This is really good news. Take it into your heart.
Practice Resurrection!
Shine out in your living.

Happy, Happy Easter.
Hallelujah.