

Risings, Easter and Earth Day

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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 rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy pear tree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning,
In Eden garden.

Those of you who know this poem know it's a sonnet in disguise, so it must be completed. Can't have a sonnet left hanging. I should say that Gerard Manley Hopkins ends this poem, as he often does, with effusive affirmations of his faith. So what follows is not merely Christian, but specifically Catholic. Eh, it's Easter . . . I'll rewind a bit:

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

The English word "Easter" derives from the Saxon goddess of dawn, and spring and fertility, Oestre/Estre, which is closely related to the other names of this same goddess all over Europe and the Near East: Eostar, Ishtar, Astarte, and Oestara. Our word for the female sex hormone is estrogen.

As a Unitarian and pantheist, and non-dogmatic person with pretensions to open-mindedness, it seems perfectly reasonable to me to worship the Earth, her seasons, her elements, the wind and fire and water, and the life that has arisen here.

The Buddhists and the environmentalists (and pantheists) have it right: living in harmony with all things is the way.

Today is the day most Christians celebrate the resurrection of their Savior, Christ Jesus. BTW, "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "messiah," that means only, "anointed", not a word that to use slowly turns us into fanatics and persecutors.

The security forces of the empire executed Jesus as a trouble-maker, with at least the assent of the local establishment. The gruesome execution was on Friday, and on the 3rd day, today, he rose from the dead. The Church long ago tied this rebirth to the rebirth of nature. It's a natural and winning combination.

Many believe in the literal Resurrection. Most religious liberals, and perhaps most modern Christians have their doubts, and treat the story as a symbol, and a reminder of the possibility of new beginnings, of redemption, of the resurrection our lives, which, you'll no doubt agree, lie in ruins.

Each one of us has known the feeling of being reborn, of starting over, of being given another chance. Sometimes the rebirth comes out of a crisis, surviving a disease, or a serious injury or other close call. We can sometimes get the feeling vicariously, when someone else survives, or doesn't.

Usually though, the sense of beginning a new life comes in ordinary ways:
beginning a new school year, and with new teachers (thanks goodness!),
moving to a new town, leaving your old persona behind,
living with another family for a while;
leaving home for college, leaving your youth behind;
becoming a sexual being,
entering adulthood and becoming independent from parents,
entering the work force, supporting yourself, starting a career,
getting married or partnered;
having children, becoming that new being, a parent;
retiring from one's career and losing the identity gained from work;
Having an old friend from childhood reach out to us after long years apart, giving rebirth to a friendship, and reconnection to part of a vanished life.

Then there are activities, like gardening—especially gardening—with all those reminders of the mysteries of death and new life, helped along, by you, the god of your garden;
In gardening, and animal husbandry, we are very close to life and death, and we wonder, don't we, when a favorite plant is attacked by bugs or disease, or if one of the puppies is delivered stillborn, it's easy to reflect on our own life and our own death, and are filled, sometimes with joy, and sometimes with sorrow and pity.

There's a kind of rebirth when one volunteers for something, or more profoundly, dedicates oneself to an ideal.

Sometimes our lives are reborn in a sudden realization, or in a choice we're now ready to make.

When traveling, you can be anyone! Putting on a mask, you can briefly be reborn as something new and possibly quite unlike yourself.

Every time there's an election, especially for President, we have a chance for a new beginning. The elections of JFK and Barack Obama felt like rebirths to many people I know.

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Some people believe in an afterlife. Some believe in heaven. Some believe in reincarnation. Some believe that their spirit will live on after death and join other—or all—spirits or Spirit.

I don't know. Nobody does. My own belief is that for these assemblies of flesh and mind and spirit, *this* life is it, and after that it all gets recycled, and we will live on for a while only in the memory of those we've touched.

What I am quite sure of, is that this life is a gift, an incalculable lucky series of coincidences that beat odds on a cosmic scale, and that if we have a deeper, more religious appreciation of this miracle, it might cause us to be kinder to ourselves and to others.

May we all, therefore, like our mother Earth, rise and be reborn at least once each year. More often if possible, as every rebirth gives us another chance to get it right.

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Bridge:

The Gospel of Judas has been translated and published. This is another in a series of so-called Gnostic Gospels that have turned up in the last 60 years, and include two of my favorites, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. The Gospel of Thomas contains the now-famous couplet: “if you bring out what is within you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring out what is within you, what is within in you will destroy you.” Mary’s Gospel likewise speaks to finding God and salvation within, rather finding it in rituals, or authorities, or institutions. You can read more about all this in Elaine Pagel’s “The Gnostic Gospels” which proved for me an idea that came to me in seminary, reading St. Paul, namely, that the disciples most definitely fumbled the handoff.

I was excited to hear about the Gospel of Judas. The Gospel says that Judas, far from being a betrayer and just about the worst person on earth, was actually in Christ’s innermost circle, favored above all the others—above all the other men, anyway—and was a key participant in Jesus plan to fulfill his mission by getting himself martyred by the Romans. You can learn more about this via a National Geographic Special available from Netflix and Amazon.

As a Unitarian, I find all this to be exciting, and affirming of my faith, which, among other things, believes that religious truth does not contradict truth from any other source. So we Unitarians, we religious liberals have always welcomed scientific discoveries, and new scholarship, and I think, are quietly delighted when we find how easy and natural it is for us to accommodate something like the Gospel of Judas. It’s like, that makes sense, that’s so human, it’s perfect. Those unfortunates caught up in orthodoxy have to ignore this sort of thing, or deny it, or create convoluted arguments, because their fixed and perfect construct can’t accommodate new information.

Mark Morford, a writer for the San Francisco Chronicle writes on these subjects. Like Jon Carroll of “Unitarian Jihad” fame, he has to be a religious liberal. Pause. You know about Unitarian Jihad? (locate squib)

Back to Mark Morford, who is positively chortling about the damage this sort of thing does to rigid thinking and the whole notion that such issues are or can be finished and done. The Gnostic Gospels he writes, are “an astonishing collection of delicious, banned writings from one of the more mystical, pro-sexual, pro-women, open-minded sects of early Christianity, one of many that offered radically differing versions of Christ’s story and message, but which, like the rest, eventually lost out to the more militant and dogmatic Church many of us know and recoil from today.” [The version of this sermon that will appear on the website will have a link to Mr. Morford’s writings, who shares outlook with the Unitarian Kurt Vonnegut, to whom we now turn, because we can benefit from thinking about Jesus in a new way.

He’s talking about events that occur at the beginning of Holy Week, rather than at the end, but for us, it’s close enough.

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Sermon From Vonnegut

I am enchanted by the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by—and then we will have two good ideas. What might that second good idea be? I don’t know. How could I know? I will make a wild guess that it will come from music somehow. I have often wondered what music is and why we love it so. It may be that music is that second good idea being born.

I choose as my text the first eight verses of John 12, which deal not with Palm Sunday but with the night before—with Palm Sunday Eve, with what we might call “Spikenard Saturday.” I hope that will be close enough to Palm Sunday to leave you more or less satisfied. I asked an Episcopalian priest the other day what I should say to you about Palm Sunday itself. She told me to say that it was a brilliant satire on pomp and circumstance and high honors in this world. So I tell you that.

The priest was Carol Anderson, who sold her physical church in order that her spiritual parish might survive.

Now, as to the verses about Palm Sunday Eve: I choose them because Jesus says something in the eighth verse which many people I have known have taken as proof that Jesus himself occasionally got sick and tired of people who needed mercy all the time. I read from the Revised Standard Bible rather than the King James, because it is easier for me to understand. Also, I will argue afterward that Jesus was only joking, and it is impossible to joke in King James English. The funniest joke in the world, if told in King James English, is doomed to sound like Charlton Heston.

I read: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made Him supper; Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those at table with him.

"Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.

"But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples (he who was to betray Him) said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?' This, he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and, as he had the money box, he used to take what was put into it.

"Jesus said, 'Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me.'"

Thus ends the reading, and, although I have promised a joke, there is not much of a chuckle in there anywhere. The reading, in fact, ends with at least two quite depressing implications: That Jesus could be a touch self-pitying, and that He was, with His mission to Earth about to end, at least momentarily sick and tired of hearing about the poor.

The King James version of the last verse, by the way, is almost identical: "'For the poor always ye have with you; but you do not always have Me.'"

Whatever it was that Jesus really said to Judas was said in Aramaic, of course—and has come to us through Hebrew and Greek and Latin and archaic English. Maybe He only said something a lot like, "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me." Perhaps a little something has been lost in translation. And let us remember, too, that in translations jokes are commonly the first things to go.

I would like to recapture what has been lost. Why? Because I, as a Christ-worshipping agnostic, have seen so much un-Christian impatience with the poor encouraged by the quotation "For the poor always ye have with you."

I am speaking mainly of my youth in Indianapolis, Ind. No matter where I am and how old I become, I still speak of nothing but my youth in Indianapolis, Ind. Whenever anybody out that way began to worry a lot about the poor people when I was young, some eminently respectable Hoosier, possibly an uncle or an aunt, would say that Jesus Himself had given up on doing much about the poor. He or she would paraphrase John 12, verse 8: "The poor people are hopeless. We'll always be stuck with them."

The general company was then free to say that the poor were hopeless because they were so lazy or dumb, that they drank too much and had too many children and kept coal in the bathtub, and so on. Somebody was likely to quote Kim Hubbard, the Hoosier humorist, who said that he knew a man who was so poor that he owned 22 dogs. And so on.

If those Hoosiers were still alive, which they are not, I would tell them now that Jesus was only joking, and the He was not even thinking much about the poor.

I would tell them, too, what I don't have to tell this particular congregation, that jokes can be noble. Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears. Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion, to the futility of thinking and striving anymore. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning-up to do afterward—and since I can start thinking and striving again that much sooner.

All right:

It is the evening before Palm Sunday. Jesus is frustrated and exhausted. He knows that one of His close associates will soon betray Him for money—and that He is going to be mocked and tortured and killed. He is going to feel all that a mortal feels when He dies in convulsions on the cross. His visit among us is almost over—but life must still go on for just a little while.

It is again suppertime.

His male companions for supper are themselves a mockery. One is Judas, who will betray Him. The other is Lazarus, who has recently been dead for four days. Lazarus was so dead that he stunk, the Bible says. Lazarus is surely dead, and not much of a conversationalist—and not necessarily grateful, either, to be alive again. It is a very mixed blessing, to be brought back from the dead.

If I had read a little further, we would have learned that there is a crowd outside, crazy to see Lazarus, not Jesus. Lazarus is the man of the hour as far as the crowd is concerned.

Trust a crowd to look at the wrong end of a miracle every time.

There are two sisters of Lazarus there—Martha and Mary. They, at least, are sympathetic and imaginatively helpful. Mary begins to massage and perfume the feet of Jesus Christ with an ointment made from the spikenard plant. Jesus has the bones of a man and is clothed in the flesh of a man—so it must feel awfully nice, what Mary is doing to His feet. Would it be heretical of us to suppose that Jesus closes His eyes?

This is too much for that envious hypocrite Judas, who says, trying to be more Catholic than the Pope: “Hey—this is very un-Christian. Instead of wasting that stuff on Your feet, we should have sold it and given the money to the poor people.”

To which Jesus replies in Aramaic: “Judas, don’t worry about it. There will still be plenty of poor people left long after I’m gone.”

This is about what Mark Twain or Abraham Lincoln would have said under similar circumstances.

If Jesus did in fact say that, it is a divine black joke, well suited to the occasion. It says everything about hypocrisy and nothing about the poor. It is a Christian joke, which allows Jesus to remain civil to Judas, but to chide him for his hypocrisy all the same.

“Judas, don’t worry about it. There will still be plenty of poor people left long after I’m gone.”

Shall I regarble it for you? “The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me.”

My own translation does no violence to the words in the Bible. I have changed their order some, not merely to make them into the joke the situation calls for but to harmonize them, too, with the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount suggests a mercifulness that can never waver or fade.

This has no doubt been a silly sermon. I am sure you do not mind. People don’t come to church for preachments, of course, but to daydream about God.