

Practice Resurrection

Easter 2010
Unity Church

Each year as Easter rolls around, it is inevitable as colored eggs and Easter candy, that your ministers' return to their own quaint spring ritual, the Easter argument. What shall it be this year, Jesus or spring? Will we open the service singing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," or with "Lo, the Earth Awakes Again." Both hymns are set to the same tune.

The first was written by Charles Wesley, author of more than 6000 hymns who, with his brother John and their friend George Whitefield were the founders of Methodism. The second is the work of Samuel Longfellow, younger brother of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was among the nineteenth century Unitarian preacher most influenced by Transcendentalism. The first recounts the ministry of Jesus and asserts his resurrection. The second enlists the story as a metaphor for spring claiming "Once again the word comes true, alleluia, All the world shall be made new, alleluia." What shall it be friends? Easter or spring? This year and last we've split the difference and opened with "O Day of Light and Gladness, of prophecy and song." We do the best we can.

Like most if not all diametrically opposing arguments, this one is ridiculous. Jesus did not live and die so that we might worship him. He lived and died so that we might also learn to live and die in service to a larger love. No matter what the Fundamentalists believe he's not the only one who lived and died for love. In fact, thank God, it happens all the time. Just as fallen leaves slowly decay and return to the soil, the best of those we've loved and lost takes root in us and lives again. It's the only immortality we can trust. We do not need to choose between the old strong story and the lessons of natural world. The text may differ but the melody is still the same.

At the end of "Journey of the Magi" Eliot writes:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth of Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,*

*But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

“I had seen birth and death but thought they were different...” Eliot’s poem is inspired by the Christmas story Matthew tells but just as the Magi experienced his birth as hard and bitter agony, the way that Jesus dies is very much like being born. Yes, by God, he suffered. And yes, by God, the others, brokenhearted, grieved. But taking up his ministry, stepping up to the obligations of prophecy and healing they began to be transformed. The story is not about Jesus ascending to heaven. The story is about heaven taking hold in hearts of the others, the ones he left behind, who rose up from despair and grief, who rose up from denial and betrayal, and taking up the cause for which their master lived and died, became the living truth of resurrection.

They learned how to carry it. They learned to embrace it, to balance it, to carry it, because they could not and they would not put it down. They went practicing. They learned to admire, admire, admire the things of this world that are kind, and maybe also troubled. As they lived out that larger love what seemed at first like death was transformed into everlasting life. May it be so for us as well.

Amen and Blessed Be.

