

Why Are We Having Easter So Early?

Both Easter and Passover are moveable feasts whose dates depend on the moon and the sun. Unlike Christmas, which is always on December 25, Easter falls on a Sunday somewhere between March 22 and April 25 each year, depending on the moon and the vernal equinox. The date of the first day of Passover also varies according to the moon and the vernal equinox.

So let's start with vernal = spring, equinox = equal night. This year on March 20, last Thursday, at 1:48 AM EDT, the sun crossed directly over the equator, and night and day were the same length throughout the planet Earth. In the northern hemisphere, the vernal equinox signals the first day of spring. So spring is here!

Passover is a Jewish festival that celebrates the delivery of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This year Passover begins with the rising of the moon on the evening of April 19. It falls on the first full moon after the vernal equinox,

on the 14th day of Nisan, the first month of the biblical Jewish year. Here at the Fellowship we celebrate Passover with a Seder, which this year will be held on Saturday, April 26.

Easter is a Christian festival that celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The first Easter came on the first day of the week after Passover in Jerusalem. The date for the celebration of Easter was set by the Council of Nicea in 325 CE to fall on the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the vernal equinox. This year the full moon was on Friday, March 21, so Easter is today, March 23. Easter is very early this year; in fact it hasn't been this early since 1913.

Easter Reflection: Life Wins

Today we heard two stories about human fear: Moses at the burning bush and the women at the tomb of Jesus [Exodus 3 1-14, Mark 16 1-8]. Confronted by the miraculous, by the promise of transformation, by new life instead of the same old familiar death, any of us might be terrified.

God spoke to Moses and Moses hid his face, but then he recovered sufficiently to ask questions. How can I go back to

Egypt? And who are you anyway? A reluctant hero, Moses tries to get out of it, but God prevails and so Moses goes to Egypt and confronts Pharaoh, who does eventually let his people go. The Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years, where Moses dies, and then they cross the river Jordan and settle as free people in the land of milk and honey.

There is no historical evidence for the Exodus, no proof that any of this ever happened. But the story has lasted for thousands of years, and I think something important happened to the people who became the Jews when they first moved into Palestine. The Exodus story is about freedom, about obedience, and about covenant. The people were transformed: they had been slaves in Egypt and now their children are free in the Promised Land. We tell the story when we read the Haggadah during our Seder.

The women who came to the tomb to embalm Jesus' body were already on edge. Two days earlier their leader had been put to death, and now they are out before sunrise in a strange part of town. And who will roll away the stone? When they find a stranger in the tomb and hear his preposterous message,

they panic and run for it. Later on Jesus appears to his disciples, talks with them, eats with them, commissions them, invites the doubter, Thomas, to touch his wounds.

There is no historical evidence that the Resurrection happened. But, again, the story has persisted for two thousand years, and I think something important happened to Jesus' followers after the crucifixion.

Writing about resurrection, Earl Holt says,

Jesus died. His death meant exactly what every death means: the end of his life's promise, the end of his hopes, the end of his dreams, and also the hopes and dreams which others had of him and for him—and of what they hoped he was, of what they wanted him to be....

Something happened to the minds and hearts of Jesus' disciples, for whom everything had been lost. A transformation occurred, a radical shift from absolute despair to renewed hope, from a sense of the utter absence of Jesus to a feeling that in some way he was still with them. His death was not the end; it was the beginning. What had died became again lively in the world.

The possibility of transformation and renewal exists ; it is in us. All around us are people whose lives, in ways large and small, have been transformed and renewed: those who have overcome the loss of what was most precious to them in the world,..those who have transcended the temptation to despair when life was at its darkest. Resurrection is not a long ago, unique, unlikely event, but is potentially present in all human life. It is a promise and a challenge, for it represents the

possibility of radical change—transformation—based on a radical sense of hope.

Death threatens us not only at the end of our lives but at every moment, the thousand little deaths of the spirit, the grievances we carry with us, the discouragements and sorrows that weigh us down, the sense of frustration or futility that darken our days and drear our nights. Easter is the promise that we can be reborn; it is the promise of new life. It is the assurance that in the midst of death we are in life.

The Easter faith can be expressed in two words: life wins. (Seaburg and Harris, *Celebrating Easter and Spring*, 79- 80).

Life wins.

Life wins every morning when the sun comes up again.

Life wins in all the days that follow the vernal equinox, in the buds on the trees that fatten in the growing light, uncurling into leaves that will shade us from the summer heat, then changing color in autumn as the light wanes, falling to the ground to nourish the tree, which is already fitted out with a new set of buds for next year.

Life wins in all the cycles of the natural world, the complex lives of the birds and the animals, the mysteries of migrating butterflies and hibernating toads, the recycling of

energy through predator and prey, owls eating mice, coyotes eating deer.

Life wins when we remember those in our human family who have died, when we honor the ancestors who gave us life, when we tell their stories and keep the memories alive.

Life wins when human courage faces oppression and hatred, resisting brutality and demanding justice. Those who are enslaved would be free. Those who have lost their homes would be restored. Hope rises again. Truth rises again.

Life wins when members of this community stand in the rain with those of other faiths to witness for peace, when we create a nurturing place where people can talk about racism, when we bring groceries for a family whose cupboard is empty, or make an elderly woman's home more safe and comfortable, or pack sandwiches for the homeless. Life wins in simple acts of kindness.

Life wins when we come together as a community of faith to articulate our identity and purpose in a new mission statement.

When we come together in worship and repeat our affirmation, renewing our promise to one another. Life wins when we laugh and dance and sing and play together, four generations of Unitarian Universalists for fifty- one years in Mohegan Lake.

Life wins.

Judy Mannheim offers us this Easter blessing today:

“May you have joy this Easter, a joy born of a life well-lived.

May you have love this Easter, a love stronger than death, bringing healing and new growth in your life, and light where it feels dark.

And may you have peace this Easter, peace which allows you to be open to the newness of the season and gives you reason to sing.” (Seaburg, 23).

And so may it be.

Amen

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