

*Sermon Look to the Lilies*

The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

April 5, 2015

Easter Sunday

Easter time is crowded with meaning, like the garden on our altar this morning.

It is spring, it is deliverance from the quiet darkness of winter and return of green and the reaching toward the sun.

It is time to start over! Easter time and the spring equinox are rich with symbols and rituals that have been passed down to us like a spiritual DNA.

From time immemorial we have marked the last full moon before the equinox and spring itself and regaled ourselves with bright colors, eggs, hares, particular flowers, bonfires, dances.

Ancient prehistorical ruins all over the world, including those built by Native Americans all over our country carefully marked the spring and fall equinox.

Ancient religions celebrated the death and return to life of gods and goddesses: Attis, Dionysus, Persephone, Osiris.

The Germanic goddess Ostara and the Saxon goddess Eostre, from whom we get the name Easter, are associated with fertility and the dawn.

Their names are traced back to and even more ancient divinity Austro, the goddess of dawn and the daughter of heaven.

The hare is part of Eostre's story and the egg is one of the symbols of these goddesses of spring and virtually all other spring traditions.

The Wiccans celebrate Lady Day or Ostara.

The Ancient Hebrew holy days of Purim and Passover commemorate deliverance from oppression and slavery, and the spring feast of unleavened bread, and the possibility of new life. On the Passover Seder plate is a hardboiled egg, the paschal egg.

Ancient civilizations celebrated the New Year or No Ruz at the time of the spring equinox.

It is a time of renewal and regrowth. It is still a holiday nowadays for the Ba Hai faith, Sufism and Zoroastrianism, and in modern day countries like Iran, Turkey, Albania, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan.

Some Ba Hai practice assembling seven objects whose names begin with the letter "S" in Persian, including lilies and hyacinths.

The Hindu Festival Holi at this time of year is the festival of love, or the festival of colors. People don't decorate eggs, they decorate each other with bright powdered colors as they dance in the streets. It is a time to play, and forgive and to heal.

I am grieving today. Today would have been Janet Dunwoodie's birthday, and like the rest of you, I miss her.

And I'm grieving the loss of a beloved pet. He died on Good Friday, and my family and I kept vigil with him all day long until we had to let him go. And in the midst of all this, I looked for a symbol and a thought to help me. I had found the lily weeks ago, not knowing how much I would need it today.

The summer grave of the Easter lily lies on the banks of the stream and turns into nutrients for the bulb lying beneath. The bulb rests in darkness over the winter. Then come the warm sun and soft rain and rich alluvial soil to kindle returning life, and green shoots rise again to seek the surface. We vest its white flowers with meaning: purity, virtue, innocence, hope and life and call them the essence of Easter. We call them the symbols of the Virgin Mother. We call them the symbols of the resurrection. And when they die, the plant remains. And when the stem and leaves die in summer, the bulb remains hidden from our sight, resting until it transforms all over again.

And I found a thought from Joyce Rupp's "Tomb Watch:" she says,

I saw clearly how each of us needs "tomb watches" every now and then. Maybe we are keeping vigil for a part of ourselves that lies dormant and seemingly dead or lost or has fallen into a coffin of depression or despair. ... Easter is about "tomb watches." It is about love that keeps vigil and waits and believes in life, no matter how dark and empty and

cold the inner space feels. Easter is about hope that is willing to sit in the tomb while it trusts in transformation. Easter is about faithful companions who keep watch with us and cheer us on as we wait for our inner resurrection.

I am waiting for my inner resurrection. Grief makes me self-centered like tenacious oak leaves. But the drive of Easter, to come out the dark inner space makes me feel guilty. To wash away my dull ache with clean spring rain seems so distant and unreal. This is the call of Easter and all our celebrations throughout the world and time. They all have something to say about emergence and transformation. Return to life, they say. Death does not conquer us. We need one another. Love does not die, it is waiting. Love does not die, it is planting – the planting of a seed, the planting of a bulb, under the earth, the planting of love inside our bodies and our spirits. Love does not die because it's not just love for ourselves, it's the love we give one another. When we gather the flowers. When we dance. When we cover each other with colors of the rainbow. When we plant the seeds of this garden we call church. At some point soon, I will reach for the dawn and find you there, my companions on this journey. Happy Ostara. Happy Easter. Happy Pesach. Happy Holi. Happy No Ruz. Happy Dawning of new life.