

## “Nothing Gold Can Stay”

By Donne Hayden

*Nature's first green is gold.  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief.  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.*

This poem by Robert Frost speaks of spring, of that particular color trees and shrubbery take on *just before* they become green with leaves. Observed closely, each bud resembles a tiny yellow flower. A stand of trees, grey and brown all winter, becomes tinged with palest yellow—and this “gold” that promises green leaves is Nature’s “hardest hue to hold,” this precious promise of spring is fleeting—it lasts only a day or two until the buds open out fully into green leaves. Those of us who have lived long enough, or observed closely enough, recognize this special color. We recognize also the truth of Frost’s perception that in any life event, the hovering anticipation *just before* something happens is the purest moment.

Once something fully begins, the process of decay also begins. Trees and shrubs put out leaves, gloriously green for a season, but destined to turn the yellow and gold of autumn, and eventually the grays and browns of winter. This is Frost’s poetic version of 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics, i.e., everything in the universe tends toward disorder and disintegration. In the poem, his reference to Eden is a metaphor for any pure, shining, golden moment in human experience. Think of any great human accomplishment—the

dawning of every human endeavor is perhaps its finest hour; after that, even the best of what we do declines. As Frost says, “Nothing gold can stay.”

So what does all this have to do with Easter?

I see in it a connection to Christianity, whose central event we observe today. Two thousand years ago when a Jew named Jesus gathered followers for his message of love and compassion, Christianity as we know it didn't yet exist. Jesus didn't intend to start a new religion; he was a Jewish wisdom teacher speaking to other Jews. As soon as the ideas in his message began to spread, the authorities—who perceived Jesus and his followers as unwelcome weeds—began the process of squelching his radical message—a message that said, among other things, that God might not favor the powerful and wealthy. This faith called Christianity has lasted two thousand years, and though it has had some green times of great good, such as early Quaker attempts to revive “primitive Christianity,” its initial golden moment full of remarkable promise lasted only a few years.

Before I begin, I must tell you that I am a follower of the teachings of Jesus. When sifted out of all that has been added to it by others, his message contains the shining golden promise that began the whole thing. When the early faith bloomed into a state religion, however, Christianity began to focus more on Jesus' death than on his life. Emphasis shifted from hearing the message to worshipping the messenger. What he taught is challenging material, his advice about how to live and treat others is difficult for human beings to follow, and many of his teachings are critical of those in power. No doubt this was one factor that led to the corruption of his message into the current version of Christianity.

In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg makes a distinction between the *pre-Easter* Jesus and the *post-Easter* Christ. The pre-Easter Jesus refers to the

Jewish teacher who lived during a particular period of history and whose teachings have been preserved in various writings. The post-Easter Christ is the figure of Christian tradition, a product of early Christian belief and thought, and a creation of the early church. One interpretation of the early Christian experience has dominated the faith for two thousand years. Borg refers to this interpretation as “the priestly story,” which portrays humans as sinful and Jesus as a sacrifice demanded by God. This version of the story, Borg says, “produces severe distortions in our understanding of the Christian life,” and he gives these examples:

- 1) It leads to a static understanding, a repeated cycle of sin, guilt and forgiveness;
- 2) It leads to passivity because it stresses that God, through Jesus, has already done what needed to be done;
- 3) It makes Christianity primarily a religion of the afterlife;
- 4) It presents God as lawgiver and judge whose forgiveness is conditional on acknowledging the sacrifice of his son;
- 5) It fails to speak to many people, who do not feel guilt as a “central issue in their lives.”<sup>1</sup>
- 6) finally, Borg says,

*... this story is very hard to believe. The notion that God's only son came to this planet to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that God could not forgive us without that having happened, and that we are saved by believing this story, is simply incredible. Taken metaphorically, this story can be very powerful. But taken literally, it is a profound obstacle to accepting the Christian message. To many people, it simply makes no sense . . .”* (130-131).

In spite of this, this “priestly” version of the Christian story has been a dominant cultural force the past two millennia, and Easter is central to its beliefs. So we observe

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

this holiday even if we are not “card-carrying” Christians; for many of us, however, the celebration of Easter is an odd mixture of beauty and terror.

Beautiful images surround the celebration of this day—spring, flowers, decorated eggs, lilies, palm fronds—but what are we actually celebrating? The “priestly story” of a violent death 2000 years ago. If we step outside the tradition for a minute, we see the central image of the Christian faith is a bleeding man hanging on a cross, tormented and mocked until he finally died. The rest of the priestly story, of course, is that the crucified man rose from the dead and ascended to heaven to be with God his father, who *sent* him to experience this gruesome death in order to pay retroactively and in advance certain divine debts we humans incur through our imperfections.

Quite honestly, not only does this not make sense to me in terms of the God I want to believe in, but I find the story disturbing and not at all comforting, more for what it says about human beings than what it imputes to God or the man Jesus. How did the first golden teachings of a Jewish wisdom teacher evolve into the gory story of a sacrificed king? Perhaps it has to do with a difference between myth and religion—if someone believes something that we don’t believe, we call their belief a myth. What we believe, however, we call religion. In fact, there is more pagan myth in the Christian story of Easter than anything else.

Some examples may surprise you.

First, even the English name for this holiday probably comes from the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring—Eostre (pronounced EE-ah-tra), and the day Easter falls on is determined by the spring equinox on March 21, a time when many early European tribes celebrated the triumph of life over death as spring returned. Eggs were dyed and given as gifts by the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks and Romans during their spring festivals. Early Christians adopted the egg as a symbol for Jesus’ tomb, and

it was forbidden to eat eggs during Lent because they were associated with the resurrection. The ancestor of the Easter bunny was the hare, ancient pagan symbol of fertility and the moon.

Other elements that come from pagan practices are more disturbing. For instance, in early spring many ancient cultures held elaborate rituals that often included the sacrifice of a king or a god, or a king who then *became* a god. In the Near East, versions of the god/king/sacrifice appeared centuries before Jesus was born, and names attached to various god-kings all have been used in reference to Christ: “Adonis was the Lord and Bridegroom, Tammuz the good shepherd, Dionysus the King of Kings, God of Gods, Mot was the Lamb of God, Hermes was the Logos, and Mithra was referred to as the Light of the World.” Tammuz, Osiris, Adonis, Attis and Dionysus were sacrificed in magical rites each spring and were then “resurrected” somehow. Their sacrificial deaths and resurrections were perceived as cleansing decay and reviving life and fertility “upon which food and the welfare of whole societies depended.”<sup>2</sup>

In Babylon, “ritual surrogates” took the place of the king. The chosen victim “was identified with the real king in every possible way,” wearing kingly robes, sitting on the throne, spending time with the royal concubines.

*After five days he was stripped, scourged, then hanged or impaled “between heaven and earth,” . . . The object of scourging and piercing was to make the pseudo-king shed tears and blood for fertility magic. . . The king or pseudo-king “became God” as soon as he was dead. He ascended into heaven and united himself with the Heavenly Father. . . When ritual murder of*

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<sup>2</sup> Chris King, Instructor, Math Department, University of Auckland. Private website: Dhushara.com website, <http://www.dhushara.com/book/hieros/hieros2.htm>

*kings or human king-surrogates came to be considered crude and uncivilized, then animal victims took their place. . . .*<sup>3</sup>

Another practice that goes back into antiquity is the scapegoat, someone chosen to bear all the evil and sorrow for a group. In 1922, British anthropologist, religious historian and classical scholar, Sir James Frazer, published a book on comparative religions titled *The Golden Bough*. Here is one paragraph from it:

*If we ask why a dying god should be chosen to take upon himself and carry away all the sins and sorrows of the people, it may be suggested that in the practice of using the divinity as a scapegoat we have a combination of two customs which were at one time distinct and independent. On the one hand we have seen that it has been customary to kill the human or animal god in order to save his divine life from being weakened by the inroads of age. On the other hand we have seen that it has been customary to have a general expulsion of evils and sin once a year. Now, if it occurred to people to combine these two customs, the result would be the employment of the dying god as a scapegoat. He was killed, not originally to take away sin, but to save the divine life from the degeneracy of old age; but since he had to be killed at any rate, people may have thought that they might as well seize the opportunity to lay upon him the burden of their sufferings and sins, in order that he might bear it away with him to the unknown world beyond the grave" (608).*<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere in Frazer's book, he speculates that early people sacrificed their most perfect specimen at the height of his or her beauty and power so that the gods of nature would reciprocate. In other words, we give to the gods our golden ones, our strongest and best, preserved in the moment of perfection, in exchange for the promise to always resurrect spring and make the world green again. According to later Christian

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, page 877, quoted on *The Hieros Gamos Part I* website <<http://www.dhushara.com/book/hieros/hieros.htm>>).

<sup>4</sup>James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Volume 1, Abridged Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.), 1978. Originally published in 1922.

interpretations, the Son of God died horribly, “impaled between heaven and earth,” so that those who believe God required such a sacrifice could experience “everlasting life.”

While I have trouble with that interpretation, it occurs to me that because humans are the way we are, the dramatic death of Jesus assured his teachings would survive. Had he lived a peaceful life to a ripe old age, we might never have heard of him.

Like the early Quakers, I am more moved by Jesus’ life and teachings than his death. One early Friend described Jesus as a human being who had “the full measure of the Light” and thus became an example for all humans in how to live a fully loving life. They understood his resurrection in spiritual terms, as “heretics” through the ages have done. According to early Quakers, the “second coming” has already occurred, and Christ has returned in the form of the Holy Spirit or the Light “to teach his people himself.” We don’t have to worry about being “saved” when he comes back at some unspecified future time. If we can accept and follow his teachings, we may *save ourselves* spiritually through his *life*, not his death.

To return to Frost’s poem again, with a slight modification . . . When it left the Light and became preoccupied with violent death and sacrifice,

*So Christianity sank to grief.  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.*