

Matt. 28:1 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Early this week, I was nearly felled by a sermon disaster. To start with, if something disastrous were ever going to happen to one of my messages, the probability is very high that it would happen to the Easter message. Of all the messages I give in a year, the Easter one is usually the hardest. That's because in this community of faith we have so many different beliefs among us about the meaning of Jesus' life and death. On the whole, that diversity of belief is a good thing. At last month's retreat, we heard over and over that the fact that there is such leeway for differing beliefs here is one of the things we most like about ourselves as a community.

I like that leeway for differing beliefs, also. But for someone who tries to be inoffensive, that diversity makes Easter hard. The cross and the resurrection are strong statements, in and of themselves. And they deal directly with the issues we believe differently about. That's why it's hard to

figure out what I can say which has integrity for me but doesn't stand in the way of someone else who also makes Cincinnati Friends their spiritual home.

So I fret. I pace the floor. I drum my fingers on my desk and generally work myself into a nervous dither, all of which causes me more than the average difficulty in finding some interior quiet from which to listen for what God would have me speak.

Anyway, that's the Easter scene under the best of circumstances. Then, bright and early Tuesday morning, there was thrown into this general nerve-wracked fluttering a request from a reporter for the Cincinnati Enquirer to get my perspective on Easter. She wanted to know what I was likely to say this morning.

Whoa. Now I have to somehow be articulate about my nerve-wracked flutter. I have to make some kind of commitment, on Tuesday, to what I'm going to toss and turn over all week long. I have to at least be able to pretend that I know what I'm saying when it comes to Easter. How did I let this happen to me?

So I spoke to this reporter Tuesday, and by Thursday evening was in such a state of paranoid anticipation about Easter that I could barely drive home from the office. In the end, though, it turns out that the reporter had thrown a lifeline into the sea I was drowning in. I began to ponder our conversation as though it had an answer for me. Which, in fact, it did. Because, among other questions, she had asked me how I, as a Friends' pastor, spoke to the challenge of the Easter bunny.

The Easter bunny.

The challenge of the Easter bunny.

Now, to be perfectly frank, I've never actually felt challenged by the Easter bunny, particularly among Friends. I mean, the Easter bunny has gone its merry way, hopping along lawns and within the forsythia, and I stand in here and sweat it out at the lectern, and in general I've been happy for him that he has an easier time of it out on the lawn. But she asked me that

question, about the challenge of the Easter bunny, and I began to wonder why, exactly, I didn't feel more challenged by the Easter bunny.

The first thing I realized was that I knew almost nothing about the Easter bunny. Where did it come from, what was it's purpose, how on earth did it get associated with eggs? I began to look into the Easter bunny's identity.

What I found out is that the early German peoples believed that at the time of the spring equinox the goddess of spring, Eostre, took the form of a hare and travelled about the land renewing the fertility of the earth and its creatures. I think the idea of fertility and the idea of an egg are closely enough associated that they would explain the association of Eostre in the form of a hare and the bringing of an egg, but there is also another legend, dubiously attributed, that says that Eostre found an injured bird on the ground one winter. To save its life, she transformed it into a hare, but the transformation was incomplete, and the bird took the appearance of a hare but kept the ability to lay eggs. In gratitude to Eostre, the hare would decorate these eggs and leave them for the goddess as a gift. Well, I don't know whether that's truly a legend or a bit of modern whimsy, but you get the gist of where we're going: goddess of fertility, of spring, hopping around as a hare bringing babies, flowers and fruit to the earth around the vernal equinox. It isn't far until you get an Easter bunny bringing eggs, even if you have changed its species (because a hare is not a rabbit), and its gender.

So now that I knew about the Easter bunny, about Eostre bringing fertility to the earth, now did I feel challenged by the Easter bunny?

Well, without meaning to scandalize, no, not really. Because if the Easter hare really is a symbol of the world's birth and rebirth after winter, then Eostre bringing life to the earth is a story not all that different from the story of the cross and the resurrection, but it is a story with an easier form, and one that we can more easily prove to ourselves.

What I mean is, even as theologically diverse as we are, the victory of life and growth over death and cessation is something we can all see in the spring time, and which we can all celebrate together.

If we believe that Jesus was resurrected in body, then we believe in the victory of life over death. If we believe that Jesus' resurrection was spiritual, that Jesus' resurrection was the renewed and continuing sense of Jesus' presence to those who had believed Jesus was lost to them forever, then we believe in the victory of life over death. If we believe, as minimally as possible, that the only thing that survived Jesus' crucifixion were the stories about his life, even so we believe in the victory of life over death. No matter where we fall in the spectrum of belief, the story of the Easter resurrection is a story about the victory of life, and love, over death, and fear. It is a story which tells us that nothing can separate us from the life of Christ. Another way of saying this is that nothing can separate us from the love given to us by the power of love, which is God.

We can start out with this story at a kind of primer level, the way we would if we were learning to read, and that's the Eostre/Easter bunny part of the story. That's the part where the branches which look dead start to flower, the grey and withered fields begin to show green, the birds arrive one day out of a southern sky, unpack their suitcases, and put on their mating colors. The air gets warmer, and our own spirits become a little more lively.

But we can leave the primer level and get a little more complicated, which is where we begin to talk not only about life following death, but about resurrection, life now in what was once dead. That's what's in the Jesus story which isn't necessarily a part of the Eostre story: not just life, but resurrection, the idea that out of suffering, and out of horror, and out of injustice and abuse, God's transformative power can work for good.

This is harder to see than the springtime, but resurrection wouldn't be much of a story if it weren't a promise made to all of us, and if we look hard

enough, we can usually find some kind of resurrection story somewhere in our lives, or see the story in the life of a friend.

We think that we can never live through a divorce, but we do. We think that we cannot survive the death of a parent or partner, a child, a friend: but we survive. We grieve, and we survive, and ten years, twenty years later, we look back on that period of death and see how this present path started there, and that old death is inextricably bound up with this new life. And if this new life has any goodness in it, after all that death, then we can lay some small claim to a resurrection.

Let me give, as an example, a place which contains both the Easter bunny story and the Jesus story. Many of you know that in my daily commute I pass by the entire western boundary of what, during the Cold War, was known as the Feed Materials Production Center, or the Fernald plant. What they did there, on 1,050 acres in Crosby Township, was to produce the uranium which was used by two other production centers, in Washington and in South Carolina, to make plutonium. In other words, Fernald produced the raw material to make the raw material for nuclear bombs.

But Fernald didn't produce only uranium. It also produced all the by-products of manufacturing uranium. Some of these by-products were radioactive and some weren't, but a good many of them weren't healthy for the people who worked in the plant or for the land the buildings stood upon or for the water that ran beneath the ground. In addition to the uranium which contaminated that site, it was polluted with thorium, radon gas, radium, technetium-99, ammonia, hydrofluoric acid, chromium, and lead.

Fernald produced over 500 million pounds of weapons grade uranium between 1951 and 1989. Then production was halted in to begin cleaning up the radioactive waste at the site. The clean-up is expected to be complete next year, although a part of the site is also expected to provide permanent storage for some low-level radioactive waste. The bulk of what used to be Fernald,

nearly a thousand acres, is being transformed into a natural area of wetlands, prairie and forest, under the supervision of the Ohio EPA.

I didn't know about the Ohio EPA, about the intention of converting the site into a wildlife area, until I saw a story in the news about it earlier this week. But what I have known, for a couple of years, is that I need to be careful when I drive up that section of Morgan-Ross Road because I never know when a deer might step out into my path, followed closely by another. What I've known is that just beyond the fence beside the road, past the lower woods and along up there in the fields that lie south and north of the railroad tracks which are used to carry out radioactive waste—right in there, I hear the loudest chorus of peeping frogs I've ever heard. Some nights in the spring, when Michel and I drive by, we can hear those little tiny frogs singing even with the windows rolled up and the radio on. Then every so often, on some other night, I catch the ghost image of an owl that swoops just over the reach of my headlights.

And still none of this is perhaps quite so startling as the morning a month ago when I rounded a bend and nearly drove off the road in my astonishment at seeing a flock of twenty to twenty-five turkeys, who had clearly just strolled under the Fernald fence and across the road, lazily sauntering through grass and kicking up dirt without a moment's concern for the car driving into a ditch not ten yards away.

This week's newspaper story quoted a cadre of folks from the Ohio EPA saying they were pretty pleased with the progress of the restoration of the 500 acres they've been working on so far. Well, I don't have to take their word for it. Given my propensity for being distracted by turkeys, I'll be lucky if their success doesn't kill me.

Now, the story of Fernald, I think, is first of all an Easter bunny kind of story of resurrection. A wasteland becomes a wetland, and we can begin to see that life has the capacity to triumph over death.

But notice, if you would, what I am not saying. I am not saying that what's happened at Fernald is the best possible outcome in the best possible world. I'm not saying that these present-day turkeys make up for the workers who've died of cancer, or the families who had their wells contaminated. I'm not saying that those thousand acres haven't suffered, that the neighbors haven't suffered and maybe suffer still. I'm not saying that we haven't all suffered because of what was done in that place, because of what was made there.

Would it have been better if that site had never been consecrated to the god of nuclear security? Yes, it would have been better. Do I believe all the optimistic reports about how well the clean-up is going, how safe that ground is going to be? I don't know what to believe. I don't, myself, have a way of measuring. It hardly seems possible that land so scarred and damaged can ever be fully restored.

And even so, the turkeys are a good thing, and the spring peepers, and the ducks which fly over. It seems to me better to have that land given over to turkeys than to have it maintained as a wound and a scar.

That quality of being better, that sense of some great wrong being twisted and wrung out and re-shaped until some good is made to come of it—that part of Easter is something, I think, that Jesus and the empty tomb may have a lot more to tell us about than the Easter bunny.

Because, at least through Good Friday, Jesus' Easter story is about suffering and failure. As the group Over the Rhine sings, "He's still my favorite loser, falling for the entire human race." I mean, here is God's incarnation, a man whose very purpose was to show us how to love one another as God loves us, and how does he end up? Like a vicious criminal, executed by the state in the most humiliating and painful way, with most of those he loved locked up and hiding in their rooms, and only a scant few women with the courage to stand near enough the cross to witness his pain. Some victory. Some life of purpose.

And then—Easter. The empty tomb. Jesus is risen. He'll meet us in Galilee.

It turns our world upside down in the most peculiar way. At least for me it does. Mostly because it tells me that whatever I might suffer on behalf of another, my suffering isn't the end of the story, but maybe the beginning of some other story. And because the resurrection tells me that my fear is a lie. Fear is a lie. I fear for my safety, but the resurrection preaches at me that the consequence of love will not be death. I can have the courage to love as God loves—or at least to try loving in that manner—because love does conquer death when it conquers the cross.

It doesn't mean that the suffering isn't real, or isn't painful. Only that, if it comes through my efforts to be aligned with God, it will not be meaningless. It can be transformed, it can be redeemed, and when I know that, I can better endure it. Maybe not only endure it, but hope for the resurrection that follows.

And what I'm talking about here isn't just my personal defeats—my broken friendships, my failed projects. I'm talking about how I want to be with this suffering world, a world of war among nations, of abandoned children and wrecked minds, and all the people and places who need healing. What can I risk on their behalf?

Maybe I can risk anything at all. Because, the tomb is empty.

Easter tells me that the victory is already mine, when I am aligned with God. The battle is already won. But what am I going to do with that knowledge?