**Root, Stem and Blossom, Part 1**

**Rev. David Kraemer**

Holidays are a mashup. Halloween, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Easter – you’ve got presents and parties, memes and memories, religious services and secular traditions.

In recent years it has become popular to decorate a tree outside your home with holiday-themed plastic stuff -- like pastel eggs and lights at this time of the year. This is interesting to me. You don’t just have Christmas lights hanging out in your closet for most of the year now. You’ve got Halloween lights, and Easter lights, or lights for the Fourth of July.

In the midst of this, people like to ask “what’s the true meaning of the holiday?”

Sometimes, I hear people, especially within Christianity, it’s the religious meaning that is the true meaning, and that all that other stuff is secular distraction, or worse, the work of the devil.

But I grew up in a Christian home, and I know we celebrated all the other stuff – chocolate bunnies and Easter egg hunts, and at Christmas, Santa and presents, and egg nog and a yule log. Everyone I knew did this, too. They were not being bad Christians. They were just celebrating the whole, happy mess.

Harv Woelck lent me a book some time ago titled “America’s Favorite Holidays,” that makes this case. The true meaning of the holidays is all of it, combined.

The author, Bruce David Forbes, from Iowa, dug into the history of five big holidays in the U.S. – Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Easter, Halloween and Thanksgiving. In each, Forbes finds a pattern, like a three-layer cake. The bottom layer of each holiday rests in a seasonal celebration. Then comes a religious or national overlay which forms the middle layer. And finally, the top layer, modern popular culture.

Christmas is a good example. The first Christians did not celebrate the birth of Jesus at all. In fact, the actual date of Jesus’ birth is unknown, maybe even in the middle of July. And the Bible doesn’t say much about this, either, with only two of the four Gospels including any account of the birth.

But before Christianity, people across the globe had been celebrating midwinter festivals – from Saturnalia to Yule. In the middle of winter, as the sun retreated in the sky, it made sense to throw a party, because what else are you going to do?

As Christianity spread through the Roman Empire, reaching up to northern Europe, the Christian church began celebrating the birth of Jesus, and to capitalize on the party already in progress, they plunked the date right in the middle of a bunch of popular festivals.

As the popularity of Christmas grew, so did the trimmings – decorated trees, Santa Claus, lights, presents, Tiny Tim, Charlie Brown, and ugly sweater parties.

Easter is a bit more complicated.

For Unitarian Universalists, at least for those of us who hew to earth-centered traditions, I hear us say sometimes that the root of Easter can be found in the Germanic goddess Ostara or Oestre, namesake of a spring festival, dating back to pre-Christian times.

But tracing this history is harder, in part because there is no written record. And there isn’t much of an oral tradition either. The oldest reference to Ostara comes from the Venerable Bede, a Catholic monk and historian of the seventh and eighth centuries, who included just one line about Oestre in the volumes of history he wrote which told of a festival celebrated in her honor in April by Anglo-Saxons, but that the practice had died out by the time he came around.

Meanwhile, Christians had been celebrating the Resurrection of Christ for six or seven hundred years. Easter – unlike Christmas -- was not calculated to replace a pagan celebration as part of the march of the empire, even if it came to coincide with events that may or may not have occurred. It was what this new faith was all about.

Easter, it is clear, grew from Passover, a Jewish religious celebration, which celebrates the exodus of Israelites from captivity in Egypt in about 1300 B.C.

Passover is a spring festival. The date of its celebration each year is determined by the cycles of the moon. In early observances, the first fruits of the barley, the first grain to ripen, were offered in thanks to God. So there is a seasonal root here. But not to what we understand as pagan, or neopagan, tradition.

The series of events that led to the Christian holiday flow from the Biblical story, which places the Last Supper and the Crucifixion just before, or just after, Passover, depending on which Gospel you read. The Last Supper and the Crucifixion, unlike the Christmas story, were, the best we can tell, events with dates we have a clue about.

And more, Easter was not intended to replace Passover as a popular holiday, but to build on it. In the next few centuries, as early Christians decided what to include, and what not to include, in the Bible, they decided to keep Jewish scriptures, not replace them. And so Jewish observances, like Passover, while not celebrated directly by Christians, are held in some reverence.

And as for the English language word Easter, which sounds maybe a bit like Oestre – we should know that Easter even for most Christians isn’t called Easter, it’s called Paschal, relating to Passover. The word Easter occurs only in primarily English-speaking nations of Western Civilization. As for its origins, it might just as easily be a reference to the rising sun.

Then comes bunnies and eggs, and chocolate and plastic Easter grass. And maybe a revision of history that attributes all these things to Ostara, who has gained in popularity in recent years even beyond any original fame.

Forbes tells us that bunnies and eggs, as symbols, are self-evident in their meaning. This is springtime, a time of birth and new life. The legendary fecundity of rabbits, the latent promise of an egg, do not these go hand-in-hand with a celebration of new life in a new land, the arrival of warmth and new crops, longer days, and the triumph of life over death?

UU Minister Kendyl Gibbons writes beautifully of the flavors on the Seder plate – sweet, salty, bitter.

Sweet is the water of joy. A dab of honey is often placed on the cover of a young child’s first book of Hebrew, so that they may associate learning with sweetness.

Salty is the water of life. The blood in our veins, the water in the ocean, the fluid in the womb, the tears we weep.

Bitter is the water of pain. That changes us, that comes in bewilderment and confusion, in the witness of injustice, the shadow side of learning, the knowledge that we are not yet all we can be.

And on that Seder plate, also is a hard-boiled egg.

“Creation and emergence narratives from across the world often include an egg,” Forbes writes.

Tales from ancient Egypt and Hindu India told of how the entire universe hatched from an egg. New life, fertility, magical powers, creation itself all are contained in the egg.

So the layers of Forbes’ cake get jumbled here. You can make a case that the religious overlay is actually the bottom layer. The middle layer might be popular culture, as bunnies and eggs reach back at least a couple hundred years. And the seasonal celebration maybe even the top layer, become more popular in recent years and in faith traditions such as ours.

Forbes notes that, of all the holidays, Easter has seemed to resist over-commercialization, perhaps because its Jewish and Christian roots are so strong.

When I first thought of how this service would come together, I thought of calling it “A Three-Layer Cake.” But the messiness of Easter history held me up a bit. And then I remembered the mealtime prayer from Waldorf learning: “Blessings on the blossom, blessings on the root. Blessings on the leaf and stem. Blessings on the fruit.” I like that imagery, especially this time of the year, better than the cake thing. And I like the culmination of all of it in the fruit, which is what we consume.

So which came first, Jesus or the egg? It doesn’t matter. The message is the same. It is the indomitable emergence, re-emergence, of life, witnessed in the tale of the tomb and in the turn of the seasons. This is a time of renewal, recommitment. A time of family and faith. A time of new life.

**Root, Stem and Blossom, Part 2**

What is the real meaning of Easter?

Today’s service has been a bit of box of chocolates. Eggs, geese, despair, joy, peace, wood ducks, green stems shooting up from the ground.

For me, Easter is all about new life – it is about the turn of the seasons, the re-emergence from the murk and the mud, and the indomitable, unlikely spirit of it all. In a universe filled with swirling gasses and cold, hard rocks, how is it that life begins at all? And then how is it that it survives? The stone of winter is rolled away each year to reveal resurrection, new life.

That’s why I love the *Peace of Wild Things* reading and hymn that we sang earlier. The natural imagery speaks to the winter of our despair and finds peace in the everlasting grace of the world. You don’t need Notre Dame in all its glory. Not that Notre Dame itself is not fantastic, amazing, irreplaceable, holy. But all you really need is a pond.

The stories we tell shape our lives, they give meaning to the events we witness. So the story, the stories, of Easter, weave together to make this day sacred.

The Christian story of Easter also, of course, is about salvation. About how we come to terms with our sins.

Our small groups talked about sin this week as we dug in to the theme of wholeness. Sins being one of the common terms we use to describe what might keep us from being whole.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t like that word much. One person said they think of sin as a form of crowd control. A way for the ecclesia, the church authorities, to keep the common folks in line. Sin comes bundled with punishment and a carrot-and-stick view of morality. Our faith threw out the idea of hell as eternal punishment long ago and with it the notion of original sin, the notion of fundamental brokenness. And so the question of salvation comes up, what is it that we need to be saved from?

But the word “sin” from Greek roots, means to “miss the mark.” I miss the mark all the time. In thinking about what keeps me from a sense of wholeness, I think it most often is a maybe too-frequent state of confusion or confoundment. I fail to act as I should, or I act in ways I shouldn’t. I can’t tell you how often I tell myself sometime later, Oh, I wish I had said that, or I probably should not have done that. I break faith. I lose my way. I don’t keep in mind the full worth and dignity of someone I am speaking to. I let my own whims run over me. I hurt someone. I hurt myself.

This is the message of “The Good Egg,” and of “Wild Geese.” You do not have to be good. At least you do not have to be perfect. You do not have to fall all over yourself repenting.

But you do have to pick yourself up and keep trying. Keep learning. Return to your carton with a new attitude. Be good to others, and be good to yourself, too.

One other piece of conversation this week – when you are not enough, when you fall short, when the task in front of you is just too large, imagine your inner piranha. A piranha is a pretty small fish. Each of us is a pretty small fish. Even as voracious as a piranha is, taking a bite out of a whale is a bit intimidating. But piranha don’t travel alone. You are not alone. If you pull together enough piranha, that whale becomes a five-minute job.

So I’m going to hold on to that image, too, next time I feel the need to come in to the presence of still water. Water with a bunch of piranha just below the surface.

Yesterday, my spouse and our son, who was visiting, took a hike at Scuppernong Springs State Park. As I took a rest on a bench in the beautiful weather, with the greening earth and my family all around, I was struck by how all these ideas – rebirth, resurrection, renewal, reconciliation, salvation, new life – are not separate at all, but immanently, and eminently evident in this moment.

As you go out into this sunny day, feel above you the day-blind stars, waiting with their own light, light to shine on you even in the dark. Go with the peace of wild things, present only to this day. Go into the Family of Things. Go into the grace of the world.

That’s the real meaning of Easter -- peace, salvation, life wins.