

Wednesday April 4, 2012

## Finding symbols for special times

By Jim Taylor

Bunnies don't lay eggs. Especially chocolate eggs. So how did they become symbols of Easter?

The central fact of the Christian Easter is the resurrection of Jesus. Some people believe it without question. Others struggle with it, or try to explain it. Growing numbers reject it. Yet regardless of their reaction, they acknowledge the centrality of the resurrection.

But because it is so foreign to human experience – come now, name one person you know who died, was buried, and lived again! – we struggle to find symbols for resurrection.

Bunnies may represent fertility, but not resurrection.

Nor do eggs, realistically. What comes out of an egg is the same thing that was inside it. At least eggs look like something that an unscientific age might have considered dead, which cracks open into new life – even if we know it ain't so.

But chocolate? Despite being a chocoholic myself, I don't understand how chocolate became essential to celebrating Easter.

Symbols have a purpose. They put something concrete inside the frame of abstract thought. As an editor, I often struggled with sermons and articles that consisted mainly of abstractions. They offered a sure cure for insomnia.

## Searching for suitable symbols

Symbols enable us to visualize those abstract concepts. They make mystery graspable. They provide a link between experience and intuition.

So we break bread and drink wine, knowing – regardless of church teachings – that *this* bread and *this* wine are not the cells and corpuscles of a long-ago Jew. It is more than a re-enactment of a community supper. The physical symbols help us enter into a mystery we cannot explain.

In the same way, baptism is more than a replay of ancient migrants passing through the waters of the Red Sea or the Jordan. Whether by immersion or sprinkling, baptism symbolizes the miracle of birth into a new kind of life -- into which we are born wet, just as we were from the womb. If anything, the Red Sea and the Jordan crossings symbolize this re-birth, rather than the reverse.

But we have trouble finding symbols that adequately reflect life emerging from death. Not near-death. Not resuscitation in the nick of time. Not suspension of death through medical technology. But real death.

## Partial truths

But I should not be too rational. A symbol need not perfectly match what it symbolizes.

Easter lilies and daffodils suggest something rising from dead soil, even if we know that their bulbs were not dead but merely dormant, sheltered by earth from killing frosts.

Butterflies too are life transformed, although not life emerging from death.

Similarly, the sun is not resurrected each morning. That notion goes back to a time when people believed that the sun literally travelled across the sky. When it sank in the west, it died and was buried below the earth. Next morning, it rose again from death.

We now know that's not how it works.

Still, when I gather with a small group on a grassy knoll, on Easter morning, when we sing with thin voices in the frosty air, when the sun lifts over the ridge to the east and shines in my eyes, my heart and my body are both strangely warmed.

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## **YOUR TURN**

My musings about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem feeling like starting down a whitewater river resonated with several of you.

Steve Lawson said he planned to adapt some of my thoughts for his Palm Sunday sermon. He went on, "We all find ourselves from time to time in places where it seems impossible to turn back (many times, for me, it is on the water) but I also believe that Jesus knew where his actions/words might take him ( and I'm not referring to some divine plan - just an understanding that he had about actions and consequences) but he was willing and perhaps found it necessary to go there anyway - thus the courage to do so. Thanks for the thoughts to help me find meaning for Palm Sunday."

Isabel Gibson thanked me for pieces "that invite people to think about Jesus as a person. I think we often read the Bible stories (and any history) as if the participants were cut-out dolls."

She continued, "I know that point-of-no-return feeling. My most memorable one was holding my first child for the first time. The point of no return in that process was long past, but really feeling the impact of what it might be like to have this as a prime preoccupation for the next 20 years -- that came only with actually holding the baby."

Mine, I think I recall, came at the wedding rehearsal -- realizing that when I said "I do" the next day, I would be committing myself to a lifelong process, which is still going on 52 years later.

Florence Driedger reminded me that there are benefits to worshipping both as large groups and as small ones. She wrote about her experiences: "The Mennonite World conference in Asuncion, Paraguay 2010 was one such great experience. In a church holding about 6000 of us singing together with a choir of about 300 of Spanish, German/Dutch and Aboriginal singers when the lights went out, but we all continued to sing! This is just one such experience among many I have experienced over the years in a Mennonite context. But we too wonder whether this is waning. Hope not.

"But there are also important celebrations when only a few gather together in a home or little church here on the Prairie. I doubt we would be celebrating in the large gathering if it were not for the little gatherings. We celebrate every Tuesday with Bible study, prayer and fellowship tea and a bite to eat-10-15 around a table. African, Asian, South American, Canadian in one small fellowship."

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

It bugs me when the organizers of the Revised Common Lectionary choose essentially the same psalm passage for two consecutive Sundays, to express two radically different emotions. But that's what they've done, so here's a paraphrase of Psalm 118, this time focusing on verses 14-24 instead of 19-29..

1        God, you give to life its goodness;  
          our cup overflows.  
2        You renew our confidence in you.  
14       When you are with us, we can face anything.  
15       We have no fears when we can feel your presence among us.  
16       A whisper of doubt scampers through  
          the back corners of sceptics' minds:  
          "Did this, could this, really happen?  
          What then of our reasoned rebuttals?"

17       But I am not obsessed with beating anyone;  
          Winning or losing, living or dying,  
          I want to be with God;  
          I want to celebrate God's goodness to me.  
18       God has tested me. God has put me through hell.  
          But God has never abandoned me.  
19       Now I have the confidence to go anywhere, to try anything.  
20       Whatever it takes, I know I'm worth it.

21       Once, I had no confidence in myself;  
          I had no confidence in God.  
          I quivered with insecurities;  
          I was a raw wound, flinching from every pain.  
22       Now the ugly duckling has become the golden egg.  
          You hold me in your hands, God, and I shine.  
23       Only you could do this.  
24       A new day has dawned for me, a new life has begun.  
          Is it any wonder that I overflow with joy?

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YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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