

An Easter Reflection: A New Beginning

Preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel

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at the North Parish of North Andover

Earlier this morning, I spoke about crocuses—one of my favorite early warning signs of spring. In my yard, they are the first things that bring Technicolor to a drab, monochrome world.

Mine are not quite blooming yet, so I was surprised about a week ago by a big patch of crocuses with petals open wide in my neighbors' yard. They opened early because they are planted in a sunny spot, in a sheltered corner where two white walls of the house come together, reflecting the sun and keeping out the wind.

It was hard not to go sit down right in their midst, mud and all, to lie down and get as close as possible—to breathe in deep, to drink in the purples and whites, to quench a thirst for color and fragrance, new beginnings and new life—a thirst I didn't even know I had.

How we need an infusion of color and life after winter in New England! And how much more we need it after a winter of loss or despair, the kind of winter some of you have had this year, in order to trust life, to *live* life once again.

Perhaps this is why the pagan side of Easter—brought to us by Eostara, the Germanic fertility goddess—is such a commercial success. Who can resist all those images of new life—the bunnies and brightly colored eggs and flowers—not to mention the chocolate? Of course, you don't see much of such things in *many* churches on Easter morn. In many churches, what you *do* see is the empty cross.

It has not always been this way. The Rev. Rebecca Parker, a UU minister and president of one of our divinity schools, found this out on a trip to Ravenna, Italy. There she was struck by the incredible mosaics found in the churches, baptistries and mausoleums. These mosaics were created over a period of 400 years, between the 3rd and 7th centuries. They were created by a Christian community, so they are all about Jesus and salvation through him. But there is not a single image of the crucifixion. Not one. Instead, in mosaic stones painted in Technicolor hues—brilliant emerald greens, sapphire blues, golds, whites, reds—there are scenes from Jesus' life and of the natural world. There are sandy beaches

and pine trees, dolphins, ducks and pelicans. There are scenes of pairs of doves and deer drinking water, quenching their thirst.

Parker notes that these mosaics reflect an Eastern Orthodox Christian idea that salvation is *the experience of coming to see the whole of creation interfused with the beauty of God's presence*. In other words, we are “saved” when the world comes alive to our senses—when we wake up from a long slumber, from disillusionment, spiritual death or despair—and despite all the pain and loss and ugliness in the world, find that we can *still* rejoice in the mystery and beauty and majesty of life in all its guises here on earth.

It is curious to me, and even sad, that much traditional Christian imagery of Easter has been stripped of all the color and life and natural inspiration found in the brilliant, ancient, colorful mosaics of Ravenna, Italy. Come to find out, some of those early Christians were apparently as fond of Technicolor- and as in love with natural beauty- as some of us! The loss of such life-affirming imagery is something that *someone- some* faithful group of people—should redress... maybe with a celebration, like ours, at Easter.

How we long for new beginnings, for new life after winter, after loss or despair...How we long for experiences of freedom, beauty and joy on this earth! For we find in such experiences- big and small- something we might call salvation.

I think of the moment when I saw those crocuses at my neighbor's house, in that sunny, sheltered corner of the world. Suddenly, there they were-- getting a head start on Easter and spring, shouting their color to the sky, triumphantly blooming with life, inviting me to join them.

That blanket of small purple flowers blooming cheerily in the lee of those sheltering walls is an image of the church for me this Easter. For here we sit, in this sunny corner of the world, where we come to get a head start on spring—where we come to be opened up early and often to the flow of life. In this fertile ground, may we be woken up, warmed up, lifted up and coaxed to unveil our true, brilliant colors. May we shine with glory like the humble crocus, and reflect the glory of life, once again. Amen.

Note: Rev. Parker's observations of the mosaics was reported in the march/April edition of the UU World magazine, in an article by Christopher Walton and Jane Greer.