



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

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## “Greeting Easter & Ostara”

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### Centering Thoughts

*Sitting quietly, doing nothing, Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.* Bashō

*Flowers are the music of the ground, from earth’s lips spoken without sound.* Edwin Curran

*The beautiful spring came; and when Nature resumes her loveliness,  
the human soul is apt to revive also.* Harriet Ann Jacobs

### Reflection

Pagan Ostara, Cosmic Springtime, and Christian Easter — What’s a good Unitarian Universalist supposed to observe?

Fortunately, we don’t need to choose. Our ancient ancestors combined these ritual observances and holy days into one, so we can too. Although we may differ in our beliefs about what may have occurred three days after Jesus died, his story shares similar symbolic features of the pagan festival for the Goddess Ostara and the natural world’s return to life at winter’s end.

The name Easter comes to us from a pre-Germanic word *austron* for dawn and *aust* for east, toward the sunrise. The name of a Goddess Ostara is a variation of the Saxon Eost-re [eest-ruh or oost-ruh] and Germanic Aust-ro, all words pointing to a Goddess of fertility and the Spring—who may or may not have been worshiped in pre-Christian times.

Evidence for any ritual observance of a Goddess Ostara is pretty thin. A native 7<sup>th</sup> century Christian scholar-monk in the land we now call England, the Venerable Bede, identifies in his book, *The Reckoning of Time*, that Easter came from ‘Eostre, a goddess in whose honor feasts were celebrated’. He gave no other information about her, nor did he provide any primary archaeological, historical, or personal witness to back up his assertion. Nor has any been found since his time. Some scholars suggest he provided none because none was needed at the time he wrote. And, historians don’t believe Bede had a reason to make up the story. Eostre or Ostara’s origin may forever remain a mystery. Whether she was an ancient religious figure or not, many modern pagans celebrate her feast day on the spring equinox, which occurred last weekend, on March 20.

Early Christians leaders adopted many pre-Christian traditions in holy day observances, making conversion easier and celebrations more familiar. Our modern Easter holiday traditions combine ancient pagan practices focused on changes in nature with later Christian beliefs focused on God and Jesus's death and resurrection. By the way, the story of Jesus is not unique. Pre-Christian gods such as Attis, Tammuz, Baldr, Dionysius, and Osiris can be found among the pantheon of annual spring rebirthers.

This calendar year only five days separate Earth's spring equinox from Christian Easter. In other years they occur further apart. Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. To further mingle spring holy days, Jesus' death is connected to his arrival in Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover observance. This year, a late Passover begins on April 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Whatever spring holy day you observe, they all share a common theme: renewal and new life. The symbols of these holidays – bunny rabbits, baby chicks, eggs, flowers, and even Jesus' death and resurrection, illustrate renewal.

After the apparent death of life during the winter season, spring's warmth and sunshine provides a magic touch that brings forth new life. We welcome with delight the flowers emerging from dark fertile soil to blossom, spread their perfume, and paint the landscape in bright pastels which transform the drab and dreary winter world. We decorate eggs, the source of life for humans and other creatures, in joyful floral colors. We celebrate the generous rabbit that quickly procreates new generations. And we recall the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead, giving hope to believers that death is not an end. Whether we apply religious meaning to these special days or not, each offers hope.

And right now we need a lot of hope. We need many reminders that when our world falls into darkness, it will not be forever.

Sadly, this past week felt especially dark. Death visited the world because of intentional violent human acts. It is difficult for me to understand what makes a person capable of such atrocity. I can only imagine that terrorists must feel incredible hopelessness. They must feel that the only way to give their lives meaning is to blow themselves up and take others with them, all for belief in a higher cause. But how could any merciful god, one of Allah's names, condone massive, indiscriminate death?

Experts say the Muslim community isn't well-integrated into western European culture. Isolation, discrimination, and lack of employment contribute to their susceptibility. America's better assimilation of immigrants makes our Muslim communities less likely to fall prey to such radicalism. American Muslims also are generally well-educated and gainfully employed. They choose to live in America because they appreciate the same freedoms and values you and I share.

But America's Muslims are not immune to these influences, nor is any group we ostracize. If we suspect every Muslim or round them up like we did the Japanese during World War II, we risk fostering extremism. Our world darkens when we allow fear and difference to overwhelm love and goodness.

Let us pause just a moment in silence in memory of the many lives lost by violent acts of terrorism and war. Let us voice our silent prayers of love and compassion. And let us be thankful for the life we live and the new life emerging around us, rising up from the dark.

*(pause)*

Darkness, by the way, is not inherently bad. Rich, dark fertile soil produces life. The dark of night creates a time for deep, interior reflection. The darkness that comes with sadness or disappointment can give birth to new directions. It is not darkness that's evil or bad. It is the shadow side of darkness that must be overcome, the darkness that prevents us from being our best as human beings.

Fortunately, in the face of human evil or darkness, hope need not be abandoned. More could have died in Brussels, or San Bernardino or Paris. More work for peace than act violently. More strangers will save those in need. Goodness always triumphs. We mustn't forget that the good overwhelmingly outshines the bad. We mustn't forget that spring always follows winter.

May the joy of life evident in the symbols and traditions of this season be reflected in our own joyful living. May we rise in this spring season to share our love and good will with all whom we meet.

May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. What spring holiday celebration did you enjoy as a child? What made it special for you?
2. How connected do you feel to nature and the seasons? Please share a connection or its lack.
3. How do you greet each new day? If it includes a ritual you call spiritual or religious, please share or reflect on its meaning for you. If not, might you adopt a greeting practice?