

The Festival of the New Life

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Of all the festival days of the year this one is the most thoroughly saturated with truest achievements and the most daring hopes of humanity. Into its deeper meaning has been burned by the fire of human experience and sacrifice, the great hope and purpose of human life from the first faint dawn of the aspiring soul up to this morning, when, with our whole beings alive, with pulsations of the new life that is already to spring into beauty and glory, we assemble to commune with the great spirit of all life in spirit and in truth. To me, the sense of the grandeur of human life, the heroism of its tragedy, the nobility of its achievement and the illimitable scope of its hope and aspiration are all crystalized into the beautiful precious stone of this Easter festival. It is a great lyric symbol of human life, created by the inspiration of humanity through countless ages of joyous, whole-souled festivity, buoyant in its hope, and overpowering in its dynamic of human aspiration and purpose.

It is the festival of the new life, the festival of the upward look, the festival of faith, of achievement, of progress, the festival in which the soul hears the call of the infinite to some great eternal task, and having heard, goes out in joy and peace knowing that the infinite presence shall go with him and give him peace. I want to make you feel the great accumulative power of human life, and human hope and human achievement, that in the course of the ages has been gleaned from the dross of history, and like pure gold, still hot from the smelter, pours itself out before us into the molds of our hopes and our ideals.

In the ordinary pursuits of our daily life we seem only to be linked to the present. Our tasks are of today and our plans are

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

of today. Here and there we come upon something that links us with yesterday and tomorrow, with this generation and the generation of our children, or perhaps we may at times feel the kinship of centuries and be conscious that we are a part of, and a worker in, some great historic movement, but I know of nothing that so ties to the achievements and hopes of humanity as this festival of the spring. For in this we unfold the pages of history, century after century, until we find our records fading away from our vision in the dim ages of prehistoric man, and even there we behold the spectacle of those nomadic tribes, celebrating the return of spring and the coming of summer, the return of life and the rebirth of hope in a festival which is the spiritual and the moral and the historical ancestor of our Easter festival.

Let us forget ourselves for the time being, and see if we cannot get back into the spirit of the times when this festival, the ancestor of our Easter, first developed. We are no longer citizens of this state of Massachusetts, with our education, culture, great houses, railroads, and all the external and internal developments that characterize the civilization of the time in which we live. For the time being we forget all of this and become simple uneducated roving tribes of the plains and hills. We live in tents, or sleep under the open sky. We have our flocks, and wander from place to place as conditions and inclinations shall direct. We depend upon the bounty of nature and the produce of our flocks for our living. We play and fight and roam about, carefree and irresponsible. We wonder at the strange mystery of life and vegetation. We people the wilds and the remote places with some strange spirit. It is our God, the greatest and best beloved of all the Gods who provides for us, and cares for us and directs us. We are children of the plains, comrades of the nomadic life. But for all that we are human, we love and hate, we dream and hunt and work. We go wheresoever the spirit listeth. We take no thought of the morrow. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. We have no storehouses in which we may store our abundance of foods. We are dependent upon the seasons and the caprices of nature. So when the Sun is south, and the producing season is a thing of the past and a thing of tomorrow, and the size of our flocks reduced and the grazing is poor, and the fruits of the field are not so abundant, we become despondent, and look with longing eyes for the return of life, and the upspringing of the vegetation of the new year, and the birth of the spring lambs. At last our hopes

are realized. The gods are kind again, nature smiles upon us. All is alive with hope. Again our bodies are fed lavishly. We rejoice, and give ourselves up to festivity, and carefree joy. Thus, year after year we celebrate the return of spring, and the disappearance of the clouds of want. This spring joy becomes a part of our life and just as soon as each spring comes around we give expression to our feelings in one great common festival. As the years go by we come more and more to realize our dependence upon the great spirit out of whose power comes all the fruit of the earth. He, whom we call God, becomes as one of us. With him we share in joy, and with him share the first fruits of our fields and the first born of our flocks.

Centuries pass and this festival has become a part of our tribal life. But through the misfortunes of war, we are brought under bondage to the great Pharaoh of Egypt. In hardship and toil, in tears and anguish, we wear away our life toiling for a hard and cruel taskmaster. All that is left of the old free life of the plains is the memory, and the traditions. Our spring festival has become but a bitter regret of the days that are gone.

Still we have faith that God has not entirely forsaken us. In our anguish we cry unto him, and behold he heeds our cry. Moses, the tender of sheep on the hills that we once so dearly loved, hears the voice of God calling to him from out of the burning bush, bidding him to come down into Egypt and free us from toil, our bondage, and our humiliation and degradation, that we may once again be free in a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses, confident in the assurance that the presence of God would go with him and give him rest, comes down into Egypt. We rise up and escape from our taskmasters, and follow the lead of him, whom God had sent. At last we come again to the land of freedom, and when the spring comes and we enter into the old festival week, we not only rejoice because we have food and flocks and the witness of the new life, but revert in our thoughts to our bitter days of bondage, and joy unto joy is added in the thought of our freedom.

With every deepening feelings and ever greater intelligence we carry through the centuries this festival of the old nomadic life on the plains, enriched and burned into the very fiber of our national life by the bitter experience in bondage, and the merciful release through the power of our Jehovah, who led us

through the wilderness into the land flowing with milk and honey.

But again we are led away into bondage. We become the bond-servants of the great Babylonian nation. There, by the shores of the great river, we sit and long for the temple in that far away city from which we have been torn away. We long for the courts and the living God, and yet we are made to amuse our masters while our hearts are bleeding. In this lonely land, and far away from all that we hold dear, we still cling to this old festival which takes us back through the days of our prosperity, back through the days of our bondage, back to the old simple life of the plains when we wandered, carefree with our flocks whithersoever we willed. Into the festival, all the sentiment, all the history, all the suffering, all the achievement of our race poured and crystalized. It had become to us a festival of sentiment, a festival of suffering, of achievement, of hope and of aspiration, a festival of the nation's history, a festival of the national ideals, enshrouded in that halo of mystery which bathes all human life with the divine.

Thus, my friends, we get the history of that great Jewish feast of the Passover, out of which was born the festival of Easter. In the messianic hope, in the life and death of Jesus, and the development of Christianity, there is added another factor, which enriches and glorifies the meaning of this great human day of festivity.

I hardly know how to say what I wish, but during the years when the great Christian movement was developing and getting underway, there arose a great conception, a great hope, in human life. If we glean from the warring conflicts of the centuries the gem of truth revealed, we shall say that at this time there arose the idea of the value, the worth of the human soul. Heretofore, the state, the tribe, the nation, the race was the dominant and valuable. Men could come and men could go, but the nation abided. But suddenly there emerged the idea of the worth of man. You get the first strong, clear statement of the idea in the teachings of Jesus. The supremacy of the human personality asserts itself, that it has within itself imperishable and eternal characteristics. All this new faith is concretely exemplified in the doctrines and dogmas that developed about the person of Jesus. In him is God incarnated, in him he lives, and shall continue to live. The doctrine of the resurrection is

witness to the faith that men had that there was in Jesus that which was of eternal worth and significance and could not perish. Thus, in the course of the centuries, the old Passover of the Jews, was made over into the new Christian ceremony, retaining all the deeper meaning that had been given it by the thousands of years of Jewish history, and adding this one great and uplifting thought, made yet the more vital and real by the life and death of Jesus and the hardships of the early Christians, the thought of the worth of the human soul, that it is indeed the spirit of the living God in the soul of man, and that it has characteristics that lift it out of the passing and the transient, and make it eternal and immortal.

In the development and the reformation of this great spring festival we see how it has become a great human institution, a festival of the new hope, the new life, the new aspiration of each age. Indeed, it is the festival of the new life, shot through and through with every great sentiment, experience, and every great aspiration of humanity. But it was yet to undergo a still greater transformation and enrichment at the hands of Teutonic ancestors. From them we get the word, "Easter" by which we know the festival. It is named after their Goddess of spring. In their rugged northern clime, the significance of the return of spring was to them important, and was indeed resplendent with new life, and new hope. So they took the old form with all its richness, and all its depth of meaning. But they have added to it a rich and a far-reaching contribution. As it came to them it had been given a formal sacramental turn, which deprived it of that spontaneity, that sense of humanity, as well as of God, so essential in all festivals. Festivals must be human and minister to a real human need. So the Germans, wild, liberty-loving, strong of character, assertive, took all the true, all the real, all the uplifting and the sublime, and to this they added the ethical and moral content. They reasserted what Jesus had taught, and what the Church had forgotten, that the new hope, the new life, must be pregnant with purpose and personality. In their hands the sacramental gave way to the moral, the formal to the real, the ecclesiastical to the human, and the supernatural to the natural. Through all the centuries we are coming back to the natural, the human, the essentially divine significance of this great festival of humanity.

Because I see in this day that line of associations that carries us back to the dim historic days, because I see it

surrounded by the halo of national and personal achievement in the life of the spirit, because I see it shot through and through with the finer sentiments of joy and suffering, of patriotism, and devotion, of human love and human aspiration, I feel as if we were having poured at our feet on this day all the rich and noble achievements of history, all the lofty and uplifting thoughts of man, all the daring flights of hope and aspiration that make life resplendent with its divine light. It is not merely Christian, it is human, it is divine, the festival of the new life. As I sit down and let my mind run over these great events that have brought us to where we are today, it seems as if I can feel the joy, the sorrow, the hope, the defeat, the achievement, the aspiration of the millions and millions of human souls whose whole being has pulsated with the returning life of spring, and, in the presence of the infinite, have lifted up their eyes and felt that somehow life, and the human soul, are of eternal and immortal worth.

Inspired by this thought, this hope which perhaps is written into the very fibers of our being, have gone forth to the new life, thinking of those things. Love, honor, integrity, self-respect, and simple truth, those things that make it worthwhile to be immortal.