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Towards New Culture Publications

(No. 1 of an additional Series on the Four Festivals of the Year)

Easter

By John Seeker

(Pen Name for Willi Sucher)

The general decline of the cultural life of civilized humanity has also matured an almost complete inability to understand and celebrate the great festivals of the Christian year. Therefore it seems to be necessary to open new gateways for the comprehension of the facts connected with these festivals.

At Easter, Christian humanity commemorates the Death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to old customs, it is celebrated on the Sunday following the first full Moon in spring.

Modern humanity can no longer comprehend these two facts by means of ordinary cognition. Nowhere in the world, which is perceived by the senses, is there to be found anything that suggests the possibility of the resurrection of a human being from death, as it is described in the Gospels. It has gradually become a matter of faith. Yet modern humanity demands knowledge acceptable to the intellect and not mere belief in the various Christian confessions. And in proportion, as knowledge cannot penetrate to the real facts behind the historic event of Easter, this festival is less understood and taken less seriously. Moreover, the fact that the time of Easter is fixed according to cosmic conditions, it also cannot be comprehended by modern thought. People have emancipated themselves so much from nature by their technology, that there seems to be no necessity to arrange any festival in accordance with conditions pertaining to the starry heavens. Therefore, the present tendency is to do away with the customary moveability of the Easter festival. The moral effect that results from its celebration, according to cosmic conditions, brings only disturbance into the calculations of the business world. Therefore, it is proposed to fix it to a certain date, for instance, as the keeping of Christmas is fixed for the 25th of December.

Behind all of this is the fact that Easter has become a matter of mere tradition. Hardly any inner experience is connected with it, and one could just as well make a fixed holiday of it for the usual kind of seasonal recreation. It has become a challenge for the modern world, like the other Christian festivals, and we must first of all decide whether we want to have a mere public holiday instead of Easter, or whether we desire to make it a festival of true religious devotion and inner strength. But, how can we once again find in the Eastern festival a source of inner experience and strength?

We can try to look at it from the point of view of the seasons of the year. It takes place in springtime, always after the Spring Equinox. This is the time of the year when the long, dark, and cold winter nights have been overcome by the ascending Sun. The days grow longer again, and warmth and light fill the life of the Earth anew. Nature awakes from her deep sleep in the wintertime, and countless little flowers and leaves come forth from their imprisonment in seeds and buds. Soon the barren landscape of winter is transformed into a beautiful carpet of brilliant colors.

Is not springtime a true picture of the power of resurrection inherent in nature? Every year, again the warmth and light conquer the signs of Death. Winter's ice and snow are melted away, the frozen soil is softened and covered with abundant manifestations of life. Even the process of germination provides us with a true picture of the preceding Death on Good Friday. For millions and millions of seeds buried in the womb of the Earth must die, so that the reappearance of life is possible.

Thus nature provides us with crutches, as it were, for the understanding of the festival of Good Friday and Easter. It is not a person who has chosen this time of the year for the celebration of Easter; but the events that are described in the gospels, have really taken place in springtime, about the time of the Jewish Passover. The powers of destiny have brought about this coincidence.

Yet, we must confess that the picture of nature in spring only lends us crutches for the understanding of Easter. They help us along only a certain part of the way towards the comprehension of this festival; but then

they fail. For even though we perceive the picture of resurrection in nature, as thinking beings we know quite well that all the splendor of nature will fade away in autumn, when the nights grow longer again and darkness and cold wipe out that beautiful carpet of color and life. Thus the manifestations of nature do not really provide a picture of resurrection as we desire to find it in connection with Christ. It is a seemingly eternal circle of destruction and re-creation. Moreover modern, scientifically-minded people know quite well that this circle will cease to operate in a very far future. People know this, and even try to pre-calculate the time when the planet on which we live will receive no more warmth and light from the decaying Sun. Then no more vegetation will be possible on the Earth. Death will overtake Nature. Therefore nature too leaves unanswered the questions that we must ask when we are confronted with the message of the Easter festival.

We too are involved in the fate of nature, because our body is a part of nature. We know that our body will one day be worn out; we have to die inevitably, and nothing in the world of our sensory experiences suggest that there is an imperishable part in us, besides that which vanishes in the course of natural events.

Nevertheless, there is the picture of Christ's Resurrection. Can it be experienced by modern humanity as a Truth, beyond the mere traditional records? Our salvation from the ever-turning wheel of nature depends on the answer to this question. We must say yes, there is an answer, and it can be experienced by each single human being.

The life of Christ spanned the time between Christmas and Easter. He was born in the Christmas Night, He died on the Cross on Good Friday, and rose from the grave at Easter. In between these two fundamental events is a time of 33 years, thirty years up to the baptism in the Jordan and three years of the actual ministry. In the Christmas Night the impulse of Divine love was born; in the Easter events, 33 years later, this impulse resurrected and has since dwelled among people for the sake of its realization.

Since that time, this rhythm of 33 years, the rhythm from the birth of an impulse to its resurrection and realization, is deeply written into the history and activities of humanity. It can no longer be denied, and the recognition of it can open the gates for the entry of the Easter message into each single human soul, if it is willing to listen (Rudolf Steiner the great teacher of a New Spiritual Revelation, was the first who emphasized the fact of the 33-years-rhythm with regard to historical events).

In 1113 the great St. Bernard of Clairvaux entered the monastery of Citeaux as a monk. He took up the strict discipline of the monastic life with great energy and unerring religious fervor. He performed the exercises to the point of complete bodily exhaustion. This monastic life as lived in the Middle Ages is no longer suitable for people today. But for those monks it meant the development of unusual will-forces, far above the will of ordinary people. Thus the year 1113 was for St. Bernard the time of the birth of tremendous will-forces with regard to the religious life. It was really a kind of Christ-mas-time for St. Bernard. Thirty-three years later this impulse of the will, which had been born in 1113, resurrected, and mightily realized itself as a historic impulse in the world. For in 1146 St. Bernard proclaimed the second Crusade all over Europe, and through his brilliant religious eloquence, he kindled enthusiasm in thousands of men for this idea.

The failure of the second Crusade is another matter. But the example of St. Bernard shows that such a strong impulse of the soul may rest for a long time in the bosom of a person, until one day it breaks forth with power, overcoming all obstacles in its way. It took thirty-three years for this impulse, born in the innermost being of St. Bernard, to be resurrected in humanity. This time corresponds to the Christ period of life from Christmas till Easter, and it opens a gateway to the experience of the power of Resurrection, of immortal existence, which came into the world through Christ Jesus.

But this reality of the development of an impulse of the soul from its Birth to its Resurrection is not only confined to a human earthly life. It reveals its creative power even still more strongly beyond the boundaries of life in a mortal body.

Prince Henry of Portugal, who is usually called "the Navigator," employed all his capacities almost exclusively in the endeavor to find the sea-passage to India and Eastern Asia. He made several attempts at great sacrifice, which carried him far down the Western Coast of Africa. Yet, when he died in 1460 (13 Nov.), the final goal, the rounding of the southern end of Africa, had not yet been achieved. One might say that in the moment of his death, his impulse, which hitherto he had made his personal affair, became the concern of the whole of civilized humanity. It was then born, so to speak, into humanity. And thirty-three years after Henry's death, in March 1493, Columbus came back from the West and told the astonished world that he had found the

passage to India. He did not know then that he had discovered a hitherto unknown continent. His idea was that if the Earth is a globe, one should be able to establish a passage to India in going East as well as West. He had chosen the westward way and had discovered America.

In this case, an impulse or an idea had taken hold of a man. He himself could not realize it, and when he died he left it as a kind of spiritual testament to humanity. Then thirty-three years later it celebrated its resurrection and realization. However, in fact it turned out differently from the way it had existed in human minds. Instead of being the passage to India, it became the discovery of a new continent. Thus impulses and ideas sometimes reveal themselves as having different purposes from those of ordinary human wishes. Just this fact unveils the independent and real existence of ideas, like objects in the material world. Yet even single human beings can gain a higher, immortal existence, if they are able to penetrate to their essential nature.

The birth of such impulses in the human soul are sometimes a painful experience, taking place in the midst of inner despair and depression. The famous Italian sculptor and painter Michelangelo (1475-1564) went through a most difficult crisis in his life. It was a turning point for him (in 1505), and afterwards he was inclined to moods of depression and gloom. Even in this, we can recognize the entering of a spiritual impulse into the soul of Michelangelo. For thirty to thirty-three years later, it revealed and manifested itself majestically in his famous painting "The Last Judgment" (1535 and later) in the Sistine Chapel. That which had shown itself as heaviness and depression at the time of its birth had come to its resurrection in the painting as the gigantic imagination of the judgment of souls by Christ.

None of the Spiritual impulses that enter the world through human souls get lost, although they may be rejected for a time. People, who have in their destiny the necessary provisions for the conception of such ideas, may not always be willing to identify themselves with these impulses and to fight for their realization; but ideas are immortal beings, and they will come again to other souls, and seek their resurrection there.

But how is it with those impulses that seem to be destructive in human history? Their existence and development also finally fulfill the manifestation and realization of the good. They too are involved in that same rhythm of thirty-three years. The Crucifixion of Christ took place, according to reliable sources, in the year 33 AD. The Acts of the Apostles tell of the persecution of the first small Christian community by the Jews. This was the great tragedy of the Jewish people: they denied in Christ Jesus the Messiah whom they had expected since the very first beginning of their existence as a nation. An impulse of hate was born instead of the recognition of Christ, and it also developed within a period of thirty-three years. In the Spring of 66 AD, the so-called Jewish War began, which lasted seven years; and in the midst of which stands the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

In this case, the impulse, born in 33 AD, seems to have resurrected in destruction only. But if one looks at it more carefully, one can discover in it a great teacher. For many of those souls who were caught in the idea of a Jewish World Empire in contradiction to the Christ Impulse of Divine love, were taught by the facts and events, and by their own death, the wrongness of their nationalistic tendencies. Thus Resurrection is not an event that happened only once, and which is recorded in the Gospels.

It can be experienced again and again in the development of pure spiritual impulses that enter the human soul. Behind the manifold single impulses, it can be assumed that there lies one great guiding principle. It can be called the principle of the evolution of humanity, in which all the single Ideas and impulses have their dwelling. The principle of human evolution may be exalted high above the impulse of a single person. Yet, it is the unfailing judge of each single spiritual impulse in mankind, whether it be the Idea of the Crusades, the spirit of Globe-encompassing discovery or artistic fulfillment. In reality, in each human being who is awake for the performance of some cultural task, such an eternal being comes to life and goes through its development in one or another way. Single sheep may stray from the guiding hands of the original all-human purpose for a while. The power of Resurrection, even in its manifestation in the thirty-three years' rhythm, will call them back, sooner or later. And what sometimes appears to be a catastrophe instead of a resurrection, may be the necessary teaching for further evolution.

Therefore the idea cannot be so very strange that, having once gone through developments of this kind, human spirits come back to Earth again and again in order to purify themselves and to advance in harmony with the guiding Humanity-principle. A person may have given birth to a certain impulse, which may have resurrected during that lifetime or only after death. It may not have served the purpose of the evolution of

Humanity. Is it then not possible that the soul of such a person comes back into another body, in order to receive anew the impulse that is akin to him and to develop it further under changed world-conditions? And are not all human beings under the same fate: that they can never fully achieve what with their highest intentions they desired to achieve?

But we can notice one fact: the higher the moral quality of the guiding impulse of a human being is, the more, one might say, is he misunderstood and even persecuted by his contemporaries. Here appears the other side of Easter: Resurrection is not possible without Good-Friday. The mortal world hates the world of the Ideas, when it becomes manifest in the higher being of people, because it finally overcomes that which is mortal. Therefore the mortal world resists that which appears in one's inner being as its adversary. And only if the mortal gives way and renounces the desire for permanence, then the eternal in one can shine forth unopposed.

Our higher impulses constitute our Higher Self. It cannot be so, that the Ideas and impulses of human evolution lead a kind of impersonal existence, and only from time to time settle, as it were, in a human body. No person on Earth was ever able to evolve and realize creative impulses, who was not able to speak of himself as an "I" in the highest sense. The "I" person and the being of the idea must form a unity, otherwise no Resurrection is possible. The Idea is only creative as the higher fulfillment of the "I." One cannot imagine Ideas working in the world separated from the "I"-person, anymore than creative ideas can manifest themselves in animals.

How is it then with that guiding principle of humanity's evolution, in which all the single historical impulses and ideas have their origin and their union? If the single idea and the human "I" are indivisible, must not then a much greater and universal "I" be the hearer of that united cosmos of creative Ideas, of which the single impulses are like rays from a Sun?

Furthermore, if those manifold impulses have become incorporated in the mortal sheath of an "I"-person, is it not possible for that great, universal "I" of the cosmos of creative Ideas has once been incorporated in the mortal body of a man?

Answering honestly all these questions, it should not be too difficult to perceive in the Christ Jesus of the Gospels this One exalted Being. For He shows in all the recorded details—and we must confess that they are only fractions and very much distorted—the archetype of all the described facts of the power of Resurrection in a human's higher being. His life was built up during the thirty-three years, which are the foundation of the Birth-to-Resurrection-rhythm in the life of historical impulses. If that cosmos of creative Ideas, as Divine beings, was really alive in Him, then the mortal world cannot but have developed the utmost possible hate and desire for His persecution. And finally only Death, the complete overcoming of the mortal, can have opened the Gate through which such a fullness of Spiritual Light could gradually resurrect in humanity.

The reasoning of mind may say that the words and deeds of the One of whom the Gospels speak do not justify one's seeing in Him such a universal greatness, that He could be regarded as the bearer of the spiritual cosmos of Ideas. His words and deeds are merely those of a simple man. Such a judgment would only reveal that it has not comprehended, by a long way, the unfathomable depths of the Gospels. Only ages of human evolution still to come, will be able to bring the light that which is hidden in those seemingly unpretending documents to the understanding of humanity.

The celebration of the Easter-festival should unite both these facts: the commemoration of the original Good-Friday and Easter scenes, as they are described in the Gospels; and the creation of a consciousness for the spiritual reality in each single human being, through which people are united with the One who manifested the power of Resurrection. Then Easter will not be a fading commemoration and tradition, but a time of experience of the universal Spirit of Human Evolution, Who sends His healing rays of spiritual Sun-light into each human soul. Thus Easter must become a festival of contemplating the purpose of human existence. Such contemplation leads us to look up to the examples given by those members of the human race who endeavored to realize the highest evolutionary impulses of humanity, in spite of difficulties, opposition and even persecution. Finally this can lead to the experience of the One in Whom are present the purified archetypes of all human Ideals and evolutionary impulses, and Who is the Resurrection and the Life.

Such experience demands cosmic greatness from us. Surely we can only gradually evolve to such a height. Therefore the Easter festival cannot be determined by earthly factors only, it must be arranged according to cosmic conditions, and people can more and more become conscious of this necessity. The first Christians, who

still lived in the personal memories of the actual Easter events, knew this demand for cosmic greatness. They arranged the Easter festival on the Sunday following the first full Moon of spring. They had two reasons for this, and a true commemoration of the first Easter was established.

For the gospels relate that the Crucifixion of Christ took place on the Friday preceding the Jewish Passover. The Passover was fixed according to the first full Moon after the 21st of March, or the Spring Equinox. Thus Easter morning, the morning of Resurrection, was the Sunday after this spring full Moon. And as the following centuries celebrated Easter according to this tradition, it was not only a true commemoration, it was also an uplifting of the festival to cosmic heights and grandeur.

Only if we will consciously create such a cosmic background behind and above the Easter festival, will we be able to celebrate it as an event that can give us inner strength and dignity.