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How do you celebrate Easter?

As a spring fashion holiday, Easter bonnet and all, as in the Irving Berlin song that Martha played this morning?

Or as a Family Feast Day—with a traditional ham.

Of course, there's always Easter for kids, with bunnies and chocolate and an egg hunt.

How the kids are interpreting it, however, might be a bit of a mystery. Blogger Linda Sharps gathered some stories from the mothers of young children.

One child was convinced that the Easter Bunny came down the chimney and that they should put a carrot out for it. Unfortunately, the dog ate the carrot and threw up on the rug.

Another kid decided that the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy were in cahoots. "One gives you candy to rot your teeth, the other comes and takes your teeth away."

Well, so much for the light and frothy approach. Easter is at its origin the most serious and the most sacred Christian holiday. For believers, the story is all about the agony of crucifixion and the joy of resurrection.

Most Unitarian-Universalist churches deal with these themes in a metaphorical sense—renewal, rebirth, revitalization. I'll add reconciliation and redemption.

The news, 24 hours a day of it, is by turns heart-rending, enraging, and depressing. School shootings. Climate crisis. Senseless war. Divisive politics.

When will they ever learn, went the Pete Seeger song. When will they ever learn?

Here is a story that gives me some comfort. It is about reconciliation.

You no doubt remember George Wallace. Four-term governor of Alabama, three times a Presidential candidate, he was known as an arch-segregationist.

Oddly enough, he had started his career reputed to be “the most liberal judge” in Alabama. In his courtroom, Wallace insisted on polite treatment of Black lawyers and he was known for his fair rulings for Black and white alike.

How did all that change? He lost an election for governor running as a moderate. After that, he apparently decided that appealing to hate and racism would win him votes—or, at least, white votes. As a PBS documentary put it, “he made a deal with the devil.” His very speechwriter was a leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1963, at his inauguration as governor, he infamously vowed, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

That same year, he attempted to stop two African-American students from enrolling at the University of Alabama.

It was on his watch—arguably encouraged by his hateful rhetoric—that Ku Klux Klansmen planted dynamite in a Birmingham church, killing four young girls.

In 1965 came the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

Young activist John Lewis, later a revered Congressman, was one of the leaders of that drive for voting rights for African-Americans.

On March 7, Lewis led 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus bridge over the Alabama River in Selma. State troopers met them with dogs, tear gas, bullwhips, clubs, fire hoses. John Lewis was brutally beaten and carried off to the hospital with a fractured skull.

Governor George Wallace allowed the violence. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. called him “the most dangerous racist in America.”

Such a person is beyond redemption, right?

It would seem that way. Yet, history takes strange turns. On May 15, 1972, Wallace was campaigning for President when a publicity seeker shot him, lodging five bullets in his spine. Wallace spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair, paralyzed and in constant pain.

Nevertheless, he won re-election as governor of Alabama in 1974 and then again in 1982.

After he was shot, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm visited him in the hospital. She too was running for President, the first Black woman to do so. Wallace stood against everything she stood for.

Aren't your supporters going to be angry that you're here, Wallace asked. Yes, Chisholm said, they are. But I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to anyone. Wallace, his daughter later wrote, "cried and cried."

Shirley Chisholm apparently planted a seed of transformation in Wallace's mind. Lying in a hospital bed, he had time to think.

Later, he telephoned people he had wronged and poured out his remorse. One of the people he called and talked to for hours was John Lewis.

Wallace was now acquainted with suffering and he acknowledged the suffering he had caused during his lifetime. He felt that his paralysis was punishment for his sins and he sought atonement as a born-again Christian.

In 1979, he made an unannounced visit to the Sunday service at the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, where Martin Luther King, Jr. had been the pastor. From his wheelchair, he begged forgiveness from the congregation for the pain that he had caused.

The listeners, believers in the power of forgiveness, saw in him a changed man. As a state trooper wheeled him back out, someone started to sing "Amazing Grace," and the rest joined in.

When George Wallace ran for governor for the last time, he won 90% of the Black vote.

Critics dismiss Wallace's professed change of heart as an opportunistic electoral ploy. But, leaders in the African-American community didn't see it that way.

Among them, historian and educator John Hope Franklin wrote that Wallace underwent a metamorphosis into a “courtly, kindly person.”

On the 30th anniversary of march over the Selma Bridge, Reverend Joseph Lowry, President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference held Wallace’s hand during the ceremonies and told him, “You have come a long way, and we have come a long way.”

In 1985, Tuskegee Institute, a historically Black institution, awarded Wallace an honorary degree, to a standing ovation. Wallace said, “That was the proudest I’ve ever been.”

Wallace’s conversion was not all fine talk and photo opportunities. He put his political efforts where his mouth was. He appointed a record number of 160 African-Americans to Alabama state offices. He hired a Black press secretary.

Legislation he supported benefitted the poorest of the poor in Alabama—the Black population. His achievements included increased financing for education, better health care and mental hospitals, improved highways. He eradicated loan-sharking and reduced repossession, both scourges of the poor.

A University of Alabama poll found that 74% of Black voters rated Wallace the best governor the state had ever had.

After Wallace retired, the Reverend Jesse Jackson visited him in his Montgomery home. The meeting was poignant. Jackson was now running for President. Wallace told him to be careful, because there were “violent kooks” out there. Jackson promised he would take care.

It was the longest that Wallace had sat up for a week and one leg was in spasm from his injury. Shrunken and pale, he could hardly hear what was said. Jackson leaned forward to speak; the two men held each other's hands, and Jackson gave one of his rhythmic and eloquent prayers. Journalist Stephan Leshner, observing the scene, felt a profound sense of history.

Jackson prayed, "The people seek leadership and they seek to be led to higher ground.... Let us be present...when the lions and lambs will lie down together, and all of us can realize the joy in each other..."

The joy in each other. Between Jesse Jackson and George Wallace. Extraordinary.

Wallace died in 1998. Congressman John Lewis wrote in the New York Times. "Rarely does our country witness such a conversion by an elected official. Such a conversion of principle can be shaped only by courage and conviction... Through genuine repentance and forgiveness, the soul of our nation is redeemed."

Alabama writer Diane McWhorter once observed that Wallace uttered three words "probably never before uttered consecutively in the Old Confederacy: 'I was wrong.'"

"I was wrong." Saying that is one step toward a new relationship. The other person can then say, "You may very well have been wrong, but you are still my brother or my sister or my friend and I will still hold your hand."

In that way, to use the expression of Martin Luther King Jr.'s, we build "the beloved community."

So, let's observe Easter by celebrating modern miracles. Miracles that don't entail breaking the laws of nature, but breaking the habits of hate and fear and anger.

As Shirley Chisholm said about her visit to George Wallace's bedside, "You always have to be optimistic that people can change, and that *you* can change and that one act of kindness may make all the difference in the world."

Repentance and forgiveness—both are acts of giving of yourself. Let us be especially thankful for the miracle of those people who have been badly hurt but are gracious and compassionate enough to forgive. Generous enough to reach out and hold their former enemy's hand.

Small triumphs in the human story might come all too seldom, which is all the more reason to celebrate them. And practice them, whenever we can.

Happy Easter, all, no matter how you celebrate.