

Archetypal Rabbits

A Multigenerational Easter Service

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

April 17, 2022

It's Easter Sunday, and this year we're celebrating it with an intergenerational service, which means all of you kids get stay with us during the entire service. Aren't you excited? I know, you probably would prefer to go to Children's Chapel for a nice activity and to hang out with your friends, but I'm going to do my best to make the next few minutes interesting for all of us by talking about a few fun characters that are familiar to us all.

And for the adult children in the room—because that what grownups are, deep down, just big kids—it's going to be fun for you too. Some scientists I know of say, "human beings are a form of infant ape," because we never fully mature. We're all like Peter Pan, the eternal child, the boy who never grows up.

So today, us kids of all ages are going to play together by playing with the images of some pretend characters. And since it is Easter, we're going to look at some of the famous rabbits we know. Why do you think I would talk about rabbits on Easter?

Of course, because the Easter Bunny is one of the most famous rabbits of them all. And what does the Easter Bunny do on Easter? The Easter Bunny hides Easter Eggs. And rumor has it the Easter Bunny was spotted wandering around our property, so we're going to have an Easter Egg hunt after our service for the small children, not the adult children. The adult children get to drink coffee and tea, as usual, to help us continue the delusion that we're all grown up.

But for now, we're going to talk about famous rabbits. Before I begin, however, I want to tell you about a real rabbit I once knew, that wasn't famous. His name was Gosheven. At least that's what may family called him. He couldn't tell us his name, like some other rabbits we'll consider can, so we called him Gosheven, a Native American word that means, "leaper," although we usually just called him Goshy.

Until Goshy came into my life, I didn't much care for rabbits. I had bad experiences with rabbits when I was a small child and grew up believing they were mean and stupid. Once, for example, when I was very small, I went on a fieldtrip to the zoo where I was allowed to hold a rabbit. It seemed like a very friendly rabbit that peacefully nestled in my arms without struggling or wishing to get down. I was in heaven because I thought I had made a new friend and that this gentle creature really liked me. But when I finally had to put the rabbit down, I discovered it didn't really like me at all, it only liked my warm coat. It liked it so much that the entire time I was holding it, the cute little bunny was eating a giant hole in the sleeve of my coat. My mother wasn't happy about that.

There was also a time someone gave my siblings and me two rabbits for pets, which we were very excited about, at first. But two rabbits often leads to more rabbits, which was the case with our rabbits. We were excited about a bunch of baby bunnies being born in our home, but it turns out that some rabbits are not very good parents. And our rabbits were such terrible parents that none of their baby bunnies survived.

So I didn't much care for rabbits because I misjudged them as all being mean and stupid. You might say I was prejudice against rabbits from then on. Then one day, many years ago, as an adult child, I wandered into a pet store while waiting for the hardware store to open next door. I saw a large smokey-gray rabbit by itself in a tall pen with an open top. All the rabbits I'd ever seen try to run from strangers, but I though I'd reach in and try to pet this one, which it didn't mind in the least. It continued sitting quietly while I stroked its ears.

This surprised me, but after a few seconds I stopped stroking its ears to look around for a clock. Suddenly I felt the rabbit pushing its head up against my hand, wanting me to keep petting it. Such intelligence and affection was the opposite of everything I had believed about rabbits up until that moment. I couldn't believe it! I looked at the shopkeeper and asked, "What's the deal with this rabbit?" A question I never thought I'd ask.

"We don't know anything about that rabbit," he said. "We found it in our parking lot. In fact, since we don't know where it came from, we're selling it for only ten dollars." Without even thinking about it, to my own surprise, I responded, "I'll take it."

As soon as I got in the car with this rabbit, wondering what I was going to do with it, Peggy called my cellphone, excited to let me know she had just purchased something for the house. I sheepishly replied, "That's good. I just got something for the house, too." I thought she might not be happy with me, but when she heard me say "rabbit," she said, "That's great! I just finished reading *Watership Down* to the kids. They will love a rabbit." (*Watership Down* is a book about heroic rabbits on a perilous journey.)

Peggy was right, our kids loved Goshy but he turned out to be mostly my friend. He lived in a large pen in our house and every morning I would go in to let him out, at which time he would start running figure eights between my legs. It was a game he taught me. Although I could have easily snatched him up, I always let him slip through my fingers because I knew it made him feel good to think he was the fastest rabbit of them all. And when I stretched out on the floor to watch TV, Goshy would lay at my side, requiring me stroke his ears the entire time. Sometimes I thought he'd let me rub his ears off if I could. He never tired of being petted.

What I most admired about Goshy, however, was how content he was with life. Sometimes I'd open the door to let him outside, and he'd go out for a few minutes and nibble on some clover, but, before long, he'd come back indoors on his own and get into his pen and just sit

there, perfectly happy to do nothing else all day long. For this reason, I considered him a kind of rabbit Zen master, because he taught me a lot about being happy with what is, rather than feeling anxious by always wanting something more, or for things to be different.

And Goshy taught me about my own prejudices, and how important it is not judge everyone because of the actions of just a few. Just because some rabbits weren't good pets, doesn't mean no rabbits are good pets. The same is true with people, we should only judge them by their own actions, not by the actions of others.

Goshy was a real rabbit, but there are many pretend rabbits that can also teach us something about ourselves, and about different ways of being in the world. Who are some of the rabbits you can think of?

Bugs Bunny, one of the most famous wisecracking wabbits of them all, is one of my favorites. His most famous saying is, "Eh, what's up Doc?" But his second most famous phrase is, "Of course you know, dis means war." Bugs bunny was a wartime baby, born in 1940, and his wisecracking, rule-breaking defiance made him a symbol of the American character during World War II. That war was against authoritarians who wanted to rule the world, and Bugs Bunny became the symbol of resistance. His image appeared on anti-Nazi propaganda, was painted on businesses and paratroopers' patches, and was even tattooed on a few soldiers.

In one cartoon, for example, instead of falling off a cliff, Bugs is able to magically float in midair. "I know this defies the law of gravity," he says, "but I never studied law." I once heard a college professor say, "He defies authority. He goes against the rules. But he does it in a way that's often lovable, and that often results in good things for the culture at large."¹

Bugs Bunny was always funny, even though he was really standing up against bullies and, ultimately, standing for freedom. For this reason, we call his kind of humor *satire*. That's the kind of joke that pokes fun of authorities and dumb rules in a lighthearted way that lets us get away with pointing out how silly some of them are. It's like the political cartoons we see in the newspapers, or like the humor of comedians like Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, Trevor Noah, and Stephen Colbert. We need people like Bugs Bunny in our world, especially when times are tough.

Bugs Bunny is a lot like Brer Rabbit, which is Southern slang for "Brother Rabbit." Brer Rabbit was a vehicle through which the descendants of Africans were able to pass along their folk-stories. Like Bugs, Brer Rabbit is a trickster character who likes to bend the rules and sometimes goes against social expectations. He reminds us of the importance of keeping our old stories and their important lessons alive for future generations, even as he shakes things up when some of those old ways are silly and need to go away.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/templates/text/s.php?sId=17874931&m=1>

Another kind of rabbit we need in our lives is Thumper. You know who Thumper is, right? Yes, Thumper is a young rabbit in the Disney movie about an orphaned deer named, *Bambi*. He's named Thumper because of the sound his foot makes when he thumps the ground. But he could just as easily be named Thumper because of the way he tends to thump people with the truth, even though doing so isn't always polite. When he first meets Bambi, Thumper says what's obvious, "You're kinda wobbly."

Thumper's mother reminds him, "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all." It may not have been nice, but it was true, as a young deer, Bambi is wobbly, especially when Thumper teaches him to ice skate and reminds him of it again. Thumper is the kind of friend who tells Bambi the uncomfortable truth, but he is also a friend there to support Bambi when he is wobbly and still learning to stand on his own four hooves. Don't we all need friends like this in our lives, who aren't afraid to tell us what we need to hear, rather than just what they think we want to hear? Being a friend who is both truthful and supportive, like Thumper is, is a special kind of friend.

I'm sure you've also heard about *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a toy rabbit that asks a skin-horse, what it means to be real. For the toy horse, being truly loved is what makes us real. But that's just one answer. What's really important is the question because it's the question all of have to ask ourselves, no matter how young or how old we are. Nobody knows for sure what *real* is. Scientists are still trying to understand reality.

Whatever the answer is, and it's one none of us will ever fully understand, what's important is that we each try to figure it out for ourselves. The skin-horse tells the Velveteen Rabbit that reality is about being loved. For some becoming real is about loving others. For some, being real is about doing something really important for the world, for people we may never meet or know, like coming up with a cure for cancer, or traveling to a distant planet. Still, for others, it might simply be about doing small things for the people we do know. No matter what the answer is, each of us is like the Velveteen Rabbit trying to figure out what the world means to us and what we should mean to the world. The answer is different for each of us, and may sometimes change for us, which is why we should keep asking ourselves, what does it mean to be real?

How many of you remember the Energizer Bunny? The Energizer Bunny is another toy rabbit that runs on energizer batteries, that keeps showing up in commercials without ever running out of power. One of my favorites is a commercial in which the Energizer Bunny is confronted by Darth Vader who wants to show him the power of the Dark Side, but the batteries in Darth Vader's lightsaber run out of energy while the Energizer Bunny just keeps going, and going, and going.

It reminds me of a young woman I see almost every day running in our neighborhood. She's remarkable because she runs up and down Sunset Hill, which is pretty steep. I often see her running in the morning, when I leave the neighborhood, only to return hours later to see that she's still running up and down that hill. She's a real-life Energizer Bunny and, sometimes, all of us need to find the inner strength and determination to keep going, and

going, and going, no matter how difficult that task before us. Putting in the effort to do what's best for ourselves isn't always fun, whether that means exercising, or doing or homework or chores, or going to school, or to work, or patiently working toward a great cause, or to make the world a better place, but we still have to find ways to keep going.

Then there's the White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland*, the one that introduces itself by saying, "I'm late, I'm late, for very important date. No time to say 'hello,' goodbye, I'm late, I'm late, I'm late." But I don't think the White Rabbit is meant to teach us to be on time. Rather, because he's in a hurry, Alice thinks he must be up to something very important, so she follows him down a rabbit hole and into Wonderland. That's where she learns to see the world from new and different perspectives: from a small perspective and big perspective, and lots of other unexpected ways of seeing things. So, for me, the White Rabbit reminds us of the importance of looking at things, the world, the ideas of others, and our own ideas from different perspectives, from fresh perspectives, in order to discover new wonders.

One of my favorite rabbits may be one some of you have never heard of, and one I'm sure none of you has ever seen. He's a six-foot-3½-inch tall rabbit named Harvey who starred in an old movie with Jimmy Stewart called *Harvey*. In the movie, Stewart's character, Elwood Dowd is the only person who can see Harvey, so everyone else thinks he's crazy. But it turns out Harvey is real. He's a pooka, a friendly creature from Celtic legend that has the power to stop time and transport people anywhere they like for as long as they'd like, months or years, then bring them back as if they weren't gone a single second. I'd love a friend like that. In the end, everyone realizes Elwood is such a great guy, it doesn't matter if he talks to an invisible rabbit. Harvey reminds us that there's more to life than meets the eye and that it's okay for people to be a little weird so long as they are kindhearted.

There are lots of other rabbit characters I could talk about, like Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*, or Steven Spielberg's *Roger Rabbit*, or Rabbit from Winnie-the-Pooh's Hundred Acre Wood, or the heroic rabbits of Richard Adam's novel, *Watership Down*, or Peter Cottontail hopping down the bunny trail, singing, "Hippity-hoppity, Easter's on its way." But since Easter has already arrived, perhaps we should introduce one last rabbit on this special day, the Eastertide Hare, or as most of us prefer to say, the Easter Bunny.