

Much to Grieve – Much to Hope
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Easter Sunday

Readings

From chapter 16 of the Gospel of Mark and chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. On the first day of the week, at early dawn they came to the tomb, saying: Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb? They looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back, and on the right they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe. They were alarmed. But the man said to them:

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen."

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and bewilderment had seized them. And they said nothing, for they were afraid.

“Hope Again” by Rev. Clarke Dewey Wells

God of Easter and infrequent spring:
Announce the large covenant to deceitful lands,
drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins,
lure us to fresh schemes of life.
Rouse us from tiredness, self-pity, whet us for use, fire us with good passion.
Restore in us the love of living, bind us to fear and hope again.

Sermon

One of the things I love about the gospels is that they are filled with mysteries, small and large. Just about every one of the parables Jesus shares, for example, leave his listeners, sometimes including his disciples, scratching their heads or missing the meaning altogether – the kingdom of heaven like a mustard seed... like a treasure buried in a field... spread before us if we had eyes to see?

Maybe I too should wonder whether I understand any of this!

Then of course we come to the biggest mystery of all, the resurrection.

As we heard in the reading, three women (as Mark tells us) went to the tomb expecting to find a body. But... no: – another mystery and another mysterious saying, at least according to Luke: “Why seek ye the living among the dead?”

Not surprisingly, the women are bewildered, afraid. And maybe also not getting the point.

Wouldn't we be bewildered and afraid? And maybe not get the point? Speaking for myself I think "yes" on both counts.

Meanwhile, *all* the followers of Jesus were bereft. It wasn't supposed to end like this – for indeed they think at first that the crucifixion is the end, the end of Jesus, the end of the revolution, the end of the expected coming of God's kingdom they had hoped, expected, Jesus was to usher in.

Then... one of my favorite gospel stories: Not long after the crucifixion we find two disciples walking along the road from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus; and something happens, something quite unexpected – and mysterious, yes another mystery. As they share memories of their teacher Jesus and his teachings, a stranger appears and seems to know a great deal about the meanings of all that has transpired. Then, when they arrive at Emmaus, the two invite this stranger to share a meal with them; and in the breaking of bread they recognize this man as... Jesus... who then promptly disappears.

More mystery. What is going on?

Well, I am far from a literalist when it comes to the resurrection. But here's what I take from the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: They expressed their deep, heart-breaking grief, to one another, and then to this stranger (perhaps the stranger's presence evoked by their sharing)... who listened, really listened.

Then they welcomed the stranger to their table... and in the breaking of bread, experienced, awakened to, deep community – what Christians call communion, but what we all have experienced as... well, as love... which for these two disciples was felt as the presence of Jesus, love manifest, love incarnate.

All that said, it seems to me that this story can be understood as another parable of the kingdom of heaven... not something someday somewhere else... but right here, right now every time we are fully present to one another – whether around a table breaking bread or around these screens.

Including present to our grief.

Right now we do indeed have much to grieve as we celebrate our second pandemic Easter; some of us grieving personal losses of dear ones to Covid or other causes, all of us grieving the shared losses of... well, the list is long for this year of Covid. So much to grieve.

But when we allow our grief, share our grief... and when we listen, really listen to a friend sharing their grief, there can be an opening to deeper community, connection, love. And why not call this a piece of the kingdom of heaven?

Here and now, not somewhere else, not some other time or place.

But... isn't Easter a festival not of grief, but of hope and renewal – spring renewal of nature, hope for personal and shared renewal of the spirit?

Yes it is, surely it is... *also* that... but most accurately maybe a holy day of grief and hope intertwined – not just this Easter, but every Easter.

And hope, like grief, though utterly normal, often helpful, can also take us away from presence now.

For us, this year, it is of course so natural as we begin to emerge from pandemic time to look forward with hope to better times, to the “after times,” to being together again in person... man, that will be great, won't it... something like the kingdom of heaven...

And it will be great.

But how about also here and now?

As many of you know, the Dalai Lama often speaks about happiness, and the universal desire of people to be happy; he also speaks about the ways in which we too often seek our happiness in all the wrong ways, all the wrong places, leading maybe to passing pleasure but in the end sometimes also to suffering rather than to a more enduring happiness.

Well, as I read somewhere some time ago, once, as the Dalai Lama was leaving an event at which he had just spoken about happiness, someone asked him when he had been happiest in his life. With just a short pause he responded: “I think now!”

Now... because we are not all Dalai Lamas, for most of us this would be way easier to say at some times than at other times – such as pandemic times, which have been hard for just about everyone, hard beyond words for far too many.

Even so, worth pondering... “I think now...”

So... in the spirit of the Dalai Lama's affirmation, can we at least resonate, a bit anyway, to something like these lines from Black poet Maya Angelou – who, after all, had known her own very hard times?

I want to thank You, Lord
For life and all that's in it.
Thank you for the day
And for the hour and for the minute.
I know many are gone,
I'm still living on,
I want to thank you.

“I know many are gone...” she wrote. Yet “I'm still living on...” and “I want to thank you.” And even more powerfully, in another great poem of hers, “Still I rise,” she begins:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

And later in the poem she concludes:

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise...

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

And the reality today is that *we* will only rise if *all* rise, our Black siblings, our Asian American siblings, our trans siblings, our immigrant siblings... our all creatures on earth siblings.

This *is* the shared task before us... as on this Easter we begin to imagine rising from the pandemic.

But, in the spirit of my message today, we do not have to wait till some other day, some other year, some other decade or century to enter the promised land when all will be free, when justice will roll down everywhere like waters... for we enter the promised land, the kingdom of heaven, each time we engage with one another, each time we are present to one another, each time we help another, each time we speak for justice or speak and act for the earth – each time, to put it another way, we die to our too-small version of our self and rise to our higher identity with others, with all life, with God.

Yes, there are daunting challenges before us... from racism to climate change... along with whatever we each might face in our own lives... but what if we accepted that the “kingdom of heaven” just might indeed be spread before us already... as Jesus said... if we have eyes to see, as he said?

What, after all, is preventing us from opening our eyes to the miracle of each moment – like this one – to the miracle of each person – like our friends spread before us on our screens... to the miracle of spring... again and always... to the miracle of those who speak words of healing, who speak to stop the hate and bring the love... who live the love... the miracle and power of speaking and working with love, rising from the pandemic, rising for justice, for the earth, together?

Finally, then, for this Easter Sunday one more brief thought:

My sermon title was “Much to Grieve – Much to Hope.”

Yes indeed, and as I’ve suggested is it utterly human to grieve our losses and utterly human to hope for better things in the future. But there is danger, as I’ve also suggested, in sometimes becoming immobilized by either grief or hope.

May we, then, remember this: Our lives are lived in the dash between those two phrases. The dash in between, the dash embracing grief and hope amidst the mystery and wonder of being alive here and now. The dash, in other words, is where we find the kingdom of heaven... beloved community... paradise on our one shared earth home.

So it always is. So may it always be. Amen.