

Moving Deeper into a Living Faith

Every year I write an Easter poem, and every year I notice that there is a lot of Good Friday in it. Let me share that poem with you now, and as I have before, I will read the poems twice through.

***The Incarnation, Part Two** Surely the angel had not foreseen this –the radiant news of that early meeting now buried inside this impenetrable mystery. “Let it be done to me according to your word.” Had she set these things in motion? “Let it be done”. How was she to bear his hard dying – how was she to hold his agony in her heart? How to say again the now impossible words “Let it be done” –even this – let this be done – her great Fiat at the foot of the cross – the utter surrender – the final emptying of the mother beside the son – the final act of love for them both.*

Mary is always a good person to include in any conversation about faith, and faith is what we are musing on in this first week after Easter. In so many of the stories we hear immediately after the Resurrection, the apostles and friends of Jesus are still terrified and traumatized. Indeed, in our reading from John, we hear that they are huddled behind locked doors for fear of the Jews.

Fear seems to be the default – it is a very human response and one we are all familiar with. I recently read a beautiful book by Sharon Salzberg called *A Heart as Wide as the World* and she says, “To be driven by fear is like dying inside.” And we feel that, don’t we? One of the lines in our Psalm today says clearly, “I shall not die but live and declare the deeds of the Lord.”

So, how do we find the courage to declare the deeds of the Lord? How do we develop a mature faith – the kind of faith that Mary exhibited from a very young age? How do we actually live out and out of the Resurrection? It seems to me that before we can receive the new life, we must release the old life.

Here is something from my own life, and believe me, I could share hundreds of stories about being afraid. A few years ago, I was privileged to attend what is called “Family Week” at a very respected rehab clinic down in Southern California. My beloved brother and only sibling was an in-patient there, and I was the person representing our family. It was a miraculous and transforming experience – one that will remain with me always. But as I left my brother to complete his treatment, I was filled with fear.

The obstacles he would encounter in the “real world” appeared insurmountable to me. I kept wishing he could remain within the safety of the treatment center forever, hardly a solution for someone attempting to regain and reclaim their own life. I wrote this poem shortly afterwards:

The desert for all its heat and intensity was a safe place. Not a wilderness at all. The wilderness is here. The desert is now with demons prowling everywhere. My own temptation – there are so many. Pick one. Not trusting You. Not allowing your grace to penetrate. Alleviate. Making myself stone – hard all the way through.

Mary's great example to us is her astonishing level of trust. Trusting the angel's mysterious message about giving birth to this special child – trusting as she and Joseph went quickly into Egypt, to escape the insanity of Herod – trusting during those anguished days of searching for Jesus in Jerusalem. And finally, trusting at the foot of the cross.

Now let's turn our attention to dear Thomas, destined to be known for the rest of time as "the doubter". The poet Robert Browning once said, "I show you doubt – to prove that faith exists." This is what Thomas said: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

And here is my poem called, appropriately, ***The Doubter I understand*** Thomas very well. For I, too, have cried out *Where are you? I, too, would have pressed my fingers into your scarred palms – running them along the ragged edge of your torn and open side – touching even the thorny remnant of that earthly crown to prove to myself how much You loved me.*

Joseph Campbell once said, “Awe is what moves us forward.” Certainly, when Thomas did encounter the Risen Lord, when he was able to say with his whole heart, “My Lord and my God”, awe was pulling him forward. Jesus gives himself entirely to Thomas with the plea, “Do not persist in your unbelief – believe”. But Jesus also says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”.

Which brings me back to this notion of a mature faith. Thomas had to release all of his doubt and fear in order to truly see Jesus – in order to make room for the Risen Life that Jesus wants to give us all. In your own beautiful Affirmation of Faith, you say, “making possible a new and larger life as we love God and love the good which comes from God in all people”. Making possible a new and larger life. That, it seems to me, is Resurrection.

Wendell Berry in his poem Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front writes: “So, friends, every day do something that won’t compute. Love the Lord. Love the world... Be joyful though you have considered all the facts... Practice resurrection”. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German pastor and theologian said, “Jesus does not call men to religion but to life” which echoes the final words of our reading from John, “..these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name”.

Let me end with one final poem by Gregory Orr. *It's not magic; it isn't a trick. Every breath is a resurrection. And when we hear the poem which is the world, when our eyes gaze at the beloved's body, we're reborn in all the sacred parts of our own bodies: the heart contracts, the brain releases its shower of sparks, and the tear embarks on its pilgrimage down the cheek to meet the smiling mouth.*

Christine Rodgers

Benediction

Glory to the Creator, who loves us into being, and to the Risen One, who loves us into living, and to their holy and shimmering Spirit, who loves us into loving. And the people say: “Amen”.