

Easter Sunday
12 April, 2009
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This is a pretty amazing day, you know? It's a pretty amazing day. Every year we get to this point and no matter what seems to be going on, Easter comes and it just sort of grabs us. It means a lot of things to a lot of different people. Well, for some it doesn't mean much at all – I was at a soccer game yesterday when somebody mentioned the holiday weekend and this fellow said, "Holiday?" It seemed pretty ironic, given what I was in the midst of, but, hey.

The church and those who are followers of The Way have for two millennia been wrestling with what this means for us. In those earliest years when Paul and others were moving around in the Mediterranean and some were headed south into Africa, some were headed east into Syria and on into India, into China and all in that first few decades, they were carrying with them a whole variety of experiences. What it meant to them in their place, in their time, in their lives. Paul, whose writings make up so much of the New Testament was in the midst of the oppression of the Roman Empire. And the meaning of his experience of the risen Christ is much of what we know of that time. But even that is limited.

Paul seemed to be offering options. Two options: Two sons of God. The Roman senate had declared Julius Cesar to be a god and he adopted Augustus and Augustus was claiming to be a son of god. August us was also a prince of peace, the Pax Romana, which was a lovely thing to behold I'm sure, that peace that always comes with oppression and despots. And even the trains ran on time.

But there was an option. Because what was being experienced by followers of The Way was that no matter what the Roan Empire threw at them, no matter what their miserable lives might have been, there was this spark within them where they realized they had experienced either in the actual experience of the apostles with the risen Christ, or in experiences like Paul's, that death which seems to be the ultimate force of despots, of empire, of the misery of life cannot crush hope. Cannot crush life.

It was to so much about the resuscitation of a physical body, it was more than that. It was that life itself, that deep, profound spark, that divine indwelling, could not be subjugated by even the threat or the actuality of death.

What Paul experienced on the road to Damascus was so transformative that it completely changed his frame of reference. It blasted him out of his previous experience. He was a man transformed. He was a man born to new life, born again. Yes, he was the same hot-headed Type-A personality, drive as he had always been, but now it was focused on something completely different. Not the suppression and the persecution of the followers of The Way, but the spreading of that message. And that message is that the worst that the world can throw at us cannot destroy hope when that hope is based on a life of love and compassion and forgiveness. Without that, this life is

not worth the trouble. If it's only about accumulating as much as we can before we die, that hardly seems worth the effort. Yes, maybe in a twisted way the one who dies with the most toys wins, but he still dies.

The life that we are promised, the life that we have in hope is based not just on some particular act, but on the message that that act gives us. That message that a life based on love, compassion and forgiveness is eternal.

The ages have built upon ages and we've gone through many permutations of the church and the way we live as followers of the way. And along the way every generation seems to feel like everything's spiraling down. Every generation thinks that the world is falling apart. We all want to look back to a golden age that never was. And yet what continues, the thread that continues through it all, is a spiritual evolution that builds upon the generations of those who practiced this life that was so personified in Jesus and the fact of that sense of the resurrection, the inability of the world to crush that life, that is the thread that runs through. And it is that which we build upon, it is that which gives us hope. It is that which keeps us going.

This last Friday night I was watching one who I will confess to be one of my heroes, Bill Moyers. There was a special on about Abraham Lincoln because it's the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. And Moyers' guests were Sam Waterston, who's an actor who always seems to play an attorney, (*always* seems to play an attorney, *including* the attorney Lincoln) and a Lincoln historian, Harold Holzer, who is apparently one of the most prolific writers on Lincoln. So the two of them did this interesting dialogue with readings both from Lincoln and people about Lincoln, and then there was conversation afterward. And I was so struck by a statement that Holzer made in this bicentennial of Lincoln (they were talking about the emancipation proclamation). Holzer got this gleam in his eye and he said, "Is it not significant that as we speak two little girls, Malia and Sascha Obama, descendents of slaves through their mother, could be playing in the Lincoln Bedroom in the White House?"

I was so struck by that. It seems to me in times that we can so easily slip into despair that all the politics aside, whether or not you agree with the politics of their dad, those two little girls may well be at least as significant in this equation as their dad and their mom. That there is in that a sign, not only of the advances made by African Americans in this country, but by European Americans as well.

There is something happening not just now, not just this moment, but we continue to evolve. We continue to grow. We continue to open our hearts bit by bit by bit. We're not all the way anywhere. But I'm just trying to say that there are signs of movement, there are signs of life, there are signs of hope. There is reason to believe, there is reason to continue the life of love and compassion and forgiveness. There is evidence of resurrection.

It is so easy for us to wallow in the darkness. It is important for us to recognize the darkness, but we have to see the light. We have to claim the light as conqueror. Life

always wins over death as long as we remain agents of hope, agents of a life of love and compassion and forgiveness.

For me that is the triumph and the power of Easter. It's like those little crocuses after this long, dark, dreary northwest winter when those little crocus' little heads pop out of the soil – POW! There is reason to live!

It's like that. Those two little girls in the White House are like two little crocus popping out of the soil.

I'd like to close with a prayer that we used last night in the Easter vigil. It was, I think, written by Philip Newell.

Let us pray:

When it seemed there was no hope you showed us new ways forward, O God.

When it seemed there were only endings, you showed us new beginnings.

Strengthen our belief in the power of life over death.

Strengthen our belief in the force truth over falsehood that we may be bearers of hope in the world, that we may be bearers of hope.

Amen.