

April 12, 2008
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Luke 24: 1-12

The Possibility of the Impossible

Most of us like the Christmas story much better than the Easter story. The birth of a baby is exhilarating and exciting. It warms our hearts, touches our spirits. The angels and the shepherds, the star and the magi, the songs of peace and joy, all of these make the story a delight to hear, to ponder and to embrace.

The Easter story, on the other hand, is hard on our hearts and minds. An innocent man is killed by the capital punishment of the day. He suffers tremendous pain and agony as he hangs on the cross--the Roman execution mode of the day. He is mocked, ridiculed and treated with contempt. The story is sorrowful, and his death is heart-wrenching. Like all deaths, this man's death is final. The lid on the casket is closed. The grave is filled. The stone is rolled to seal off the tomb. The termination papers are signed. The body is cremated. The remains are buried. Earth is returned to earth, dust to dust. It is finished. It is the end. It is final. Period.

This, of course, is only the prologue to the Easter story. For Easter is not about death, but about birth, as is Christmas. I wonder if that's why, according to the Gospel narratives, the first to discover Jesus' resurrection were women! The women had gone to the tomb of Jesus for the same reason many of us visit the resting places of our loved ones -- to mourn, to remember, to grieve, to connect. They wanted to see their beloved teacher. His death had been especially unjust. They never thought his life would end like this, even though they knew that the political situation was unpredictable, the power of the Roman Empire was oppressive, and the struggle between Roman rule and the Jewish elite--as well as Jesus' message of the kingdom of heaven -- were intensely fierce. Now at the tomb they were already feeling abandoned and bereft.

But something unpredictable and unexpected happened. Instead of death, they found life. Instead of Good Friday darkness, they found Easter light. Jesus' body was not there. Angels and gardeners were around. Then Jesus appeared, saying he had been raised. The women were astounded, terrified, amazed. We don't know the exact details, but we do get the general idea. For the story is not about historical details but about its message, its meaning, which is as ancient as life.

It seems that death and rebirth, decay and renewal, destruction and reconstruction, dying and rising have been part of life's cycles since the beginning. Hunters, for example, hunted animals which had to die in order for humans to eat and live. Life was given and saved. Farmers during agrarian times watched the seeds they planted grow and flourish into a different form of life. A seed became a flower, a bush, a fruit. The seed had to die in order to produce. Even when humans began to build and live in cities this cycle of death and rebirth continued, as old mud-brick buildings were demolished to build new structures. The process of decay and renewal, death and rebirth were ordinary parts of life.

It is not surprising, then, that throughout our existence, we humans--recognizing that life is always cyclical--have embraced even death and resurrection in different forms. Resurrection was not an unusual idea at the time of Jesus' death. Pharisees believed in it. Sadducees did not. Most Jews believed there will be some kind of resurrection at the messianic age. The mystery religions of the time embraced death and resurrection as a spiritual and mystical experience. Many of us today have heard ancient myths from many traditions where floods destroy the earth, only to restore it back to life; where out of unimaginable death comes the beginning of new life; where Snow White sleeps for seven years, only to wake up to life renewed.

We humans tell stories to explain the unexplainable, to fathom the unfathomable, to make sense out of the senseless. Here, we have Jesus' story that does not make sense through rational logic, yet we know its meaning intuitively, for it is about death and rebirth, losing and finding, letting go of the past and starting over anew.

Even the word Easter emphasizes this cyclical aspect of resurrection. Easter comes from the name of an ancient goddess of sunrise and spring, Eostare. She was the Teutonic goddess of the dawn, birth and new life. From her name is derived the word *estrogen* without which new birth does not take place. So even though eventually Christianity embraced the idea of resurrection as an afterlife, it seems there was an earlier time when Easter and Resurrection were more about new birth, rebirth, new life here on earth as a spiritual, mystical, symbolic experiences through which we all walk during our journey called life.

Each of us here knows and has experienced Easter and Resurrection in one form or another. If you have lived through the loss of a loved one, a spouse, a child, a parent, and made it, you have known Easter and a new beginning. If you have gone through the dark days of divorce, thinking that the pain will never subside, that you will never recover, and are here today, you have known Resurrection and a new beginning. If you have had your heart broken and thought you will never heal or love again, but you are here, you have known Easter and a new beginning. If you have been in the darkest place of the soul, walking through depression, an addiction, a violent act, and you thought you will never be able to live again, and you are here, you know Easter and a new beginning. The miracle, the amazing is not Resurrection after death. It is the ability to rise above it all, to be raised, right here on earth, to move on, to deal with past pain, to heal your heart, to recover, to overcome, and to begin over and again in this life on earth, today.

Many of us overcome incredible odds in life. Most of us carry wounds we never thought would heal. Most of us survive abuse and violence, war and injustice, poverty and oppression, and come out all right. Most of us find a way to begin over and again. The miracle is that many with horrifying pasts and unimaginable experiences make it. What they thought was impossible becomes possible. Their wounds eventually heal. They know Easter. They know Resurrection.

Yet there is more to Easter than just the ordinary cyclical moments of life. Easter is also about the miraculous and the unordinary. It is about the possibility of the impossible, the experience of the amazing, the encounter of the unimaginable. By that I do not mean that God has done the supernatural or the paranormal by raising Jesus. I mean that God can do the

impossible, the extraordinary, the amazing as we experience them. God is not supernatural. God is transcendent. God does not do the paranormal. God does the mysterious. God does not do the unnatural. God does the amazing, the extraordinary, the inspiring, the awe-filled, the full of wonder.

The Biblical monotheistic God does the impossible, especially in comparison to the ancient gods and goddesses who could handle only the ordinary, the commonplace, and the cyclical. While they reigned over the natural cycles of life, rain and sunshine, spring and fall, death and life, this God did the impossible – created the universe out of nothing, just by speaking a word; begat a son born of a virgin; and raised Jesus from the dead. All these point to the God who can do the impossible, the awe-filled, the amazing, bringing possibility to the impossible. And as such, Easter is the most amazing, extraordinary, astonishing Christmas gift of new life given to us. It is the gift of new life not in a baby but in an old person's heart, not in a newborn but in the shattered spirit of the aged, not in an infant but in the broken heart of the one who has lived.

Hindu legend tells the story of Shiva and Shakti in their heavenly abode, watching over the earth. They are touched by the challenges of human life. As they watch, Shakti sees a miserably poor old man walking down the road. Her heart wrings with compassion. She turns to her divine husband and begs him to give this man some gold. Shiva looks at the man for a long moment. My dearest wife, he says. I cannot do that.

Shakti is astounded. What do you mean? You are the Lord of the universe. Why can't you do this simple thing?

I cannot give this to him because he is not yet ready to receive it, Shiva replies. Shakti continues to appeal to her husband. And so Shiva drops a bag of gold in the man's path.

The man meanwhile walks along thinking to himself, I wonder how I will find dinner tonight. Turning the bend on the road, he sees something on the path on his way. Aha, he says. Look here, a large rock. How fortunate that I have seen it. I might have torn these poor sandals of mine even further. And carefully stepping over the bag of gold, he goes on his way.

I often think that Easter is this unexpected bag of gold, this unpredictable, extraordinary gift which we generally miss and walk by; that Resurrection is this astonishing surprise, this astounding wonder which we pass by. Often we do not notice it. We overlook it. We forget about it, even disregard it. In Easter and Resurrection we are given the gift of the possibility of the impossible, life's unlimited, boundless potential, infinite horizons, the promise and the confidence that all things are possible. What a shame that often we forget about it, neglect it. We get sidetracked by fear and anxiety, by lives that are demanding and overwhelming. We get distracted by a world full of despair, pain and brokenness.

Let me remind us today that we are an Easter people, a people of birth and new birth, a people for whom Easter is an astounding, amazing, and mysterious gift so that in a world of brokenness and pain, we can embrace the possibility of the impossible, the alternative to despair and violence. We are an Easter people, a people for whom Resurrection is this inspiring, awe-filled and wonder-filled gift, so that our hearts, embracing the extraordinary power of divine spirit, can overcome incredible obstacles, tackle unimaginable odds, and attempt enormous barriers. We are a people for whom Easter is an amazing gift so that we can recognize the

alternative to a messy world, to fear and cowardice, and can participate in building an Easter-like world of love and hope, justice and peace. We are a people for whom Resurrection is an unimaginable gift where a mess is turned to a blessing, fear to love, cowardice to courage, crucifixion to resurrection, a problem to an opportunity, and the impossible to a possibility.

Don't miss the extraordinary, amazing gift of Easter and Resurrection this year. Death does not have the last word. Birth and rebirth are always possible. Let the possibility of the impossible fill your heart, your life and our whole planet and the universe. Happy Easter!