

“The Other Side of the Stone”

A reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
with e.e. cummings and Peg Kirkpatrick
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“When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins.”

When the sun has risen in the East,
When the Alleluias have been sung,
When the story has been told,
When the stone has been rolled,
The work of Easter begins.

In the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, “Each night a child is born is a holy night.” So too every story of life begun again is a sacred story.

Life after birth we understand, but life after death? It is the stuff of mystery, a mystery that we all will know. The promise of Easter lies not, I believe, in this mystery becoming known but in what happens when the bonds of death in life are broken. What happens when, in Sarah York’s words, “we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us—possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.”?

Some stones are easy to push away; others, not so.

Sometimes a stone takes the shape of a door that calls for another to open it for us. When I was a child of maybe five or six, my mother was a Girl Scout leader for a troop of girls very much my senior. When they went on field trips and other outings, getting a sitter for me was just not part of our culture. I tagged along and for the most part enjoyed it—until one spring Saturday we went for a cookout to Graham Park. In our small Iowa town Graham Park was the popular gathering place for family picnics, playground activity, and scout outings like the one I was on with my Mom and her Girl Scouts.

As they were preparing the fare for the cookout, I needed to use the restroom. Its architecture I remember well—a stone house-like structure that seemed immense with great wooden doors and a dark interior. Once inside, once finished, I headed to the door to return to my Mom and the others. It wouldn’t move. I pulled and pulled. It wouldn’t budge. I started yelling, then crying, then sobbing. It seemed like forever before somebody—my Mother—came looking for me. But in those moments before that terrifying door was opened from the other side, I was in full-blown despair. That door may as well have been the stone blocking a tomb.

Throughout the course of my life I have known times far more dire than my trauma in the park, times when I felt that the doors blocking my release wouldn't budge, that the stones marking the exit were beyond my capacity to move. Through the good grace of friends and family and my own will to thrive, those doors did open, those stones rolled away, and life was renewed on an even deeper and more gratifying level than before. Yet the childhood memory remains, an early sign perhaps of the more soul-bending experiences that followed and the stories known to all of us of release from oppression in whatever form.

What strikes me above all in the image of the stone and the tomb is the stark separation of one inside from life outside. How profoundly the prison complexes of our nation embody this brutal separation. How horrifically the holding structures for undocumented immigrants intensify it. How the searing realities of Nazi oppression and the courageous counterpart of the Resistance placed tomb and stone in the starkest of contrasts.

Yet dark nights of the body and soul, in varying degrees and myriad forms, are known to us all.

What does it take to push away the stone? What has it taken for each of you to push away the stones from the tomb-like spaces you have known?

Perhaps it was a story that recharged your will to lean hard on the barriers that kept you from life's fullness. Perhaps it was the unexpected presence of a friend, who listened and witnessed and encouraged without advice. Perhaps it was a cadre of strangers, acting in the mode of resistance, rallying on your behalf. Perhaps it was simply a strain of music that awoke in you gratitude for beauty amid devastation and a surge of hope.

And so it moves. The stone moves. It rolls. It rolls away. You're awake. The sunlight pours in. The unimaginable has happened. You're filled to brimming with possibility. And you are not alone. By the grace of whatever, whomever, you breathe deeply. You emerge. You are overcome with gratitude.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

In the spirit of e.e. cummings, can we come alive to the day? Can we awaken to the grace that moves us to move the stone to land on the other side? Can we connect with and beyond ourselves? Can we love as if for the first time and know, perhaps for the first time, that we are loved and lovable?

The sun has risen in the East. The Alleluias have been sung. The story has been told. The stone has been rolled. Let the work of Easter begin.

Sources:

e.e. cummings, "I thank you God for most this amazing", in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 504.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, "For So the Children Come", in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 616.

Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas", in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 615.