

“Awakening”

An Easter sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“Wake up! Wake up, Jan!” my Mother would exclaim, standing over me on one of hundreds of school mornings. Unlike Frog, who went to the extremes of turning the pages of the calendar to convince his sleepy-head friend, Toad, that it was spring and he was missing out on so much, my Mom never had to resort to such tactics. Instead, she would rail at me: “Mind over body! Mind over body!” Ugh! I felt like Toad must have felt, but like Frog my Mother was convincing, so out of bed I sprang, into my school clothes, scarfing down breakfast, and heading out into the sunshine or the snow or the rain or the sleet of a new morning. Once up, all was well.

Late April is another story altogether. In the words of Mark Belletini:

“those stars hemming the blue veil of morning...”

“that bronze and perfect Passover moon...”

“those laughing daffodils along the lane...”

What words do we use to proclaim our wonder at the glory of earth’s awakening? What words do we use to express our astonishment that we are here at all? We woke up this morning, and that even if we needed some coaxing like Toad and the much younger me, once we’re awake, we can know the beauty, the pleasure, and the delight of walking out into whatever combination of elements Mama Nature has stirred up for the day...or whatever combination of elements humankind conspires with Mama Nature to stir up, for we’re definitely in this together.

With Mark I could say that the marvel of this earth is “an accident in the universe that just happened” or that “it’s one more miracle in a cosmos full of miracles, one overflowing with divinity.” Accident, miracle; legend, report; myth, truth. Why, I ask, do we need to be so hidebound to what we learn from scientific research that we discount the wonder of that which science tells us, full of mystery as it is? Why, I ask, do we tend to mask wonder with the supernatural, given the astonishment of all that we can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch?

In the words of the 14th century Persian poet Hafiz: “If this world was not held in God’s bucket, how could an ocean stand upside down on its head and never lose a drop?” Do we really think Hafiz was speaking literally? Such poetry emerges from wonder. Every question of science emerges from wonder. Every question of religion emerges from wonder. Even the stories of Toad finally rising from his sleepy-headedness and your minister finally getting up to face the day emerge from wonder. I wonder what. I wonder if. It’s curiosity with a strong dose of awe.

Can we ever wake up, really wake up, without being filled with wonder? Can we ever know wonder without awakening? We can turn over and pull up the covers, or we can wake up and wonder what and wonder if and venture out.

Is it scary to wake up and notice and venture out? Consider the young Gautama Buddha, not yet known as the Buddha. He was privileged, protected, sheltered by parents who had the wherewithal to keep their son from the harshness of life. But the young man asked himself: “What’s out there?” He opened the doors that had sheltered him; he went forth and he noticed, and he thought about it for a long long time until he awakened. He deeply and profoundly awakened. Buddha means literally “the awakened one.” It takes courage to notice. It takes courage to wake up. It can be scary, terrifying even.

What exactly was that earlier Mark reporting in his account of the life of Jesus? Was it literal, like a scientific monograph or a fundamentalist rendition of spiritual writings? Was it poetic? Was it mythic? Was it legend? Was it honest?

Mark’s account of the last days and beyond holds a story that he had heard and that people before him before had heard, and back it went all the way to the original teller. We know that even eyewitness accounts aren’t always so. Yet a story as it’s passed on gathers its own kind of truth in the countless tellings and hearings, truth that matters to the lives of the tellers.

Mark’s story of Jesus appearing after he had died and the story of Jesus’ birth as told in the Gospel According to Luke have some common threads, threads that connect with how we understand the Christmas story and the Resurrection story.

For the youngsters here who don’t understand what metaphorically means—it’s like when you tell one story to describe a deeper story. Arnold Lobel tells the story of Frog working so hard to wake up Toad and of Toad finally getting it. It’s April and spring’s promise calls him to listen to Frog and rise from his long slumber and go with his friend out the door into the sunlight. It’s a wonderful story just as it’s told; and it’s a deeper story, because it reminds us that sometimes we’re Frog and sometimes we’re Toad. Sometimes we go into our parents’ rooms to wake them up and urge them to bounce into the day like we do, and sometimes we’re the sleepyheads, and our parents—like my Mom—need to come into our rooms and shake us awake and say something annoying like “Mind over body!” that does the trick whether we like it or not. Waking up makes all the difference, whether it’s any of us or Toad or Buddha or Jesus.

Now, about those common threads. Luke tells us that:

“...in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.” (Luke 2:8-9)

They were “filled with fear.” Of course, if angels appeared to any of us, we would probably be filled with fear. We would be terrified. And we would be in awe. And we would know wonder. This kind of fear and terror and wonder and awe generally don’t “scare us stiff,” so that we can’t move. The shepherds, according to Luke, decided to go to Bethlehem; and they went and found the newborn babe. This kind of fear drew them away from their familiar hillside, far beyond their comfort zone.

Mark tells us in the last few verses of his story that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome were bringing spices to Jesus' tomb, so that they might "anoint him," a common practice of reverence for the dead. But when they were asking who would roll away the stone that covered the entrance to his tomb, they saw that it was already rolled away. They went in and saw a young man sitting there dressed in a white robe, "...and they were amazed." The young man told them not to be "amazed," but to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus would go before them into Galilee and that they would see him there. With that, the women ran out of tomb, "for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid."

"Trembling, astonishment, fear." Not unlike the fear that filled the shepherds on the night of Jesus's birth. When the awakening that is birth and whatever awakening accompanies the longing and the hope against hope that follows the death of one we love, there is also fear, fear that is amazement, fear that is wonder, fear that is astonishment. We cannot wake up without these feelings.

When we come into the light of day for the very first time, what do we do? We scream bloody murder! So much light. So much air. So much that we've never ever experienced. It has to be terrifying. We are shaken right down to the tiny bones of our souls.

Whether Jesus did or didn't rise from the dead isn't the point of Easter. I'm with Mark Belletini on this:

"...today, on Easter,
for all my of my education and life experience,
I cannot tell which word is which.
Accident. Miracle.

...When some argue for heaven,
and others argue for earth,
for the life of me I cannot comprehend the
seriousness of the debate.

...now, on this Easter Day, everything grows
beyond words, beyond earth and heaven, into
a necessary vision of harmony and peace for all
humankind who rise into life that is alive."

On this Easter morning, may we also "rise into life that is alive"—in wonder, in astonishment, in amazement, in silence and in singing that in spite of all the odds, we are here and now alive, as if some stone were rolled away from whatever wombs or tombs we've inhabited and we emerge from the darkness into light and life.

May it be so. Amen.

Sources:

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