

“Coming Out of the Dark”
April 12, 2009
Easter

A number of years ago, a friend told me a story about one of his friends—a guy who loved to hunt mushroom in the spring. He would go out and find the best ones he could, and as many kinds as he could, and then he'd prepare them in every way imaginable. Then he'd invite all his friends to a great mushroom party! Everyone came, and always had a great time.

He hosted this annual event again last spring, but this time, there was a problem. As everyone was partying and enjoying the mushrooms, one of the guests noticed this guy's cat lying on the kitchen floor, writing in pain. They began to panic. Obviously the cat had eaten some of the mushrooms, and was poisoned! They called 911 and the medics came, and most of the guests were carted off to the hospital for treatment for food poisoning.

After all the hubbub had died down, the host of the party and a couple of the guests returned to the house to gather belongings, and someone remembered the cat. They conducted a search to find out where she had crawled to die, and they finally found her. But to their surprise, she was very much alive...in fact, she had just given birth to six baby kittens! Instead of dying, she was bringing new life into being.

That's very much the story of Easter. In our Bible passage, we heard that the women went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus; they went expecting to find death, but they were mystified to find life instead. Peter, too, went to the tomb, found it open, but found no dead body there. It turns out that, although they were looking for and expecting to find death, they instead found life.

Last week we talked about all the ways in which we experience endings in our lives: a loved one dies; our hopes and dreams are shattered; our partner chooses not to be partnered any longer, and we feel as though a door has been slammed in our face. We're disoriented, lost, and we don't know who we are. Words like “You're fired,” or “You have cancer,” can send us reeling. It seems as though our lives are permeated by darkness, loss, sadness, despair—by death-like experiences, literally and figuratively.

And yet, Easter sends us a different message. What we experience as an ending—of love, of hope, of a relationship, of a dream—may not really be a door closing in our face. Instead, it just might be an opening to a new life, a fresh, new beginning. You see, that's the real story that Easter

is telling us: even when all seems lost, when darkness seems to be all there is, that's not the end of the story. An ending is always following by a beginning; light follows darkness; hope follows despair; life follows death.

Seneca was quoted as saying, “**Every new beginning comes from some other's beginning's end.**” Life is a constant ebb and flow of beginnings and endings, of life and death, of Good Fridays and Easters. Death and resurrection are being played out in our lives on a minor scale in our daily lives, and on an ultimate scale when we come to the end of our physical lives on this earth. Easter says that death does not have the final answer; life does! Life is a constant round of deaths and losses, and it's also a series of rebirths and new life.

I may have shared this story with you in the past, but to me, it represents in a microcosm what Easter is all about. A number of years ago, the staff of which I was a part went on a retreat. Now there had been some problems that had prompted the time away, so we had set apart a sufficient amount of time and an abundance of space to allow us to deal with the issues that were bubbling up.

During the time we were away, everything came tumbling out—the anger, the frustration, the accusations—out it all came. Lots of tears were cried, and the pain and hurt spoken aloud, named, for the first time. Frankly, it seemed as if everything were disintegrating before our eyes.

After this all erupted, we had to get away from one another, and we each went our separate ways for a couple of hours. Finally, we came back together at the agreed-upon time, and something pretty powerful happened. Confessions were made; apologies were offered and accepted; forgiveness was granted, and the love and respect we had for one another began to emerge again.

Later that night, after dinner, we sat outside together, watching a magnificent meteor shower, seeing shooting stars light up the night sky. In those moments, we realized that the kind of relationship that we had once had was over, dead, and something new, something deeper and more meaningful, something healthier and more positive, was born that night. We had just been through a death/resurrection experience. The stories of Good Friday and Easter rang true for us in an entirely new way.

That's just one of the ways in which our lives are filled with endings and beginnings. Easter assures us that when one door closes, another is open for us to walk through. When everything seems lost, life can once again be found, every day of our lives.

In an entirely different way, the same thing is true when we come to the end of our physical lives. I'm well aware that the death of a loved one can feel very final and permanent. It can seem as though the person we have loved is lost from us forever, but part of the Easter message is that life goes on, even

though it's in a way that mysterious to us, a way we can't completely understand or comprehend. We can't prove it; that's something we just have to hope and trust is true. And you know, I've often thought that, even if it turns out not to be what we hope or believe, I still think it's OK, because one thing I am sure of is that whatever comes next has God in it. God is the one who is always constant.

Nonetheless, I have a sense that experiences like those the early followers had give us a clue, a hint, that there's something more beyond this life on earth. Other stories of the resurrection insist that the Mary Magdalene and the disciples somehow experienced Jesus alive again, even after they had seen him die on a cross. They knew in their hearts that he was present with them, even though it was in an entirely new and different way.

Many of us who have walked through the valley of grief when a loved one died can relate to the kind of stories the followers of Jesus told, because many of us, too, have experienced in one way or another the presence of the one who has died. For me, in the deaths of my parents, it came in a dream. My Mom died first, and I recall vividly a dream I had some months after her death in which her face appeared, and she just said, "I'm OK." That was it. After my Dad's death, again I experienced his presence in a dream, walking around the corner of the house with his dog, and I knew everything was OK.

When I was in seminary, I took a class on death and dying, and our professor was someone who had been the right-hand person to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the pioneer in the study of death and dying. Kubler-Ross began her work as a scientist and a skeptic, not really believing there was anything at all beyond this life, or seriously doubting that such a thing existed.

However, our instructor shared numerous stories of their experiences—stories they had withheld from one another for a year or two for fear the other would think they had lost their scientific objectivity. Nonetheless, the stories that they heard time after time were finally shared, and both became convinced that there was more once this life was over.

One of those stories was so profound to me that I've never forgotten it. He told about a woman whose husband and the father of their son had recently died. Not long after his death, the mother was on her way up the stairs to tuck her son into bed. As she climbed the stairs, she became very aware of her husband's presence, right there with her. She paused, shook it off, and continued to her son's room. As soon as she walked in, her son said, "Mommy, did you see Daddy? He was just here."

Can we prove that story? No. Can we prove that after every ending comes a new beginning? No, I doubt that we can. But even though we can't prove it, I have no doubts, because God's promise is that life overcomes death. That's what Easter's all about!

Closing:

Easter offers each of us a beautiful new life, here and now and forever. We have the choice—to choose life or choose death. God wants us to choose life.

There's a poem by Suzy Sutton entitled "Reaching Beyond" that puts it well:

**Do you reach beyond to touch the sky,
Or lag behind, afraid to try?
Do you reach beyond to learn anew,
Or hesitate—the same old you?
Do you reach beyond to lead the pack,
Or do you waste time looking back?
Do you reach beyond and claim your space,
Here and now, this time, this place?
Do you reach beyond and try to soar,
Or sadly, play it safe once more?**

Easter is God's promise, a promise for a new reality, a new sense of ourselves, for new awareness, a new mode of being, a deepened sense of purpose. Easter is the spiritual doorway to a whole different way of seeing and understanding the world; it's a whole new way to glimpse life here and life forever.

Have a very Happy Easter, and go in peace.

Amen.

