

## “Lifelines.” Easter, 4 April 2010

When I read the Easter story, there’s almost always a remembrance that comes to mind from my growing up days in Madison, Indiana. From my earliest years and my first experience with death when my grandmother, who lived across the street from us, died, our family had a ritual they followed. Once the funeral was complete and the burial done, and everyone had gone home, my folks would always get in the car and drive back to the cemetery. I never asked, and they never said why, but I wonder if, in some ways, they were doing what they believed to be the proper thing in saying good-bye to this dear one. And maybe, just maybe, they were going to assure themselves that it was real.

I think that’s probably what the women who were part of Jesus’ closest circle of friends were doing, too. They weren’t able to act right after his death and burial, because it was the Sabbath, and that was not allowed. However, as soon as they could do so, they made their way to where the body of Jesus had been placed, preparing to give it a proper burial.

I’m sure they made their way to the tomb quite somberly, probably quietly, each of them replaying in their minds the times they had spent with Jesus, trying to erase the picture of the horrifying death he had suffered. They went there ready to face the reality of death in the most graphic of forms.

However, when they got there, they were in for a big surprise. According to every rendition of the story, they couldn’t find the body of Jesus, and in one way or another, they’re told that Jesus has risen! The part of the story that really caught my attention this time was the question that the women were asked, “Why are you looking for the Living One in the cemetery?” They went, expecting to encounter death, but they found something else instead. They discovered that the darkness, the hopelessness, the pain of death had somehow been transformed into something far different.

The truth is that, if you read the Bible passage for today, we can’t say for sure exactly

what the women found when they got to the tomb. There’s no way for us to know or prove precisely what was there, but I’ll tell you what...whatever happened, changed everything. Moments before, they had been filled with a deep, all-encompassing grief, but now it was different. Something happened that changed everything! Something significant, something important, something life-changing had occurred! Instead of death, they found life; they found hope!

This is the Easter event; it’s what it’s all about. It’s the hinge pin of our faith, and there’s one thing that’s absolutely clear. Whatever happened on that day totally changed the course of history. It changed the lives of the women who went to the tomb; it changed the other disciples, and it’s still at work today, because it’s changing you and me even at this very moment.

The message of Easter really comes to us in multiple layers, but a big part of it is that we have to the gift of life—life in the here and now, and life when our days on this earth are over. Easter tells us that, whatever we experience, God is with us and assures us that everything is OK.

I’ve mentioned before a book by Barbara Bradley Hagerty, entitled *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality*. She covers a lot of territory in the book, and eventually comes to the topic of Near Death Experiences. In 2006, she attended a conference of the International Association of Near Death Studies, and heard story after story of peoples’ experiences with verifiable deaths. This was of special interest to her because of an experience her own grandmother had gone through before anyone ever talked about such things.

Hagerty said the occurrence probably happened to her grandmother at the age of 41 sometime in 1939, when her daughter, Hagerty’s mother, then 18, was away at a “finishing school.” She got a call that her mom had fallen gravely ill. By the time Hagerty’s mother arrived home, her mother was slipping in and out of consciousness, and following her upbringing, she was attended by two Christian

Science practitioners and a medically trained Christian Science nurse.

They kept a fierce prayer vigil for three days, but on Saturday morning, Granny “slipped out of this world and moved through a brief space of darkness,” as she would later write. According to those at her bedside, “her eyes did not close, but a film closed over them, and all activities ceased.”

Granny wrote, “I had passed the portal called death. There was no fear and no anxiety.” She reported that she walked for a while, aware that she had left the world and those dear to her behind, and as she walked, a light began breaking through. She said that she was suddenly surrounded by a light more brilliant than anything she had ever seen before, and then a voice told her that she needed to go back, so she obeyed.

According to the others in the room, an hour had passed, and those present had continued their prayerful vigil. Then, to their astonishment, she suddenly opened her eyes wide and began to speak. Later, she wrote these reflections: “I heard my own voice talking, and this is what was said as they took it down...‘It is wonderful. It is beautiful.’ ‘The darkness is all gone; there just isn’t any more darkness at all.’ ‘There is no death. You don’t have to die.’” Then turning to those friends in the room, she said, “You never have to be afraid again.”

Granny recovered from her illness and resumed her life, continuing to be the efficient, independent woman she had been. However, it became clear that her near-death experience shifted her view of life. Hagerty writes that it was “as if she switched from a magnifying glass to a telescope.” After that, she became well known for the healings she brought about. Hagerty asked her mother if she understood why that had been possible, and her mother responded, “Yes, she said to me, ‘Never be afraid.’ She said the whole experience taught her that there is nothing to fear, and that everything is love. That love was the light. There was no death and you need never be afraid.”

I don’t know what you make of stories like that one, and the truth is none of us knows

what comes after life on this earth is finished. However, I take great comfort in hearing of those stories of God’s presence and God’s love, constant with us both in this life and the next. For me, part of the Easter message to be the assurance that we need not fear death; there is the hope that life, albeit a form of life that we can’t know or describe, awaits us on the other side.

I found it interesting to read something that Alan Alda wrote about life and death. He talked about the permanency of death, saying “**Death is a pretty big change.**” Ever since his beloved cocker spaniel died when he was 8, and his dad thought it would be comforting for him to have the dog stuffed, he began to understand that death is not something we can fix.

After that, he said, every change he experienced was difficult for him, and that’s tough for an actor who has to move from job to job every few weeks. He went on to say that every few years, the kind of part you were once right for is suddenly right only for the generation behind you. Alda said that every uncertainty frightened him—opening nights, cocktail parties, even ringing telephones filled him with apprehension. In other words, he was afraid to live his life.

Then two years ago, things changed. He was shooting a television show on top of a mountain in Chile, and came down the mountain in an ambulance. He finally arrived at a hospital in a small town nearby, where a surgeon was waiting. After an examination, the doctor concluded that some of his intestine was blocked and had lost its blood supply. Basically, it had died, and unless it was removed, he would die along with it. The doctor said that they could fly him to Santiago, where the hospitals were larger and well-equipped, but the airport was fogged in, and if they waited for the fog to clear, it might be too late. He might be dead.

Alda said that maybe it was the doctor’s quiet confidence; maybe it was the simple fact that he had no time to dawdle. For whatever reason, an odd sense of calm settled over him, and he said to the doctor, “Let’s do it here.” Even as he was saying the words, it occurred to him that he might not wake up from the

operation, so he asked the friend who was with him to pass on a few words to his wife and children and grandchildren in case he didn't make it.

The friend seemed uneasy taking the notes, but Alan Alda said that something strange happened as he was telling the friend what to say to his family. He wrote, "I wasn't uneasy. I wasn't afraid. Death might have been only an hour or two away, but for now, getting this message out was all I had on my mind."

Was this his own experience of a changed view of life—from a magnifying glass to a microscope—a whole different way to view how to live life here and now? Afterwards, he said he began to realize that change seems easier now. He said that he doesn't get nervous talking to strangers, or picking up the phone, or facing opening nights. He said, "Once the Big Change didn't scare me anymore, I guess the smaller ones fell in line."

You see, I think Alda discovered part of the secret of Easter—that we need not fear living life right this very moment. Every moment of every day is at our fingertips—ready to be explored, fully experienced, lived to the fullest. Easter is about being fully alive right now!

The good news of Easter is that death is not the final answer. Darkness, confusion, despair, hopelessness do not have the final word. Easter tells us that those dark moments in our own lives are not the end. This story reminds us that life comes out of the darkness of a womb; it's about a new form of life that comes out of the darkness of a tomb. It's like the brightness of spring that follows the dead of winter. In fact, Martin Luther said, "Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf of springtime." Easter is about the world coming alive in every bud on the flower and leaf on the tree. It's new life breaking out all around us, symbolizing the possibility for new life breaking out within us.

Easter is all about new life in all its various dimensions; it's about the hope and possibility that opens before us every single day. Yesterday's mistakes and confusion are gone, and today brings the opportunity for a new beginning. Easter is about celebrating the beauty that each and every moment of every

day offers us, and it's about taking it all in, feasting on it.

Are we doing that? Are we experiencing all of life that God has in store for us? Are we filled with wonder and gratitude for each and every day? Are we tasting all that is possible? Are we experiencing all of life? Have we smelled all the flowers and read all the books? Have we flown all the kites we can find, and laughed at all the jokes? Have we waded in the water and felt ocean spray on our faces? Have we climbed the highest mountain and taken in God's beauty?

Part of what Easter has to say that is all of life is at our fingertips, if we are just willing to open our minds and hearts and spirits to experience it. That's the message of Easter. Death is not the end; life awaits us—in the here and now and in the hereafter. That's reason to celebrate!

There's a poem entitled "Reaching Beyond," by Suzy Sutton that goes in part like this:

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 try to soar,  
Or sadly, play it safe once more?

Easter is all about reaching beyond. It's touching the sky and learning to fly; it's living in this day and beyond; it's starting new and fresh. Easter is life itself!

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we can all live the Easter promise of new life.

Have a wonderful day, and go in peace. Amen.