

A LIFE OF AWAKENINGS

A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. John H. Nichols to the First Parish
in Wayland on April 20, 2014

I was leading a hike in the Southern range of Vermont's Green Mountains, and one night we camped at the end of Stratton Pond. I awoke to the hush of a new morning with the glow of early sunlight backlighting Stratton Mountain. Mist was rising off the pond, and the bird songs came across more clearly because of the surrounding quiet.

Henry Thoreau once spoke about "an infinite expectation of the dawn which does not forsake us even in our soundest sleep." He was talking about the optimism that can survive all our dark nights of the soul and believe that somewhere down the line, no matter what, new light will be breaking into our lives. "An infinite expectation of the dawn that never leaves us

The dawn can work wonders on my psyche and perhaps on yours? Have you ever taken a problem home and worried it all night. Somehow the longer you dwell on it the worse it seems. You become irritated, annoyed, angry or fearful until there is nothing left to do but go to sleep. Then the first light of the new day begins to dispel the darkness in more ways than one.

If the coming of the dawn does not solve the problem it usually brings a new willingness to deal with it or at the very least to live with it differently. I don't think it is just the hours of sleep that improves our outlook. I think every dawn reminds us that life regularly turns a page and gives us another chance to do or see things differently.

You may have noticed that many Unitarian Universalist hymns celebrate the dawn. "Morning has Broken," "The Morning Hangs a Signal" "Morning so Fair to See," "We Sing of Golden Mornings". There are many more. Unitarian poet Samuel Longfellow wrote a hymn to the promise of dawn in these words, "O life that maketh all things new." Unitarian Universalism is a celebration of the chance each morning brings to make something of the world better. We are a people of the dawn, of the life that makes all things new, which is one reason why Easter continues to be an important celebration for us.

The Easter story began at dawn. Jesus' body had been laid in a tomb two days earlier. Because the Sabbath intervened, they couldn't properly prepare his body for burial until the morning of the second day. That day some disciples went to his tomb to perform this last act of love and loyalty. The stone covering had been rolled away. The tomb was open, and it was empty. They were terrified because they believed the body of their friend and leader had been stolen. Then

two men step out of the darkness, and one asks, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

I want to focus for a minute on “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Biblical speech is not historical speech or scientific speech. It is metaphorical speech. In it, the disciples share much more than a specific moment that may or may not have happened. They write about how they felt two mornings after Jesus died.

They had dwelled in the land of the dead – on the terror of the Crucifixion, on its unjustness, on its sadness, on their own personal loss. Then suddenly – at dawn two days later – they began to realize that their sense of Jesus presence in their lives was still very real. They realized they had been looking for him in the wrong place. They had been thinking of him as among the dead. They were worried about bodies and perhaps graves. And now it was time to explore the world of the living for signs of hope.

Looking for the living among the dead. Have you ever had an instance in which someone awakened you to a poem or passage or a song that you had read but completely dismissed from your life. As many times as you read it or sang it or heard it before, the piece sounded a dull note. As far as you were concerned that piece dwelled in the land of the dead. It did not live for you. It had no meaning. There was no point going back to it. Then someone said, “Look at it this way.” Or “Listen to it this way.” Or, “I hear it this way.” And suddenly what had been dead for you came alive for you. These awakenings happen somewhere all the time.

Or perhaps you had judged a person badly. You thought he was “dull” “boring” “too difficult” “too argumentative” “too liberal” “too conservative” or any one of a number of one-dimensional labels that we put on people. But then something happened that caused you to see this person in an entirely new light. You saw a whole persona, a complex person with loves and dreams, passions and commitments not unlike your own. Someone who had been dead for you became a living person that you wanted to include in your life. These awakenings happen somewhere all the time.

Perhaps you were part of a working group that had thought and talked itself into a corner differing over how to attempt a project. There seemed to be no way out. Nothing worked. No desirable outcomes appeared possible. All light had been shut out, and the group was “dead in the water.” Then someone –maybe someone who hadn’t had much credibility with the group– came up with an idea. At first most people dismissed it, because this person’s ideas are customarily dismissed. But, gradually it dawned on everyone that this new idea was not only a way out, but very possibly a way to succeed. The group had been looking for something living in the midst of a death – a dullness, an apathy -- it had practically willed upon itself,

when something that may not have been miraculous but certainly was unexpected, restored life and meaning and purpose. These awakenings happen somewhere all the time.

Jesus disciples were such a group. They were illiterate fishermen. They were not particularly insightful or courageous.. They had been cowards in the face of Roman power. After he died they probably spent much of their time trading blame over what happened, and it seems clear they hadn't liked each other very much to begin with. As a movement they were dead.

And then something happened. Even though thousands of Easter sermons will be focused on what they will call the fact of "resurrection" what really occurred with his body is not as important as the fact that this improbable foundation for a movement, a disparate, feuding band of disciples, found a new life, survived against all odds, and witnessed to the possibility of new awakenings. They tried to explain this with the metaphor of resurrection.

In order to understand something else about awakenings I want to take the same story from a different angle. John tells us that after Mary found the tomb to be empty she ran and told the disciples. John goes to some length to tell us that the men practically raced each other to the mouth of the open tomb. The first one to reach the open door stopped and did not go in. Then Peter came along, and he did go in and verified that the tomb was empty. Then the story tells us that the disciples went back to their homes.

Once they got home, perhaps they were planned a search party to fan out and try to find the body. Perhaps they worked out some way to alert all of the other disciples. Perhaps they thought they knew who had stolen the body, and they were trying to figure out how to get it back. The picture that "you get of these male disciples is that they race each other to the tomb. Then they run home and they argue a lot amongst themselves. They are certain they ought to be doing something, but they cannot stop doing long enough to know what to do.

But the story goes on to tell us that Mary stayed within the tomb. She was weeping. She was grieving for Jesus, and as she wept she realized that a man was standing beside her. She did not recognize him. He asked her why she was weeping. Believing him to be the gardener who tended the area around the tomb, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him." The man then said her name, and she realized it was Jesus.

Anyone who worries too much about whether this story actually happened, and what does that mean, is looking for the living among the dead. The story is a metaphor, not a history. I think what the gospels are telling us is that it was not until the disciples – and mostly the women who were disciples – allowed themselves to grieve that they began to understand that new awakenings were possible and were happening.

I am not a therapist, but my guess is that grieving is the turning point in many therapies. Grieving opportunities that will never come again, grieving the loss of your old self, grieving the person you have become – these things have to happen before a corner can be turned and a new awakening is possible. People who have been helped by twelve step groups have said that one has to hit bottom, before a new awakening can happen without the old destructive behavior.

As long as we don't grieve we are trying to solve a problem in old ways that lack patience or energy or stamina. When we acknowledge the depths of our sadness, confusion and despair sometimes the stones roll away and allow light and new energy to come through. Perhaps that's why the Good Friday service always ends in a sanctuary that is completely dark. And the Easter celebration begins with the dawn. Awakenings like this happen somewhere all the time.

Whenever I do something like this with a passage, I know there are some folks listening to me who are thinking, "He's really stretching a point here," or this must be some weird Unitarian Universalist spin on a traditional Christian thought. I know what the resurrection is, because I learned all about it as a child." I am always fascinated when people insist that I embrace as the only way to understand something a definition of God or Jesus that they themselves rejected long ago.

So let me paraphrase the late Reverend Peter Gomes, who was the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and preacher to Harvard University. In summarizing one of his Easter sermons, Peter said, "Easter is not just about Jesus; it is about you. He has already claimed his new life; now is your chance to claim yours." I would add this is a time when we recognize that no matter how caught or stuck or trapped we may feel there are infinite dawns and possibilities ahead of us. We have seen it happen to others. We have seen it happen around us. The book of new chances is never closed to us.

"Easter is not just about death: it is about life." It is about "real life before death, right now. You do not have to die, to live." I would add nothing more dishonors the life and memory of the man than the traditional belief that the only meaning of Easter is "Jesus punched our ticket for us, and now we get to live forever."

"Easter is not just about the past, way back then and long ago; it is all about the future. Literally I say to you, your best days are ahead of you. 'Old things are passed away; behold all things are become new.'"

In John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." What does that mean? Does it mean that Jesus believes he has overcome the bonds of mortality and will ascend to heaven to sit on the

right hand of God? Many would think so. But Peter Gomes had a different interpretation of which Jesus meant, and it is this.

“I am not nor will I ever again be intimidated or inhibited or defined by the tribulations of the world. I will not be defined by my problems, I will not be defined by my neuroses, I will refuse to be victimized or to be described as a victim or to be classed among victims. My vision will not be limited by the headlines; I will both live and die by a standard that defies the standards of the world.

“Where the world tells me to hate, I will love, cost what it may; where the world tells me to stand pat I will move on, to wherever I am to go; where the world tells me to be prudent, fearful and cautious, I will be brave and foolish and courageous, no matter what. Where the world tells me that my destiny is shaped and determined by the past,...” (I will claim a future that is free for me to act as Life and my conscience direct.)