

Awakenings
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Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody! —Rumi

Ancient Witness: Mark 16:1-8

I want to start this morning with a favorite Easter story. You might have heard it from me, but it's just so fitting. It's from a favorite person of mine, Anthony de Mello, who was a Jesuit priest, was born and lived in India, was a mystic who drew upon other religious traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism. He died in 1987 and about decade later, Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict, declared his views incompatible with the Catholic faith and dangerous. This made me like him even more.

This gentleman who knocks on his son's door, "Jaime, he says, wake up!" Jaime answers, "I don't want to get up, Papa." The father shouts, "Get up, you have to go to school." Jaime says, "I don't want to go to school." "Why not?" asks the father. "Three reasons," says Jaime. "First, because it's so dull; second, the kids tease me; and third, I hate school." And the father says, "Well, I am going to give you three reasons why you must go to school. First, because it is your duty; second, because you are forty-five years old; and third, because you are the headmaster." Wake up, wake up! You've grown up. You're too big to be asleep. Wake up! Stop playing with your toys. (Anthony de Mello, Awareness)

The reality of Easter, my friends, is not about resuscitated bodies walking around; it is about resuscitated spirits. It is about the quality of the lives we are living; it is about being filled with happiness, serenity, freedom and compassion. It's about waking up. As de Mello wrote,

Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, and they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence. (de Mello)

Instead of fully grasping the beauty of human existence we walk around in a daze. We are in a stupor. We are preoccupied; our attention is elsewhere. It is like we are drugged, numbed to either pleasure or pain. The lights are on, but nobody's home.

Furthermore, we resent being told this. It sounds like bad news to us, so we often kill the messengers. Sometimes we even crucify them. But this truth shouldn't shock and dismay us too much. In fact, being asleep is normal, really. It is typically human. It shouldn't surprise and upset us. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk and activist once wrote:

Our society makes it difficult for us to be awake. There are so many distractions. We know that 40,000 children in the Third World die of hunger every day, but we keep forgetting.

We keep forgetting. It is very difficult for us to stay awake. It reminds me of T. S. Eliot's line, "Human beings cannot bear too much reality." So we go back to bed and pull the covers over our head. Living in a dream world is easier to take.

Did you know that infants have this natural defense mechanism? When things get really chaotic—let's say there is a really loud noise—instead of getting really upset and agitated their response is just the opposite. They fall asleep. It is really amazing to see, but it is very natural. Between our world and our human nature, it is just hard to stay awake. There's no need to get angry at anyone about it; that's just the way it is.

I read an interesting book by Tara Brach, who says from her Buddhist perspective that many of us are lost in a "trance of unworthiness." When we are in this trance we forget our own goodness. She writes:

Especially when things seem to be falling apart—we lose a job, suffer a serious injury, become estranged from a loved one—our lives can become painfully bound by the experience that something is wrong with us. We buy into the belief that we are fundamentally flawed, bad and undeserving of love. (p. 148, Radical Acceptance)

When we are in this trance we mistakenly think that our lives are painful or out of control because it is our fault. We think that if we had only done better, if we were somehow different, things would have gone right.

And this feeling that we are unworthy puts us to sleep; it hypnotizes us. And Brach points out that we unconsciously do all kinds of things when we are under its spell: We become our own worse critic and blame ourselves for everything. We keep ourselves busy and occupied. We hold back, play it safe and avoid risking failure or trying something new. We live in the future and avoid the present. We focus on other people's faults. We blame others, and all these so-called strategies only temporarily relieve us from the weight of failure. They only distract us from the pain but do not help us see our own basic goodness. Instead, we often only go deeper and deeper into this trance of unworthiness.

On the other hand, these times when things seem to be falling apart can also help shock us out of our trance and wake us from our sleep. As Emerson said, "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." Sometimes we need the dark night of the soul to lead us to the dawn of Easter. In the *Tao te Ching* Lao Tzu said, "If you want to become full, let yourself be empty; if you want to be reborn, let yourself die." Jesus said, "whoever loses one's life will find it."

Brach, from a Buddhist perspective, writes that the alternative to this trance of unworthiness is the *path of radical acceptance*. Instead of resisting, one is able to let go. Instead of continually trying to filter out the bad, one embraces the whole self, the whole world, without judgment or regret. She tells this great story:

One day a young Catholic priest was making his rounds at a community hospital and he came upon this woman, emaciated and with the yellow tinge of an afflicted liver. He sat down next to her bed and asked how she was doing. "I'm lost," she replied. "I've ruined my life and every life around me. There is no hope for me. I'm going to hell."

The priest sat in silence a few moments. The he noticed a framed picture of a pretty girl on the dresser. "Who is that?" he asked. The woman brightened a little. "She's my daughter, the one beautiful thing in my life."

"And would you help her if she was in trouble or made a mistake? Would you forgive her? Would you still love her?"

"Of course I would!" cried the woman. "I would do anything for her! She will always be precious and beautiful to me. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because I want you to know," said the priest, "that there is a picture of you on God's dresser."

In his message of unconditional forgiveness and love, the priest was giving back to this woman her goodness and innocence. From a Buddhist perspective, when we can regard our mistakes and transgressions with the eyes of compassion, we release the ignorance that keeps us bound in hating and blaming ourselves. We see that our imperfections don't taint our basic goodness.

This is what the spiritual life is about—waking up to a “basic goodness” that is within us and that is within the whole world, which is a continual process, not just a one-time thing. This is what it means to be reborn, to be raised up, to be resurrected, to be set free—again, again and again.

There's a story about four year old Zackary who was in church with his mother. During the sermon he heard the preacher talk about “Jesus rising from the dead.” He leaned over and whispered to his mother, “What does that mean?” She whispered that he was talking about how Jesus died and was buried, he rose from the grave and was alive. Zachary's eyes got big, and he said incredulously in a very loud voice for all to hear, “Jesus was a zombie!”

Now, I have to admit that I really like zombie movies like the new series, “The Walking Dead,” which is about the zombie apocalypse. It's a guilty pleasure of mine. But it's also a great metaphor for human life, I think. Most of the time we're walking around in zombie state, in a trance, unaware. It's the default setting. And the spiritual life is about waking up. And so Jesus, actually, is as far from a zombie as you can get. He, and the other great spiritual teachers, were truly alive among a world of the walking dead.

In 1973, British neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote a book titled, *Awakenings*, which was made into a movie several years ago (1991). It is a true story about Dr. Malcolm Sayer, played by Robin Williams, who was working in a rehabilitation hospital in the Bronx, New York. The patients had such advanced cases of Parkinson's disease that they were frozen, like statues. They couldn't move, talk or communicate. Their uncooperative bodies had become prisons. Everyone had given up on these patients, but Dr. Sayer was convinced that there was life within them, and he never gave up even though some of the patients had been in this condition for 40 or 50 years.

One of Sayer's patients, Leonard Lowe, was chosen as a test patient for a new drug, L-Dopa. There's this amazing scene where Leonard, played by Robert DeNiro, is found walking around at night in the dark. And he says, “Everyone's asleep—I'm not asleep!” Leonard, indeed, had awakened after years of being immobilized and “asleep.” Soon all the patients were awakened to new life by the miracle drug. There were tears of elation and jubilation all around. When the hospital administration balked at the funding, the staff even contributed their paychecks for the new drug.

The euphoria is short-lived, however, when first Leonard, and then the others, begin to suffer a slow slide back into their frozen, catatonic state. Yet the staff are transformed; they no longer perceive the patients as objects, but as people. And they remember who they were as people—what their interests were and what kind of music each one liked.

The initial effect of this drug, L-Dopa, is like the way the presence of The Sacred can have upon us. We find ourselves imprisoned, asleep, in a trance. We have eyes and fail to see. We have ears and fail to hear. (Mark 8:17-18) And then, perhaps suddenly, we are alive; we are awakened! Our eyes are opened, and we have recognition. There are tears of joy, a newfound freedom and a deep sense of peace. We realize, “I’m not asleep!” Even though we may slip back into our trance, we are no longer the same, for we have tasted being alive. So we might hear the Easter story from time to time, but that is not the same thing as *experiencing* Easter. And this is the goal.

Other religions traditions have their own language to describe this reality, too.

It is said that after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of his presence. The man stopped and asked, “My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?”

“No,” said the Buddha.

“Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?”

Again the Buddha answered, “No.”

“Are you a man?”

“No.”

“Well, my friend, what then are you?”

The Buddha replied, “I am awake.”

I believe that we can certainly say that Jesus, too, was “awake.” Jesus, of course, was a lot of things. Marcus Borg points out that Jesus was a healer; he was a wisdom teacher; he was a social prophet for justice and nonviolence, and he was the initiator of a movement. But first and foremost, Jesus was a Jewish mystic. He was a “spirit person.” Mystics simply are people who have an awareness of experiencing the Sacred Presence. The mystic says this: “Everybody already has what they need to be incredibly happy and satisfied! The only thing they need to do is to wake up and see it.” It is not the kind of peace and happiness that the world or society offers—the happiness of achievement and acquisition. It is the peace of simply accepting and being accepted. Radical acceptance is to accept the life we are living—every part of it—and the basic goodness at the core of each moment. This peace is not world-denying; it radically *embraces* the world.

So Jesus had this profound awareness of God, and it was this awareness that guided these other aspects and everything that he did. He felt radical acceptance. And it was this awareness led him to challenge injustice, to live with compassion toward others, to be filled with an inner calm and happiness.

As a spirit person, Jesus’ life had a “raised up” quality. He was awake. I like to say, Jesus was raised up long *before* Easter! He was resurrected *before* he died! And what Jesus was about was this: He said that you, too, can be awakened. You, too, can be raised up, resurrected. The reign of God is right under your nose, he said, and you can live in it. You, too, can know happiness, peace and freedom. Your picture is on God’s dresser.

This view of resurrection is how the early Christians experienced it—not as an historical event. Resurrection is in the here and now. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “God, out of great love... *made us alive* together with Christ... and *raised us up* with him.” Resurrection is something that happens to you in *this* life, not at the end of it. It brings with it a qualitative change, a new way of being.

Carl Rogers once said, “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.” When we become aware of this presence that regards us with love and compassion, our lives transform. When we can see the basic goodness in ourselves, we can also see this goodness in others. The Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, described a moment of his own awakening:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depth of their hearts where neither sin nor knowledge could reach, the core of reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the divine. If only they could see themselves as they really are, if only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more need for war, for hatred, for greed, for cruelty. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.

This is what it means to be awakened, to be raised up, to experience Easter. It is to see the secret beauty in ourselves and others. It is to see there is no need for war, hatred, greed or cruelty. It is to see that the divine is shining through the world all the time.

“This,” said Merton “is not just a nice story or a fable. This is true.”

Happy Easter!

Invitation to Worship (from “They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection,” by Julia Esquivel):

Be with us on this vigil
and you’ll know what it means to dream!

**You’ll know then, how wonderful it is
to live threatened with Resurrection!**

To dream, awake
to watch, asleep
to live, dying

**and to know ourselves already
Risen!**

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)