

“Dry Bones And Caterpillar Soup”  
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Easter Sunday  
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It is Easter Sunday. It is a time when much of the western world thinks about the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his death at the hands of the government and his resurrection after three days in the tomb.

Whether or not you believe the story of Jesus, at this time of the year it is appropriate for us to be considering things like death and resurrection. Springtime is when the earth puts forth new shoots of green, trees begin to bud. The forsythias were out in full strength this week, and I do believe my lilac bush is going to blossom this year for the first time.

Each year this rebirth appears as a welcome reminder that there is a cycle of life that affects us all and that there is potential for rebirth even after what very surely looks like death.

It may seem odd to read on Easter from the Hebrew Prophet of Ezekiel, but this is one of the many times in the ancient texts, both Hebrew and Christian, where there is talk about resurrection after death.

Ezekiel spoke about going to a place the middle of the Valley he described and it was full of bones. In other parts of the scripture this is called *sheol*, or the land of the dead or where the dead are buried and it is said to be full of the bones of the dead. Ezekiel describes them as dry, hollow, utterly without life--no breath, no flesh, no anything that would indicate life or hope. And yet Ezekiel goes there and is told by the Lord to prophecy to the bones. “Go ahead and speak to these dead things and tell them about the glory of God and the power of the Lord and see what happens.”

And so Ezekiel does this and he sees that the words he speaks brings these rattling bones together to take shape and then they are connected with sinew and muscle and eventually skin and then the Lord, the Hebrew Lord, tells Ezekiel to breathe into the bones, to prophecy to the breath of

the four winds to enter those bones in those bodies and bring them back to life.

And God tells Ezekiel, God says, "...mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel; they say our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely. Therefore prophecy and say to them 'I am going to open your graves and bring you up. Oh my people I will bring you back to the land of Israel and you shall know that I am the Lord.'"

And so it is this story that comes to mind on Easter weekend when we contemplate the story of Jesus of Nazareth who was put to death by the government on Friday just before the Jewish Sabbath, placed in a borrowed grave, and locked away under guard. All of his people--his disciples, his followers, his believers, his friend--they all thought him to be dead and gone; as gone and hopeless and devoid of life as those bones in the valley described by Ezekiel and his people were scattered around Jerusalem hiding. Like Peter who denied Jesus three times, all of the disciples backed away, tried to put distance between the man had been killed and themselves, probably out of fear and self-preservation. Jesus was a dangerous man to be near.

And so beyond hope, deep in their grief, Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the grave to anoint Jesus's body so that he could be laid to rest appropriately in accordance with Jewish tradition. Because Jesus had died on the Eve of the Sabbath, there had not been time to properly prepare his body for burial and at that time, Orthodox Judaism required that burials happened before the Sabbath, and so the burial took precedent over the preparation. So they showed up Sunday morning hoping that they'd find a way to get into the tomb and prepare Jesus's body, now dead 3 days, and anoint it and wrap it appropriately and say prayers over it so that his death would be honored as it should be.

What they found, of course, was an empty tomb and, depending on which version of the gospel you read, there was either an Angel of the Lord sitting outside the tomb or there were one or two men dressed in glowing white inside the tomb and all of them said the most remarkable thing to the women. The first thing they said was "Don't be afraid, don't be frightened,"

and then they explained that Jesus was gone; he was risen and had gone ahead of them and they would see him again shortly.

It is over-simplification, to perverse and perhaps obscene degrees, that my brain equates this storyline with every great story of struggle I have ever read. The hero fights bravely, seems to lose, and yet somehow a miracle happens and the hero comes to the rescue and survives and there's some Disney-esque version of "they all live happily ever after."

But I'd like to talk this morning about what happens between the death and the resurrection. I want to look at that time when the bones are lying dry and empty and abandoned before Ezekiel comes and speaks to them of God's power and they're brought back to life. I want to talk about the time between when the Caterpillar curls up into its chrysalis and when it emerges as a butterfly some weeks later.

That time spent in the land of the dead is not something we talk about a lot. In the Easter story we tend to focus on the death and then the resurrection but we never talk a lot about what happened in those three days between.

What happens while Jesus is dead? The scriptures only say then he goes to the land of the dead. Ezekiel doesn't say really what has happened to those bones other than they've been left to dry, to ossify, to become lifeless, but we never talk about the process to go from A to B. We never talk about the time the caterpillar spends reduced to its molecular elements and in a living perhaps but not visibly so soup of sorts before it reassembles itself and emerges as a butterfly. I wonder: does the caterpillar know that it's soup? Does the caterpillar know that there's something coming that is different than their thus-far known existence?

I have a view of human nature that is perhaps a little jaded. Newton said that an object at rest tends to stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force. And an object in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. I think human nature is similar. So if life is good, we don't have a lot of motivation to change. But when we become uncomfortable, our discomfort is that outside force, we are inclined to change. We get to a place where it's no longer sustainable to do what we're doing, whether that's move or sit, and so we have to change what we're doing.

Personal transformation can be every bit as messy and frightening and seemingly disorganized as the process by which the Caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The process of personal rebirth involves the examination and perhaps reorganization of a lot of muscle: spiritual muscles, intellectual muscles, muscles of the heart--the heart meaning that that part of us which *loves*, not necessarily the fist-sized muscle in our chest.

I invite you to think about some time in your life where you have undergone some kind of deep personal transformation: perhaps some moment when you reached an epiphany, found some real truth that you had not previously understood. Perhaps it was a time when you realized that your heroes had feet of clay, or that people you trusted had let you down. Perhaps it was a time when you realized that you have a lot more value than those around you chose to recognize.

Those moments of transformation can be disorienting and frightening, moments when we feel like we're in the soup and we don't know what shape is going to come out on the other end of this thing.

The disciples were very much in the soup that weekend: they were frightened, unmoored, feeling abandoned. They were forced to re-evaluate what they thought they knew and what they thought they understood. They had to consider again the things that their hero had told them. What did Jesus mean when he said the temple would be torn down and restored in three days?

How were they supposed to go on? I can only imagine that they were thinking, "he told us a bunch of things and we thought we understood and now we don't understand, and they felt like instructions but we don't know what to do because we don't understand what he told us." That had to be a terrible, frightening time.

And so when the women returned to the good news that Jesus had risen, I can only imagine that this didn't actually help their anxiety. They were already upset and confused and sad and angry, and now these women have come back and essentially been told that water runs uphill and they should be pleased about that, that Jesus had come back from the dead and everything was going to be great. And so they spent some time in the soup.

Personal transformation is not always (perhaps not even often) a consensual thing, a willing thing, a thing embraced with joy and excitement.

Going back to Newton, I tend to think that personal transformation happens only when all other options have been tried and failed and that outside force which is acting upon the person becomes overwhelming and forces us to move in a new direction. When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed "Father, if there's any way that we can get through this without me having to do this thing that's what I'd prefer." He was not really excited about being a martyr; it seemed like a terrible plan, and I can't say that I blame him.

I have said before that every kind of growth I've ever done has happened because I tried all those other options and they failed, and what was left was the hard thing and so that's what I had to do. So Jesus had wandered all around Judea preaching and teaching and preaching and teaching and explaining and witnessing and modeling forgiveness and compassion and all of those things didn't work, and so he was stuck with the hard thing and he didn't want to do it, and I don't blame him.

So the disciples had to do the hard thing, which frankly was grow up and go out on their own and do the things that they've been trained to do, and the caterpillar has to do the hard thing which is break down and be still and rearrange and emerge as something new.

So on this Easter Sunday morning, I want you to think about that message of hope that comes when the bones take breath, when the chrysalis opens and something beautiful emerges, and when the women find the tomb empty and are told that their Lord has risen. This kind of hope, this kind of learning, this kind of rearranging of what we know, is revolutionary.

People who are downtrodden and without hope do not make progress; they do not create justice; they do not provide love. The hope that comes with the message that he is risen, that the bones are alive, that the chrysalis is opening, that message of hope is revolutionary to the hopeless.

I want us to go forward this week and be revolutionaries. I want you to take in your heart the understanding that everything is not always what it appears, that things might not actually be dead, but be capable of transformation, capable of new life, and even when we feel like we can't learn anything new, we can't change, we can't do anything, that there lies within us molecular, genetic material that makes possible a kind of rebirth beyond our imagination.

Whether you believe in the story of Jesus or whether you believe in the story of the Hebrew Prophet Ezekiel or whether you believe in the science of the butterfly, know that that is the state of the human condition, and that you have the capacity for transformation, and just because you've done it once doesn't mean you can't do it again. I want you to consider: consider the soup, consider letting go of what you know, what you think you know, be willing to be wrong, be willing to completely reconsider things and emerge as something beautiful and complex and revolutionary.

It is Easter Sunday. May you go forth from this day reborn in whatever way feeds your heart and brings the joy of hope and revolution to your day and your week and your month and your future.

Amen.