

Easter Sermon 2011: Life, Death, and Hope

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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Another Easter. Isn't it remarkable? Spring forcefully reminds us of what we seldom contemplate, namely the indomitable spirit of life forever surging forth anew. The bright colors of nature's glorious life coming to a close in autumn detract us from death's inevitability. Then winter reminds us, sometimes brutally, that death does indeed exist and no facet of life is spared...no leaf, no centipede, no organism, no human. It's in the rulebook...no exceptions. But then life awakens again in the spring, and we're almost surprised by that because we may have somehow forgotten this extraordinary sacred cycle of renewal while in the throes of a harsh winter. Hope can easily be buried by the snows, and bring to us a misleading notion that lifelessness seems of interminable duration. I think of death making its rounds indiscriminately when I read the ee cummings line: "The snow doesn't give a soft white damn whom it touches."

But spring never forgets to visit. Sometimes slow in arriving, yet always startling in its appearance. We sing a lot of Halleluiahs because we don't really know what else to say to this miraculous rebirth of nature. As ee cummings wrote so fittingly: "The earth laughs in flowers." What a great contrast: The snow doesn't give a damn and yet the earth laughs in flowers. Life, death, hope. Life, death, renewal. Life, death, resurrection. It doesn't really matter how the cycle is identified linguistically, because spiritually it resonates in every human heart. The answer to death is hope, is spring, is renewal, is resurrection.

Easter is merely the Christian version of the universal story of hope that death is not the final word. Hindus had addressed this a few centuries earlier through their metaphor of reincarnation. One of the oldest myths addressing life's renewal is found in the Phoenix rising from its own ashes. I love the way Herodotus explains the phoenix to his people in Greece during the 5th century BCE. He begins confessionally, "Although I've never actually seen a phoenix, I did see a painting of one and this is what he looks like..." (If only all the world's religions began with a similar disclaimer: I've never actually seen God or heaven, but I've seen paintings and this is the story I've heard" ...why then the world would be a great deal more peaceful.

Herodotus saw a phoenix with a tail of gold and scarlet. Its life expectancy is between 500 and 1000 years. Near the end of life it builds a nest of twigs that then ignites. Nest and bird burn fiercely and are reduced to ashes from which the young phoenix egg arises, reborn anew to live again.

The tallest living thing on earth is the redwood tree, soaring about 40 stories high with a life expectancy longer than the mythological phoenix. The redwood forests strike me as virtually mythological themselves as they lord over all of us in majestic

splendor. And when they fall, after 800 years or more you figure: "Well, that's it. They've had a long run but when they're down...they're down. Not so fast..."

At the stump of the fallen tree there are tantalizing signs of new life, dozens of green sprouts. There's a project currently underway to reforest the land in order to halt and possibly reverse climate change by cloning these green sprouts and planting them. They would be cloned, fed heavy doses of synthetic growth hormones and nursed in a laboratory environment to create genetically identical trees. Once they grew roots they would be transplanted to enriched soil where they will continue to grow.

Birth, death, hope, cloning, and growth hormones? What would God say? What would ee cummings say? What would Bill McKibben say? I think they would all agree: New life to help the planet is a good thing. God might add: If I didn't want to see it happen I wouldn't have given humans the intelligence to clone. Even as our planet is dying, such an inconceivable concept, seeds of hope are being planted for earth's own resurrection.

ee cummings said, "We can never be born enough." That's probably what Edward Abbey had in mind when he wanted to fertilize the growth of a cactus or cliff rose or sagebrush, or trees. We can never be born enough.

In my small group ministry at Friendship Manor this month – a group that no longer qualifies as small because we have somehow adopted Mormons, and Anglicans and United Church of Christ members, all who subscribe to rational religion rather than literal religion...we discussed Easter and I invited different interpretations of the afterlife. I made it easy for them to render a vision of heaven by promising not to be judgmental. "Come on," I said. "So what is heaven like?" But they all shook their heads, even the Mormon Great grandmother, and they all agreed that our life continues in the memory of our loved ones.

That is no small matter because the piercing question arises: How do you want to be remembered? I want to briefly tell you of man whom most of us probably never heard of, Robert Muller, a Belgian, who served as the Undersecretary General of the United Nations for 40 years. His ideas on world government, world peace, and even spirituality contributed to his being dubbed as the United Nations philosopher. Well deserved, by the way. He founded the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica, and served on the advisory council for the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. He died last September.

He said sometime during his career, "We must care to know during our lifetimes how we want to be remembered in death. This will mold our lives." (How we want to be remembered in death will mold our lives. Let me paraphrase this just a titch:

Immortality is not a matter of taking up residence in heaven on the condition we follow religious rules and let Jesus into our hearts at our deathbed; immortality is

not a matter of being reincarnated into other life forms determined by an aggregate of many past life transgressions; immortality becomes manifest in the form of memory which is consciously determined by how we choose to live our lives. That which ultimately controls our decisions about how and in what we invest our gift of life must be grounded in how we want to be remembered. If I want to be remembered as someone who tried to serve humanity, that will mold virtually every step I take. If, on the other hand, I pull off the world's greatest ponzi scheme and rip off investors like Eli Wiesel and many universities and non-profits in order to satisfy my insatiable greed, then my living memory will place me in hell forevermore.

We must care to know during our lifetimes how we want to be remembered in death. Do we give it the care or attention it demands? This is what molds our lives so we better start paying attention how we want to be remembered after we're gone.

For me it was Jesus' ministry – how he lived his life, not the myth of physical resurrection but because he lived deliberately as a healer that he lives on in the memory of western civilization. Like all the prophets from all religious heritages, they molded their lives and are remembered in death for challenging the invincible power structures of their respective cultures with compassion. Yes they spoke truth to power but they also spoke compassion to power and this is how we remember them. We cannot match their discipline and commitment and influence; they are after all the prophets. But they gave us templates of how to live more sensitively to the needs of our neighbor and how to speak compassion to power.

I want to tell you a remarkable story about a black photographer from South Africa named Ernest Cole. He stood only five feet tall, this giant of a man. In the 1960's he created one of the most harrowing pictorial records of what it was like to be black in apartheid South Africa. In 1966 he went into exile, and by the next year his book was published in the United States called *House of Bondage*. His photographs were banned in his homeland where he fell more and more into obscurity. Forgotten. Banished. For all intents and purposes – dead.

In exile, Cole's life crumbled. Through the late 70's and all of the 80's he was homeless in New York, bereft even of his cameras. He died at the age of 49, just one week after Nelson Mandela walked free.

Today the largest retrospective of his work ever mounted is on display at a gallery in Johannesburg. His images shock and anger the whites and blacks who are drawn to this great exhibition. One of the startling photos is of a group of black men lined up nude against the wall being examined as gold-mine-recruits. Cole snuck his camera into the scene in his lunch box, hidden under a sandwich and an apple. The younger generation is brought to tears by this exhibition, but Cole knew how he wanted to be remembered, and he is reborn in South Africa today.

Art is a powerful medium and perhaps (if you've ever noticed) artists are a little "different" from most of us, undoubtedly due to their commitment to how they mold

their lives. And they gain immortality in their art, as a recent article by Salman Rushdie reminded us. He wrote: "The lives of artists are more fragile than their creations. The poet Ovid was exiled by Augustus to a little hellhole on the Black Sea called Tomis, but his poetry has outlasted the Roman Empire. Osip Mandelstam died in a Stalinist work camp, but his poetry has outlived the Soviet Union. Federico Garcia Lorca was killed by the thugs of Spain's Generalissimo Francisco Franco, but his poetry has survived that tyrannical regime.

"We can perhaps bet on art to win over tyrants," says Rushdie. "It is the world's artists, particularly those courageous enough to stand up against authoritarianism, for whom we need to be concerned, and for whose safety we must fight."

In this same vein we must admire those who mold their lives in their commitment to justice through civil disobedience. Five members from our church were arrested this week in Washington, D.C. Through their actions they made it crystal clear that they are determined to be remembered in death as activists to heal the earth. They confronted the system and vowed to shift the power in this country from a handful of leaders whose wealth grows exponentially with the continued use of fossil fuels destroying the earth, to bring power into the hands of the people committed to earth's sustainability.

In a real sense they are artists using the earth as their canvas;
They are prophets speaking compassion to power.

Most significantly, they have cared to know in their lifetimes...they have cared enough to know in their lifetimes how they want to be remembered in death and have thus molded their lives accordingly.

Without death life has no meaning. But if we cannot answer death then our lives are meaningless as well.

Life, death, hope. Life, death, renewal. Life, death, resurrection.
We must care to think of our lives as lived with love and compassion as we shape the tenor of our own immortality.

So yes, it is Easter again. Isn't it remarkable. The earth laughs with flowers. We are reminded of the miraculous cycle. Let there be joy. Halleluiah.