

Singing While It Is Still Dark

An Easter Sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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I have a vivid memory of being a boy, not much older than seven or eight, I imagine, and finding a dead bird near the tree in our back yard. Something like that doesn't leave you unchanged. What was once airborne, colourful and free, was now lying on the ground, with its beak slightly opened, and eyes closed. To say that I was a sensitive child is an understatement. I have another memory of crying when I was even younger as I watched my uncle cutting down trees. Children often have a connection with nature that goes beyond what we adults normally see. And that day, I saw a bird, broken, lifeless, and laying in the grass when it should have been sitting in a tree looking for worms – or flapping its wings in search of a companion or simply flying because it was able to do so, and for the joy of it.

I did know that people were buried because along the street to my grandmother's house is a graveyard. I knew that's what people did when people died: you buried them in the ground. So, without much thought, I found a shoebox, and I picked up the bird, and put it inside, oblivious to the germs and micro-biotic bacteria that were left on my hand. I had dug a hole near some bushes, and I was all set except I had no words for what I was about to do. Being a regular participant in Sunday School, I found a little red Bible, and I opened it and started reading. Somehow, I felt that this bird's death had not gone unnoticed.

I, like many of you, have been noticing the singing of birds early in the morning, while it is still dark. The chirping has woke me up a few times, and with it, a calming sense that it is indeed

spring, and winter has passed by us. Of course, if it was crows, I would want to blast them out of the sky! “Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark,” writes the poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Singing while it is still dark is a spiritual practice many of us have learned in life, whether we name it as that or not. It is the laughter shared at the bedside of a dying spouse. It is the smile that happens when working through our grief of a memory that gives life. It is the bittersweet moment when we realize that life in all of its beauty only ends one way, and sharing the wisdom of that revelation by changing how we live because what we were doing before wasn’t really living anyway. In the story from John, it is Mary who comes to the grave courageously bearing spices for her Lord’s body.

Our dear friend Ruth Mitchell’s final advice to me, hours before she died, was to take care of my little family. Don Morton, another good friend of ours, wondered out loud whether there was life after death, and he was ok with either answer. Both serve as reminders to me and us all that life is different depending on the perspective we place on any given moment, at any given time. Life from a hospital bed is vastly different than life from the comfort of our kitchen. All of our Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays run together until one day, we receive life-changing news. Holidays start to feel the same until we realize that it may be our last one. It’s then that we need the resurrection, but we are so loathe to talk about our faith with each other. But why?

While we were in Halifax last week, we were packing up the car when we were approached by two young men wearing ties and name tags. I saw them coming a mile away, and did my best to not make eye contact, only because we were in a hurry. My experiences with missionaries from the Mormon Church have always been very positive, and I’ve always admired their

passion to walk all over cities and towns talking to people. After a few moments of hello, one of the young men asked me if we could talk about Jesus. He started to tell me about family, when I played my trump card and said, “Look, thank you so much, but I don’t want to waste your time. I’m a United Church minister.” I thought he might back down, but apparently we United Church people are in need of a little more saving! It only encouraged the conversation. He wanted to talk more, but we just didn’t have the time. I did feel badly but I knew that there is as much chance of me becoming a Mormon as there is of Art Buck becoming a member of the NDP. But, the more I thought about it, the more I realized what I had in common with these two guys: I too travel around this city talking about Jesus, I too am trying to get people to come to my church, and I too am trying to wean myself off of caffeinated beverages!

Talking about resurrection does something for me that nothing else does. It triggers my small-mindedness to believe in mystery; it opens my heart to a greater love than I have ever known; and it helps me to see that no matter how often we attempt to ‘kill’ God in this world, with the death of innocence, the death of truth, the indifference to injustice, that God loves us so much that not even our killing what is holy will keep God away.

Amy Julia Becker, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary writes in response to the statement, “*Why I Need the Resurrection,*”

“Shower, breakfast, kids to school, myself to work, go running, make dinner, kids to bed, check email, sleep. It’s easy to forget. But after the earthquake in Haiti, I need the resurrection. When my friend’s parents die in a plane crash, I need the resurrection. When another IED explodes, I need the resurrection. And when I see the flash of blue and yellow of a bird in flight, when apartheid ends, when my kids hold hands, I need the resurrection. In the sorrow and the joy, the resurrection reminds

me: goodness will last, light overcomes darkness, life triumphs over death.”

What I believe, and what I cling to, is that there is room for us in this story. Despite all of the things that get in the way, there is room for us. John’s Gospel tells this story of the second morning since Jesus’ died. The trauma of that Friday was still with those who loved him the most, especially Mary, the first witness to the risen Christ. John says that their world was still very dark, and they came to the place where Jesus was in that darkness. But in that cold morning air, they could see something, and that was the stone had been rolled away. There are theories as to how his body disappeared. One of the theories is that perhaps the soldiers moved it so that Jesus’ follower wouldn’t try to take his body and create a place where people could come and worship a radical who would be a more powerful symbol of rebellion in death.

John’s Gospel doesn’t draw that connection, though, and maybe we shouldn’t either. The body is gone. And in its place is the clothing placed on Jesus, rolled up. We get the impression that the body wasn’t moved, that perhaps it had walked out on its own. But John doesn’t tell us. We have to really think about that one for ourselves and draw our own conclusions based on what we really feel.

The big chunk of stone that was so hard to place in front of the tomb has been pushed aside. And running to see it are Simon Peter, and “the disciple whom Jesus loved”; the one who reached the tomb first but would not go in. When he did go in, something clicked in him. Something told him that this was true, that this was real, and that this man who had done so much for so many in ways beyond their comprehension in order that people could live had somehow moved beyond death into a new way of living. It was a teaching moment. The unnamed disciple is a mystery, yet the fact that he isn’t named allows us for a

moment to imagine ourselves there standing at the door of the tomb, afraid to go in. It's where many of us find ourselves spiritually in today's church.

Why would we go in to such a place? What purpose would it serve? It doesn't make sense. It's counter-cultural. Then again, the Gospel isn't supposed to make sense. Resurrection isn't scientific, it's spiritual. This isn't resuscitation, this isn't a re-animation, this is new life. The pain and suffering of Jesus' followers for the past two days have been transformed into something new and different though we can't quite put our finger on it. The pain that was so crippling and hard to watch is now past, and the hammer and nails of Good Friday have been transformed into the garden of tears on Easter Sunday. A radical, transformative journey that has given someone, and the people he loved, the power to live again.

Why do you need the resurrection?

Henri Nouwen wrote beautifully, on the occasion of his mother's death,

“The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost. The resurrection doesn't answer any of our common questions about life after death such as: “How will it be? How will it look?” But it does reveal to us that love is stronger than death. God's love for us, our love for each other, and our love for those who lived before and will live after us is not just a quickly passing experience, but a reality transcending all time and space.” (Our Greatest Gift)

May the song of the resurrection penetrate the darkness of your morning.