

## Empty Tombs

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### Reading

Chet Raymo's weekly *Science Musings* appeared in the *Boston Globe* for twenty years. He is Professor Emeritus at Stonehill College in North Easton, Massachusetts and is the author of eleven books on science and nature. This reading is from an essay entitled, "Beginnings," included in his book, *The Soul of the Night: An Astronomical Pilgrimage* (pgs. 45-46).

"The spring comes slowly up this way," sang the poet. And this morning it was there, in a meadow beaten flat by winter, hiding in a cavity of grass abandoned for a deeper burrow by some still-sleeping creature. Spring was there in that borrowed nest. It was the first day of April, and the meadowlark was back!

I didn't see him. You seldom see an early meadowlark unless you come close enough to scare him up from his hiding place. But his long, slurred, double-noted call is as sure a sign of spring as a crocus and, like a crocus, a trifle premature. In a month or two the meadow will be lush and green, but today the thought of spring is touched with heartache. Like the song of the meadowlark...

Why are beginnings touched with sadness? The birth of a child, the beginning of a new year, the first triumphant notes of a Beethoven symphony, the call of a wild bird in an awakening meadow--all moments of promise, of joy even, all infected with a strange, sweet melancholy. Does the meadowlark know something I don't know? That acolyte in black-and-gold vestments has a secret. From his hiding place in the crumpled grass he lectures on existential philosophy and discourses on roses and thorns...Beginnings wear their endings like dark shadows.

## Sermon

Here's an Easter story:

Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb, having waited over the Sabbath, to anoint his body. She might be going alone, or she might be accompanied by one or two other women, depending on which Gospel account you read. She must be in deep despair. Her teacher has been brutally murdered by the Romans. The center of this community, the one who had brought this unlikely group together as disciples, was dead, and many of the followers, even among Jesus' closest companions, had scattered in terror. If it's true that Mary Magdalene was favored by Jesus, becoming something of a teacher within the community herself, purportedly healed of "seven demons," which may have referred to physical or psychic ailments, now she is cut loose from any comfort she had found, stripped of any status she had achieved as a woman within this new community, alone. She may be not only sad, but bitter toward the other disciples, toward Jesus himself, for abandoning her, for not being smarter about escaping Roman retribution, for dying...

But she continues on her way to the tomb, to anoint the body of the deceased with spices and oils, because that is what tradition calls for her to do. She is putting one foot in front of the other; she is letting duty guide her so she won't have to think; she is quite possibly numb from the trauma of Jesus' arrest and death and the dissolution of her adopted community. From all accounts, she has no expectation of any resurrection. She has no inkling that victory, spiritual or otherwise, will come from this defeat. It must feel like there is only darkness ahead; continued Roman oppression and disdainful treatment, even within her own community, for being an unmarried and childless woman, now associated with the humiliating scandal that Jesus had brought down on them all.

All this may be with her as she makes her way to the tomb, or maybe she hasn't even been able to think, yet, about what is next, and she is still just deep within the sorrow and grief of the events.

In any case, this is where the Easter Moment, the Easter Miracle, takes place. First evidenced by the stone being rolled away, supported by the empty tomb (though the grave cloths are there, folded neatly, proving that the body was not stolen), and confirmed later by the risen Jesus appearing to Mary and the disciples, even allowing Thomas to feel the wounds that were made in his hands and the gash that was cut in his side by the Roman soldier.

The Easter story, in this interpretation, is one of God intervening in the normal course of human events and *changing the circumstances*, literally turning despair into hope by changing the outcomes of which we are so certain. We can be transported, it says, against all odds, from a situation we fear and dread into a reality of which we have not even dared to dream. It is the story of a miracle.

Not all of us accept that interpretation. We are hesitant to corroborate miracles on the word of the Gospel writers, or to rely on Divine intervention as a valid source for hope. Is there an Easter message for us?

To be fair, if we don't accept the Gospels' accounts, we have to admit that *something happened!* Jesus' crucifixion should have sounded the death knell for the followers of Jesus. It is understandable that they scattered in fear, frightened that the vicious Roman rule would delight in crucifying them immediately upon the heels of their teacher. There were always open slots available for crucifixions and now, without their teacher, without Jesus, why go on, why risk execution? How would they continue even if they wanted to? It is understandable that they scattered.

What is less understandable is how they came back together and, rather than hiding, why they began to preach in an amazingly courageous way, risking (and suffering) beatings, imprisonment and worse.

*Something happened.* Something turned their despair and fear into hope and courage. Some sort of Easter moment or moments or miracle or happening or awareness or transformation occurred. *Something happened.*

Bishop John Shelby Spong has a wonderful book entitled, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*, in which he speculates about what that Easter moment may have been.

“At its very core the story of Easter has nothing to do with angelic announcements or empty tombs,” he writes. “It has nothing to do with time periods, whether three days, forty days, or fifty days. It has nothing to do with resuscitated bodies that appear and disappear or that finally exit this world in a heavenly ascension.” [Bishop John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 12.]

And yet, he embraces the Resurrection as a reality. He sees it, not as an Easter morning miracle (which he regards as metaphor), but as a process that occurs over many months, as Jesus' followers (and Peter, in particular) tries to make sense of all that had happened. They feel that Jesus brought them closer to God, yet could God have given any clearer sign of displeasure than allowing Jesus to be killed? They knew that Jesus was dead, that this part of their lives was over, yet something of it stays with them, even as they take up their old lives in surrender to the fates. They try to forget it all, as it has only brought them pain, suffering and danger, yet something like hope seems to survive even their crushing defeat. But what is the hope? Where is the hope?

Here is [another Easter story](#), courtesy of Bishop Spong.

:  
*One night in the early fall, Simon and his mates had a particularly good catch. They were happy as they dragged the fish ashore. They built a fire, placed some of their catch on the grill, brought out the bread from the boat, and prepared to feast. As was his custom, Simon took the bread, said the ceremonial blessing, broke and distributed it. In his blessing, he likened the bread to Jesus' broken body. Both, he said, were meant to give life.*

*Then it happened. A light went on in Simon's head. It was as if the heavens opened and so did Simon's eyes, and Simon stared into the realm of God. There he saw Jesus as part of God's being and God's meaning. It was not delusional. Death could not destroy the one who made God known. "Death cannot contain him. I have seen the Lord!" was Simon's ecstatic exclamation. Then Simon opened the eyes of the others to what he saw. Each of them grasped this vision, experienced Jesus alive, and were themselves resurrected. That was Easter. It was both objective and subjective, but above all it was real.*

Resurrection, suggests Spong, is not a Divine event, entering our world from outside the realm of human experience, but is a transformation that occurs very much within human experience, as we bravely put one foot in front of the other, even when we want to give up; as we wrestle with the questions, even when we despair of ever having answers; as we continue, one breath following another, as best we can.

Understand, this is not a Bible study. Though what happened for the disciples and the followers of Jesus is an interesting question, I am much more interested in *your* Easter stories. When you are suffering the worst that can happen; when the earth shakes and destroys all that you have built; when the bad news arrives and it can't be unsaid and no miracle is forthcoming...What, then, is Easter? Where, then, is hope?

Understand, if I could preach miracles and assurances about what happens

after death and prayers to keep you all safe, I would...I would do that. I don't resist these solutions from any intellectual snobbishness or because I am worried about what you will think of me. I don't preach them because I don't believe that that's where our hope lies. In fact, I don't think it can lie in anything I say. We don't *think* hope, we don't *say* hope, we *walk* it, one step at a time; we *live* it, one breath at a time.

This is another type of Easter story, one with which, perhaps, we are more familiar; the story that writer, Joan Didion tells, in her account of the year she lived after the death of her husband and during the severe illness of her daughter, who died after the book, [The Year of Magical Thinking](#), was published.

*I know why we try to keep the dead alive: she writes toward the end of the book, we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us.*

*I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead.*

*Let them become the photograph on the table.*

*Let them become the name on the trust accounts.*

*Let go of them in the water.*

*Knowing this does not make it any easier to let go of him in the water.*

*I think about swimming with him into the cave at Portugese Bend, about the swell of clear water, the way it changed, the swiftness and power it gained as it narrowed through the rocks at the base of the point. The tide had to be just right. We had to be in the water at the very moment the tide was right. We could only have done this a half dozen times at most during the two years we lived there but it is what I remember. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that. (pgs. 225-227)*

You have to go with the change. Somewhere between the grabbing on and the letting go is where hope lies. Somewhere in the midst of circumstances we do not choose, we must choose hope.

The worst that can seemingly happen has happened. Our pain is not wiped away by a miraculous change in our circumstances. The stone is not rolled away; the tomb is not empty; defeat is not turned to victory...and yet, somehow, we survive. And we not only survive, we find the courage to embrace hope once again. Something about doing what we need to do, letting our hands wisely work at what is necessary; allowing others to offer us help and compassion, lifting us up when we fall; daring to look into one another's eyes and listen deeply and patiently to one another's stories; something about taking another step, drawing another breath, past the pain, until we look forward to the next step, the next breath. Somewhere in all of that we find the courage to embrace hope once again.

I say *courage* because embracing hope means risking pain once again. Beginnings wear their endings like dark shadows, says Chet Raymo, and embracing a new beginning means embracing that shadow. To live in this

world, says Mary Oliver, you must be able to do three things: To love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing that your own life depends on it; And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. You can survive without that, but to *live*, you must be able to do those things. And that is a courageous decision. That is an Easter decision. Not to close our eyes and ears to pain and tra la la our way through life as long as we are able, but to face our sadness, to walk through the hardest times, to claim the despair as our own, and to still be open to the inevitable, painful, beautiful coming of hope...

For just as beginnings wear their endings, endings carry the light of beginnings, well-hidden but present, in the very center of their finality where it seems like no light could survive.

That is an Easter story...