

Easter 2015

by Rev. Don Garrett

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Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. What a wonderfully powerful yet gentle expression of gratitude and hope. This music doesn't really need an object or a context in order to move us. We're so grateful when things turn our well that we immediately recognize those feelings as they resonate within our hearts.

But, today, there is a context for this alleluia: Easter, the day that celebrates Jesus' resurrection after his execution over 2,000 years ago. As such, it represents a paradox and a miracle. It's a paradox because celebrating someone's return from the grave is an event solidly outside of human history. Except for the stray story, here and there, like this one, everyone knows that it just doesn't happen. But millions maintain that this miracle did take place. How could that be? The answer might be that it was a miracle.

Well, miracles like resurrection disrupt the very fabric of reality. Some would say for the better, some have thought otherwise. I know it was things like this that created a crisis of belief for me when I was younger. Trained early in the scientific method, claims of resurrection just didn't meet my standards of evidence.

But when I studied the Bible, I had a professor who said something surprising – at least something I hadn't anticipated. He told me that, although there were thousands of ways to read the Bible, there was only one way that was absolutely wrong: reading it literally. The Bible is not a collection of historical facts and scientific evidence. It's a compilation of symbol and story, myth and miracle – a different kind of literature entirely. And the more something seems paradoxical or impossible, the deeper the meaning buried within. We can't be satisfied with either believing or rejecting its claims. We need to examine them in a very different way.

Joseph Campbell gives us one of the keys to understanding this kind of project. He calls it "The Hero's Journey." Mircea Eliade, in his book, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, outlines the three basic stages of the journey: separation from or death to the old life, the intermediate stage of chaotic ambiguity and ordeal, and then

rebirth in a new life and return to society as a new being – which is right there in the Apostle’s Creed, you know. Suffered, dead, and buried; descended into hell, third day rose again. It’s the hero’s journey, encoded in this particular mythic language.

The first stage, separation or death, tends to hit us hard. The first stage, separation or death, tends to hit us like a great big whack in the face by some cosmic two-by-four, like being nailed to a cross and left to die. If we don’t take this too literally, while still allowing the power of the image to infuse our thinking, we might recognize how helpful it might be to remember that, in life, many things that turn out to be good seem to begin badly. At the least, we might suspend judgment; at best, we might even take a glimmer of optimism from the story.

After all, it tells us that Jesus was murdered, buried, and rose from the dead. It puts a happy ending on an otherwise impossible situation. What good would it do for us to carry this image around in our psychological back pocket?

Well, there have been more than a few times in my life when I’ve had the experience of a sudden, shocking, and apparently complete reversal of fortune. Some of you might be able to recognize what I have described as feeling like having swallowed a boat anchor. There’s a sudden plunging deep in the pit of the stomach, accompanied by hopelessness and despair. And that feeling sometimes continues to plunge so deeply that it feels as though your heart has been ripped out and plunged into the earth beneath your feet.

And how do we respond to these moments? Well, most of us tend to resort to whatever constitutes our favorite, most accessible curse word or two. And then there’s the groan of hopeless desolation. Ohhhh. One time or another, one way or another, this happens to everyone.

I know it happened to me when I was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the age of 21. Ohhhh. I felt it when I was fired from a job. And I felt it when my first marriage to the love of my life came to an end. Those feelings of bleak despair are part of human experience and I don’t doubt for a minute that Jesus and his followers had similar feelings on Good Friday those many years ago. Ohhhh. All is lost.

There's an old spiritual song about this, about finding the strength to face this kind of adversity, the kind that King David wrote about in the 23rd Psalm, calling it the valley of the shadow of death.

It goes, [sing] "You've got to walk that lonesome valley. You've got to walk it by yourself. Nobody else can walk it for you. You've got to walk it by yourself."

Now, this doesn't fix things, but it does direct our attention inward at times like these. We can stop blaming our circumstances and focus on how we choose to respond to events. How do we walk? And there's a little bit of hope in that, when we realize that, while we may not have been able to prevent this turn of events, we still have some ability to make choices that make a difference.

Will you sing with me? "You've got to walk that lonesome valley. You've got to walk it by yourself. Nobody else can walk it for you. You've got to walk it by yourself."

Now, how would it feel, in the midst of those moments of despair, you could sing that song, but even more, if you could hear, even if faintly in the background as you sing that song, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia?"

This is one of the deeper meanings of the Easter story. Things don't just happen completely all of a sudden. Even sudden changes have points of transitions, points where we can choose how to feel, how to respond, and how to imagine the future.

You see, we tend to live in a binary world: either things are good or they're bad. But there are other ways to see change, ways that the ancients found to be more useful than that, ways to find hope even in the midst of apparent hopelessness. One important way is to recognize what has been called "liminality," or the transitional time between states.

The liminal recognizes the fragility of transition when the certainty of the prior state is lost and the new state has not yet become established, like the vulnerability of a creature that has shed its shell but not yet grown a new one. It doesn't matter that the new shell is going to be bigger and better – any such transition brings uncertainty and risk. And losing your shell can certainly feel like a hopeless turn of events. Ohhhh.

Our culture has preserved some of the vestiges of liminality, but, unfortunately, they tend to be rather empty of the power they once conveyed. There were times when ceremonies like graduation and marriage represented deep and profound changes that needed to be marked with ceremony. But nowadays these things often seem rather more artificial and expected. The big changes in our lives tend to come when we don't expect them, and the often knock us right off of our foundations. Uh-oh, boat anchor – ohhhh.

We have a limited capacity to embrace change; we want to believe we know what's in front of us. Nouns are stable; verbs indicate change. This is why we tend to see our world as a series of nouns rather than verbs. Even when we talk about change we tend to do it in a series of stable images rather than an ambiguity of change of state.

Pete Seeger's song, "Turn, Turn, Turn" – drawn from the book of *Ecclesiastes*, expresses the universality of change in just this way. You see, its lyrics describe times to be born and die, plant and reap, kill and heal, laugh and cry, love and hate, war and peace. All this suggests change, but actually does it through a series of certainties: born, die, kill, heal, love, hate, war and peace. They're all rendered equal in this montage, but we don't get any sense of the transitions from one state to the next.

It's like square dancing where you go around the circle grasping the hand of one person after another as you meet them – right, left, right, left. This way, each person around the circle is a certainty with no transition. It's exhausting to dance that way – it's exhausting to live that way! But we kind of do! But actually, the trip around the circle is more like this: you begin to let go of the hand you're holding, let go, reach for the next hand, touch that hand, begin to grasp, and grasp fully before beginning to let go.

This second way of seeing things is the liminal view, the view of change. The wise persons of all the ages, including our contemporary physicists, agree that change is the only constant. As a matter of fact, they would say there are no such things as nouns. Nouns are fictions of convenience. There are only verbs. Everything

is always changing. If reality actually is constant change, wouldn't it be useful to look at the liminal as the normal state of things rather than the exception?

When we go around the circle merely grabbing the next hand offered, one after the other, we spend very little time reflecting on the nature of transition. This may be OK in square dancing, but using this model for decision-making can lead us to some very poor decisions. When love, hate, peace and war are all seen as equal things to grasp, we can do some pretty awful things without realizing what it is we're doing. When we focus on the liminal time between decisions we can have a better chance of understanding their consequences. This is where irrational hope can be useful. Instead of panic or desperation, we might be able to hear a faint "alleluia" beneath our wings.

In our culture, decisions are mostly made by creating a crisis that needs to be resolved. Something drastic gets our attention. We point out that there is danger and that something needs to be done about it. For example, we've lost our grip on the hand we'd been holding and we need to grab a hold of another one. We want to go from one certainty to another. Thus, we're always making decisions under pressure. This results in a culture so noisy and contentious that we often want to just tune it out and be left alone. This leads to much of the apathy in our current political process, which leaves decision-making to those who want simple answers rather than those who prefer the big picture.

But there is another way to look at things. Since change is constant, we can learn to enter liminal time and see the forces of change at work within every moment. Dreamtime is a term shamans have used for entering into the liminal where distinctions between past and future, conscious and subconscious, inner and outer become blurred in the twilight of possibility. By safely leading us into ambiguity, dreamtime can give us the possibility of true growth and transformation.

How much of your life is filled with certainty and the craving for certainty? How often do you stop to look at the space between your certainties and see all the ambiguity that surrounds them like the way the sky surrounds flying birds?

This can be hard to do, but there are ways to create a special context where we can allow ourselves to experience uncertainty, where we feel safe enough to

permit ourselves to experience that “not knowing” which is the nature of the liminal, of dreamtime. The creation of this special context is one of the purposes of worship. We can come together to share a space of mystery and miracle, where pregnant possibility can be born, where the abundant springtime follows winter’s desolation, where we can consider change without crisis, growth without loss, fulfillment without guilt.

This is why worship is so very important. We needn’t prostrate ourselves to some external entity of powerful benevolence, although that does seem to help many people to feel safe enough to embrace the liminal, the spaces between certainties. We do, however, need to humble ourselves before the unknown, to experience the limits of our intellect in the face of ever-changing reality.

This is why Easter is so important. It challenges the dualistic paradigm in which we live most of the time. Easter invites us to see life more as a dance than a series of causes and effects. We can reach and touch, turn and sway instead of stumbling forward in a desperate struggle to regain our lost balance. Experiencing life as a dance helps us remember that what looks like a hopeless situation might be the gateway to some amazing possibility, a new opportunity we hadn’t imagined; that even the darkness of death might turn out to be a window into some kind of brighter light.

Alleluia.

May it be so.