

**The Call of Easter**  
Rev. Mark Hayes  
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**Reading:** from “Jesus of Mystery”: an Easter sermon by the Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia

Easter is a mystery. We can read the texts of Easter every year till Kingdom come, but the mystery’s larger than that. It was a relief to me when a friend said, quite matter-of-factly, the other day: “We won’t ever really know what happened after Jesus died.” They returned to the cave and lo, the stone had been rolled away and the linen shroud with which he had been covered remained draped over the stone where he had lain and . . .? What we know is that, to the people who knew and loved Jesus the Easter event was an amazing moment in the midst of utter desolation. When the new world that they had awaited looked to be in shambles and the Messiah in which they’d believed was gone, hope emerged and the remnant felt a sense of purpose and life was among them again. . .

The mystery of Easter is the mystery of hope that emerges when hope is hard to find. That’s the mystery that tormented the disciples, who were forever asking Jesus: “Where and when is the Kingdom of Heaven?” And Jesus would answer with mysterious parables and remind them that those who have ears will hear and those with eyes will see. My favorite Gospel isn’t in the Bible we normally read. It’s the Gospel of Thomas, which was written around the same time as the other gospels, but didn’t get into the canon. But there’s a difference. In the Bible you can pick up at any church, the Kingdom of Heaven is a place beyond this world – hope deferred to the afterlife. Whatever you suffer now, something better will come to you later in heaven. The place to which the body of Jesus rose. In the Gospel of Thomas, however, the Kingdom of Heaven is beneath your feet, in your heart, shining through your eyes. . .

When Jesus said “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” it wasn’t around the corner at hand – it wasn’t come the millennium at hand. It was At Hand right here. People just lacked eyes to see and ears to hear.

**Sermon:**

I’d like to start with another reading. This one is by the Rev. Daniel E. Budd. It’s called “We’re Not Sure What Happened,” and appears in the anthology, *Celebrating Easter and Spring* [ed. Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris]. Budd writes:

We received an invitation from our neighborhood newspaper to place an ad for Easter. Someone suggested to me that, should we advertise, it should say something like, “Join us. We’re not sure what happened.” I was tempted.

We’re not sure what happened. But, we know what it’s like when someone appears whose message we feel offers hope; who inspires us with new ways of living which touch our hearts and lift our spirits in anticipation. We know what it’s like when they fall short of our expectations, or worse, are cut down by the forces of hate and bigotry which too often enter human life.

We’re not sure what happened. But, we know what it’s like when someone has grown profoundly into our own lives, who seems as much a

part of our living as our own breathing, whose presence lives in our souls. We know what it's like when death takes them from us, perhaps prematurely, and the empty place now in our souls is much like an empty tomb.

We're not sure what happened. But, we know what it's like to feel sorrow and loss, despair and grief. We know the waves of tears and the thoughts of the past which flow through us, which begin to fill the emptiness with stories and memories, begin to shore us up again with a different presence which will live with us for all of our lives.

We're not sure what happened. But, we know what it's like to realize, to have it dawn upon us, that what we have known and loved lives on now with and within us, a part of who we are. We know that somehow, in our hearts and souls, resurrection is real: not that of the body, but of the spirit – a spirit renewed, even reborn, in the midst of our lives and our living.

We're not sure what happened. But, we know that there is a difficult hope, a faith, that through the living of whatever sorrow and grief we feel (and will continue to feel on occasion) there is also a growing sense of grace and gratitude, of joy and thankfulness, in the mysterious and abiding astonishment of human being. In that wonder may we find our strength, our own sense of Easter.

No, we're not sure what happened. On the other hand, many of us may feel fairly sure what *didn't* happen. It seems far-fetched to consider the possibility that Jesus miraculously rose from the dead. That he walked through walls, had conversations with his followers, and was taken bodily up into heaven. It strains credulity. Such things lie beyond our experience and our scientific understandings of how the world works.

And so, if it's all based on lies, on what seems to us a fantastic, unbelievable fairy tale, why do we still celebrate Easter? What is the call of Easter? One key to answering that question is an understanding of the difference between history and story. John Dominic Crossan, perhaps the foremost expert on the historical Jesus, wrote a book several years ago called *The Birth of Christianity*, in which he looked at what happened in the years immediately following the execution of Jesus. Among other things, he was attempting to understand more deeply the meaning and role of resurrection in the origins and development of the new religion, Christianity.

Early in his book, Crossan states that "History is not the same as story. *Even if all history is story, not all story is history.*" He goes on to point out that:

[A]cross the past two hundred years of scholarly research, we have learned that the *gospels* are exactly what they openly and honestly claim they are. They are not history, though they contain history. They are not biography, though they contain biography. They are gospel – that is, good news. *Good* indicates that the news is seen from somebody's point of view – from, for example, the Christian rather than the imperial interpretation. *News* indicates that a regular update is involved. It indicates that Jesus is constantly being actualized for new times and places, situations and problems, authors and communities. The gospels are written for faith, to faith, and from faith.

Anyone who carefully reads the gospels, or indeed the entire Bible, will soon notice that it does not speak with one voice, or from one point of view. In fact, the Bible was written by particular people with certain cultural assumptions and certain beliefs, each with their own particular agenda. Furthermore, when the Bible, or any work, is read, it's read by particular people with our own cultural assumptions, beliefs, and agendas.

The understanding and usefulness of a story need not be absolute and never-changing. In order to embrace a story, to learn from it, or to be inspired by it, we must be able to adapt our understanding to fit within the larger framework of our own worldview, shaped as it is by our own experience and education.

Another Christian scholar who has explored the idea of the resurrection at some depth is Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. His search for the origins of Christianity is described in his book, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*. And my understanding of his conclusion is that it's not an either/or, but rather a both/and. Spong makes reference to Joseph Campbell's work, *The Power of Myth*, and acknowledges being "touched by Campbell's ability to see the truth of myths while refusing to literalize the rational explanation of those myths." He goes on to write:

Campbell enabled me to appreciate such timeless themes as virgin births, incarnations, physical resurrections, and cosmic ascensions, which appear again and again in the religious histories of the world's peoples. Slowly, ever so slowly, but equally ever so surely, a separation began to occur for me between the experience captured for us Christians in the word *Easter* and the interpretation of that experience found in both the Christian Scriptures and the developing Christian traditions, which have borrowed freely, if not always consciously, from the mythology of the ages. . .

My faith in Jesus' resurrection . . . does not today demand that I claim a nonmythological literalness for the words I use to talk about that resurrection. Nor do I insist that Easter be understood as an objective supernatural event that occurred inside human history. I do maintain that the effects of that experience called Easter are demonstrably objective. . .

I today approach and understand that critical moment in the life of Jesus called Easter and the Christian hope of life after death quite differently from the way I once did. I would describe that difference as both less literal and more real, and both parts of that statement are equally important.

In another of his books, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, Spong states that "Obviously something happened after the death of Jesus that had startling and enormous power." But he also acknowledges that "The narratives that seek to convey the experience cannot be literalized without drowning their very integrity in a sea of contradictions."

It seems to me that one of the short-sighted habits of skeptics and believers alike is to focus so much on the literal truth or falsity of the biblical record, that the underlying truth and meaning of the *story* is lost. I made a similar argument in my recent Clergy Column in the Centre Daily Times on the question of God's existence or lack thereof. I suggested that that's simply the wrong question. The important question is how our conception of the divine shapes who we are and how we live in this world.

Similarly, in the case of Easter and resurrection, the important question is how our understanding of these concepts shapes who we are and how we approach life in this world. For me, the simple message at the heart of the idea of resurrection is that death does not have the last word. That may or may not mean that there is some kind of continued consciousness or experience awaiting me when I die. I personally don't believe that there is. But I still find the notion of resurrection meaningful, primarily in the context of this one life that I know I have here on earth.

I want to take a little detour here to tell you a bit about a book I'm reading right now. It addresses, in a novel way, the notion of personal immortality, and even suggests to me a completely new possible interpretation of the Easter event. All this from a book that never mentions Jesus, and mentions religion only once, in the context of being a potential cause of wars.

The book is *I Am a Strange Loop* by Douglas Hofstadter, who you may remember from an earlier book *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* – a book that, incidentally, blew me away twenty-eight years ago. Hofstadter is a cognitive scientist who explores how a self, a consciousness, an “I” can arise out of mere matter. Perhaps a brief excerpt from the book jacket blurb will give you an idea of what he's about:

Deep down, a human brain is a chaotic seething soup of particles, on a higher level it is a jungle of neurons, and on a yet higher level it is a network of abstractions that we call “symbols”. The most central and complex symbol in your brain or mine is the one we both call “I”. An “I” is a strange loop in a brain where symbolic and physical levels feed back into each other and flip causality upside down, with symbols seeming to have free will and to have gained the paradoxical ability to push particles around, rather than the reverse.

If that intrigues you, I recommend the book. In any case, he talks about the strange loop – that highly complex set of symbols or patterns of brain activity – that defines the sense of “I” or self for each of us. But then he also talks about how, when you know another person very well, and are somehow on the same wavelength, you actually internalize a portion of their patterns or strange loop. In his view, the “self” is not a physical being, but is in fact merely an abstraction defined by those complex patterns. Therefore, for him, when you do internalize a part of someone else's deepest patterns, you literally have a part of them within your own self.

Hofstadter had already developed these ideas in some detail when his wife, with whom he was extremely close, died suddenly and unexpectedly of a brain tumor at the age of 42. His theories – and his experience – led him to the understanding and conviction that in fact, a significant portion of his wife literally lived on within him, since a good part of those patterns that defined who she was had been transferred into his brain and consciousness through the intimate interactions of their close relationship.

Whenever I think or talk about personal immortality, it's in terms of living on through our influence on others, like ripples in a pond. Hofstadter takes this notion to another level. It's almost as if the thought patterns of others can influence our consciousness – our very self - in a way parallel to how our ancestors' genes influence our biology. And so our ancestors live on in us through our genes, and others live on in us through the strange loops of our conscious selves.

Perhaps Jesus lived on beyond death through the transfer of radically different patterns of thought and consciousness to his closest followers. Perhaps they didn't even realize they had internalized his teachings of love and compassion and forgiveness and hope so deeply until his death left them to rely on their own resources. Perhaps they then experienced his continuing presence through his strange loop that lived on in them. Perhaps. Perhaps not. We're really not sure what happened. But it is an intriguing thought, is it not?

Whatever our understanding of resurrection, renewal, rebirth - it *is* a miracle, albeit not necessarily a supernatural one. There's a reading I often use in memorial services that goes like this:

It is a miracle,  
Nothing less than a miracle:  
That flowers bloom every spring;  
That living thing begets living thing;  
That we human beings emerge  
Again and again  
    from ignorance to knowledge,  
    from hopelessness to meaning,  
    from sadness to joy.  
It is a miracle,  
Nothing less than a miracle.

That, to me, is the miracle of Easter. The specific Easter story in the gospels is one expression of such miracles. Our observation of the re-emergence of dormant life in the spring is another expression of such miracles. Seeing new life in spring inspires me. For the second year in a row, a robin has built a nest on top of our front porch lamp and laid four small eggs. I'm deeply moved by the privilege of watching the beginning of new life. Soon my garden will begin sprouting new plant life. Such miracles help me maintain my hope and faith that life is more important than death, and that life will prevail.

Perhaps the most important expression of the miracle of resurrection or rebirth comes from our own experience, over and over, of that emergence from hopelessness to meaning, from sadness to joy. For life is not simply joy. We recognize every week here that life brings both joy *and* sorrow. As Robert Fulghum once said, sometimes we have lows so low that it would take an extension ladder to get out of them. The miracle is how often that extension ladder appears, either in the form of other caring people, or our own inner strength, or from we know not where.

Whatever it is that brings us back from the edge of despair to a sense of renewed hope, and even joy – that's what we are celebrating today. For those of us who are able to celebrate joyfully, hallelujah! For those of us who may be at one of those lower points in our lives, where there's no obvious cause for joy, the celebration may be a bit lower-key, celebrating the hope, the confidence that there is something else awaiting us on the other side of the valley through which we are struggling.

With that in mind, I'd like to close with the end of Hilary Krivchenia's Easter sermon from which our reading came this morning:

Because we are humans – strong and vulnerable, divine and earthbound  
– we live in this world of the present, this precious world with all its beauty  
and all its struggle. Because you are human, the mystery that is celebrated

at Easter is in you – it is hidden in the shadows of your sorrows, your pain, your mistakes, your Good Fridays, your moments of anger, your demons, your suffering, your losses. You have to live with those in the hope that cannot be seen. Inside the mystery that cannot be reduced to an equation. Inside that mystery there is still something new and sweet. Something good, creative, pure, and fine. It is in your being, in your Easter heart, in your mind of light, your velvet darkness, your fresh eyes. “Behold,” said the prophet Isaiah – “I am doing something new.” That something new is inside you, and together we can celebrate it at Easter.

So may it be.