

Do Not Go Back

2020 April 12

In the old story, which is only that, *a story*, very old, about human love and loss and loss of hope and fortitude- two women are walking to the graveyard. Their friend has died, murdered by the state, which could not bear the weight of love, a government which could not bear the burden of peace, and would not listen any longer to a young rabbi's call for justice, calls for mercy, simplicity, compassion, the ranting of a subversive, naïve, countercultural, simple and simplistic zealot, so annoying and so dangerous to empire. Their friend has died, has been killed, and they are going to the gravesite in the early morning to do what people always, everywhere, have done: they want to wash his body. They want to touch him one last time, kiss his hair, smooth the agonized and twisted arms and legs, wrap him in clean linen, close his eyes with their own hands.

Some of you have done this; I've stood with you while you've done this: honoring the body that once housed the spark, the soul, the light and the mind of someone. And some of you, I know, in recent days and weeks, have sadly joined the most lonely fellowship in this Corona-time: all the people worldwide who've lost a loved one, whether to Covid-19 or something else. You've lost a friend or relative close by or somewhere far away, and the one thing you needed – to see and touch and hold them one last time, is not something you can do. Gathering to grieve and to be held yourself is not something you can do. *I'm so sorry.*

We know, as the women in the story know: the body becomes earth again so fast, minerals and dust and ash; they want to touch him one more time because they know that very soon the very part of him that seemed at times most real, the physical part, will burn away, leaving nothing for their hands to hold but questions, leaving only mystery, leaving maybe nothing, or maybe memory, which is a kind of resurrection. But like most people in the throes of grief or hopelessness, these women do not yet believe in resurrection.

They're walking in the dark before the day begins. Theirs is an intimate errand; they don't want anyone to see them. And they are exhausted; they haven't thought it through entirely. Suddenly one of them stops walking; she grasps the hand of her companion with a terrible thought: "Who will roll away the stone for us?" The body of their friend is lying in a garden in a little cave, and soldiers sealed it shut, to keep the crowd away, to let the whole affair die down. They walk faster, fearful now and wide awake.

At memorials here, and funerals, we speak a variation on a well-worn prayer: *May the beauty of their life shine and shine, and may our lives bring honor to their memory.*

These lines say nothing of the person's life and character, except that there was beauty there. The lines say nothing about despair, how it punctures the spirit, ruptures the soul, crushes the will to go on. The story of the person's life and the sorrow of the people are held elsewhere in the service.

May the beauty of their life shine and shine, and may our lives bring honor to their memory.

This prayer is absolutely for the living, and it is an admonition: *keep on walking forward. Keep going, day by difficult day, into the days of more light. Walk on toward your fear (there's no other way to go), walk into your sadness, your rage and doubt. Go on, despite despondency. Walk into the morning, the rest of your days, and let your love - love of your person, and love of this life (your life and all life, all people, animals, waters, flowers, the trees just coming into green – history, music, laughter, art) - let your love shine brighter than the sun, stronger than any obstacle or stone. Let your love (which is your life) bring honor to their memory.* The lines are marching orders.

In the old story, the women are walking to the place of emptiness - which sometimes is the place inside you, a deadened place, hopeless place; the wintry heart, tired and discouraged. Maybe it's the place you live right now, here in Week 5 of this shutdown. The women in the story arrive to find the stone is rolled away - and afterward they insist, against the patronizing scorn of experts and disciples, they insist that what they were seeking and what they truly loved had never died and could not in fact be killed. Something came to life *in them*, the ice of their grief cracked like lake ice breaking up, their fear unlocked, their own power blossomed, and something, some little feathered hope, flew out on bright, indestructible wings. They would tell the story of their teacher's life and death, and the story of the sickness plaguing their society, the sickness of money and power and privilege, the sickness of empire, and they would tell of the mighty resistance, the revolutionary love, defiant as crocuses and buds on the trees. Love lives again that with the dead has been, like wheat arising green.

There's no reason to hope when sorrow and despair loom large, no reason at all – and so it's good that reason isn't all we've got. There are other tools in the basket (in the Easter basket). In her blog not long ago, Maria Popova wrote, *“To be human is to be a miracle of evolution, conscious of its own miraculousness. Our consciousness is beautiful and bittersweet, for we have paid for it with a parallel awareness ... of our staggering fragility, of how physiologically precarious our survival is and how psychologically vulnerable our sanity therefore. To make our awareness bearable, we have evolved a singular faculty that might just be the crowning miracle of our consciousness: hope – and the wise, effective action that can spring from it. It is the counterweight to the heavy sense of our own fragility, mortality and grief. We hope precisely because we are aware that terrible outcomes are always possible and often probable, but that the choices we make can impact the outcomes.* Optimism is important. Optimism relies on reason and data and evidence (as does pessimism, by the way). But hope relies on love.

In another, even older, story, a people held in bondage far too long, oppressed so hard they could not stand, decide all at once to walk out. They have no grounds for optimism, and no lived experience of freedom or joy, and yet they decide to walk toward it, toward life and light and liberation, which in fact becomes theirs - freedom is theirs - as soon as they take the first step.

Pack nothing, they whisper from house to house in the night. Don't wait for the bread to rise. Be ready to move at a moment's notice, and go quickly, before you have time to sink back into the old slavery. Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind -- fear, silence, submission. Only surrender to the need of the time – to love justice and walk humbly.

You will find refuge in new places. The stories you tell one another in the dark will make you

strong and wise...

*Make maps as you go, remembering the way back from before you were born.
Sing songs as you go, keep telling the stories and passing them on.*

Do not, do not, go back.

The central story of Passover is the exodus, the story of a people who walk out of their despair, not into sunlight nor into any guarantee of safety, but into uncertainty. They let go of the pain that is at least familiar and step into a future they can't even yet see. They wade in the water. They choose the desert over bondage, and they wander there a long, long time. Some grow old and die there (Moses included) before they reach the promised land, but they are determined, self-determined, to go. They keep on walking forward toward the rising sun, because they love life and dignity and hope so much.

Many people have posted this week about the challenge of celebrating Passover when you can't gather round a table. Passover is all about food and relatives and kids running around, and telling the story and arguing about the story, with lots of wine and matzoh and brisket. There have been – as there are now with so many things - some lovely adaptations. At one point in every Seder, the story recounts the plagues that rained down on Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to let the people go: locusts, lice, frogs, boils, the killing of cattle and children: threats that were not, in fact, effective. The people have to walk out on their own.

And here we are now in the midst of our own plague (no act of God – just biology, revealing our fragility as animals), and we are forced to reckon, like the women at the tomb with their grief, and the Israelites in their slave-chains in Egypt, *how shall we go forward now? What songs will we sing in this strange new land? Who are we now? And what story will be told of this time?* We have to reckon with that question because we're writing the answers right now. We are all writing that story, that history, that sacred text, that scripture verse, those psalms, the haggadah that tells how the people came through, how love prevailed - we're writing that story right now.

And just as in the old story, we can see more clearly now that some plagues were plaguing us all along. Like the bewildered friends of Jesus, we can see that what he was doing, what he got killed for, was calling out the sickness of society, the injustice, the imbalance, the greed. When this storm passes over, if it passes us over, our new story will call us to ways of being. There's no point in the journey if the Promised Land on the other side doesn't have health care for all, affordable, adequate, abundant. There's no point in the journey if in the Promised Land on the other side it's revealed to us that our most important workers – doctors, yes and nurses, of course – but also grocery clerks, factory workers, Amazon workers, direct care providers in nursing homes and group homes, trash collectors, fire fighters, child care workers, delivery drivers, truckers, are also the least paid and the most vulnerable. There's no point in the journey at all if on the other side, in the Promised Land we find that the people who die first and in the largest numbers, staggering so, are brown and black and LatinX and Native and also poor. This pandemic burns away illusions, and there's no point in the journey toward healing if we can't all come through and be free.

Leave quickly, they whispered, before you have time to sink back into the old slavery. Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind. Only surrender to the need of the time – to love justice and walk humbly.

*Make maps as you go, remembering the way back from before you were born.
Sing songs as you go, keep telling the stories and passing them on.*

Do not, do not go back.

Wade in the water, the troubled, roiling water.

Walk toward your sorrow, your grief, your fear, and let them teach you what you're made of, you and your people.

Let this time teach transformation of your spirit and our spirit and our world.

Grief and fear unravel us, we know that and we know, too, that by grace and will and with the help of good companions, we stitch the losses into the fabric of being, and make new meaning, anchored in old wisdom that still holds.

For me the Easter story has never been about the resurrection of anybody from the dead. It's about the rebirth of our imagination, the rebirth of a resilient hope that defines us as human. Even in the isolation of the desert, even standing at the very tomb, we say love lives again, like wheat arising green, like daffodil, maple, bloodroot, crocus, snowdrop, dogwood, all the fierce green shoots of everything.

Marge Piercy reminds us,

*Who can bear hope back into the world but us, you--my other flesh,
all of us
who have seen the face of hope
at least once in vision, in dream,
in marching,
who sang hope into rising
like a conjured snake,
who found its flower above timberline by a melting glacier.
Hope sleeps in our bones
like a bear waiting for spring
to rise and walk.*

These words in closing come from Richard Wilbur. I thought of this poem when I saw the photo that Jack chose to accompany John Gorka's song - Ken Stewart's beautiful shot of the stream with the melting ice that looks so much like the stream outside our sanctuary this morning.

*The air was soft, the ground still cold.
In the dull pasture where I strolled
Was something I could not believe.*

*Dead grass appeared to slide and heave,
Though still too frozen-flat to stir,
And rocks to twitch, and all to blur.
What was this rippling of the land?
Was matter getting out of hand
And making free with natural law?
I stopped and blinked, and then I saw
A fact as eerie as a dream,
There was a subtle flood of steam
Moving upon the face of things.
It came from standing pools and springs
And what of snow was still around;
It came of winter's giving ground
So that the freeze was coming out,
As when a set mind, blessed by doubt,
Relaxes into mother-wit.
Flowers, I said, will come of it.*

May it be so.

May a thousand flowers bloom
and may you see them waving on your walks around your neighborhood.
May a thousand flowers bloom from the wreckage of this time,
And may your love and faith,
your hands and your hope,
be part of the turning of the world.