

Coming Alive to All That Life Makes Possible

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Homily

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of April is “Awakening.” And so, we continue our exploration today, gaining wisdom for our journey from the words of poets, from the Christian Scriptures, and from our own experience. And let us explore with joy and open hearts.

This weekend brings a convergence of religious traditions. A convergence of belief and practice, of stories overlapping and contradicting. A convergence much like our weather this week—hailstorms and lightning, gray skies and snow flurries, wind and full bright sun, bright enough to warm your face and windy enough to cool it at the same time. We are in the full moon phase. For Lakota people that means a Fattening Moon, a time of growing with anticipation of plenty. Still, perhaps buds are visible on some plants, but the promise of blossoms and flowers remains concealed rather than forthcoming. We see all of this, but what are the possibilities through the perceiving?

Yesterday marked the New Year for practitioners of Theravada Buddhism, a time for meditation and reflection, for visiting temples and making offerings for good luck. Last Friday, the Jewish observance of Passover began at sundown, and the holy days extend until sundown next Saturday. At this time, our Jewish siblings commemorate the liberation of Israel, with Moses leading the people out of Egypt. Our Muslim siblings find themselves at the midpoint of Ramadan, which began on April 1 and will end on May 1 this year. One of the five pillars of Islam, at Ramadan the people commemorate the prophet Muhammad’s first revelation with a month of daytime fasting, prayer, reflection, and community. And in the Christian tradition, today is Easter, the day Jesus Christ is said to have risen from the tomb after his Crucifixion by empire on what is called Good Friday. And how can we forget the Easter Bunny, a benign version of what is probably a Christian invention rather than a pagan myth of a supposed Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. We see all of this, but what are the possibilities through the perceiving?

All these holidays, these holy days, they mark a time for gathering with loved ones—with people who understand your customs and your heart—and for reflecting on the enduring and the worthy and the possibilities of life’s goodness. These are a time to hold together with each other when the world all around us seems to consist of nothing but chaotic destruction. How are we to make sense of the devastation of war, violent conflict around the world and especially visible in Ukraine at this very moment as people flee Russian bombs and soldiers and yet try to honor a centuries long tradition of *pysanky*, intricately painted Easter eggs? How are we to reconcile human dignity with new laws meant to prevent women from making their own health care decisions, with talk of re-criminalizing marriages between people of different races, with actions to disenfranchise and devalue siblings who understand themselves to be queer? How are we to survive the extinction of biodiversity and the heating of the planet? How? As the poet this morning says, our “great mistake is to act the drama as if [we are] alone.” We make sense, we reconcile, we survive by being together with each other in love. We see all of this, but what are the possibilities through the perceiving?

And I wonder if that feels like enough. Being together with each other in love. Is it possible, that a thing like compassionate relationship can sustain us when the world feels vile and chaotic such that you might just want to push it away and retreat into oblivion? Yet, as the poet this morning suggests, we are not troubled guests on this earth, we are not accidents amidst other accidents, we were invited from another and greater night than the one within which we are submerged. Still, we often have trouble seeing the good that is right in front of us. How can we do a better job of seeing it, of living into the possibilities, of making new and better possibilities within the painful and the destructive and the chaotic?

In the Christian story, today is the day that the Lord has risen, redeeming believers from sin and death. Salvation out of sacrifice. It's a story also of resistance to power and oppression, of inspiration to persist as an example to others to persist regardless of the apparent bleakness of outcome. As a non-Christian, I struggle with the story's outcome. While in Mexico a few weeks back, I really did get my fill of bloody crucifixes and bleeding, tortured bodies. The story leading up to this message, however, the story of the Son of Man, of Jesus trying to persuade people that he has a good message, one that they can in fact understand, that story is intriguing. In the Gospel of Mark, it's a story of his struggles to make the possible plain to the people, where the wonderment of the apostles is most evident. This is the story where Jesus teaches a lesson, in parable or by action, the response of his disciplines is: Wait? What? Who are you?

Throughout, Jesus is trying to teach them, but the disciples are often incapable of learning. Though the following lines comes from the Gospel of Thomas, a fragmental and non-canonical source for Mark, it captures well Jesus' challenge: "His disciples said to him, 'When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?' He said to them, 'What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.' (51). The possibility is all there, but they are not yet awake to it.

Honestly, I find the response of the disciples downright comical. As they move about Galilee, Jesus heals the sick, feeds the hungry, chases away demons, disputes with priests and scholars, and walks on water. And yet, the disciples don't seem to get him at all. In *Mark* 1:35-37, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." This is something that he has done before, as in for 40 days and 40 nights. "Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'" They don't think the Son of Man needs a little time to himself?

In *Mark* 4:38-41, Jesus and the disciples have escaped the crowds in the only way they can, by going out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus needs a nap, but a storm rises up. "Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'" This, after he has been healing the sick and chasing out demons. And their response? "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'"

Just two short chapters later, in *Mark* 6:47-52, after more healing of the sick and chasing out demons, these Gospels are really repetitive, and including feeding multitudes with a few loaves and fishes, the disciples are out fishing in the sea. "Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and [Jesus] was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened." They see with their own eyes the possibilities, but they still can't break through the biases and the expectations. They resist what is right there before them.

Even when Jesus talks to them very slowly and literally, the disciples struggle with the new. They're not yet awake. In *Mark* 8:14-20, they are all again out on the water. "The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. 'Be careful,' Jesus warned them. 'Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.'" He's warning about puffery, but they don't get the joke. Instead, "They discussed this with one another and said, 'It is because we have no bread.' Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?' 'Twelve,' they replied. 'And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?' They answered, 'Seven.'" How on earth can they be worried about not having food when they travel with the amazing bread-creating Son of Man?! Jesus must be shaking his head something fierce.

Oh, and my goodness the Parables, do they have any imagination to see the meaning? In *Mark* 7, Jesus disputes with the Pharisees, who try to show that he is not properly following the laws of Moses. And Jesus accuses them of making up laws based on Moses but really self-serving to their social positions. They have had such arguments before, and this one is about handwashing. In verses 14-16, Jesus says to the crowd, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

But the disciples don't get it, and Jesus seems a bit fed up, though he goes to lengths to explain in verses 17-23: "After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. 'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'" Ah! Oh! We see it now. Oy vey!

Maybe you can feel a little sorry for the Son of Man on this trip to his own death. The disciples seem a dim lot. And they are really so much like us, not able to get out of their own heads to see what is in front of them, the beam in their eyes blocking the real size of the motes in the eyes of their neighbors. As Alan Watt said, "Awakening is not the creation of a new state of affairs but the recognition of what already is." But Jesus persists, all the way to Golgotha and perhaps beyond, teaching, leading, not always patiently or kindly. Because he loves them. Because he trusts that they can awaken to all the possibilities of life—its potential for care and connection and love. "Now, looking through the slanting light of the morning window toward the mountain presence of everything that can be, what urgency calls you to your one love? What shape waits in the seed of you to grow and spread its branches against a future sky?" What will awaken you? What will save you?

Reflection

Can this day, can any day really be beautiful? Given reality, the maelstrom of war, violence, oppression, destruction that our systems and ways of living have created, what can beauty actually be? I resist saying it, but here it is: this is always the way it is with us. Human beings can't help but make our world terrible. We find it so very difficult to break out of our limitations, our confirmation bias, the *status quo*. The optimist in me fights that idea, that circular idea, that always comes around to the same place. The violence, the hatred, the domination, human nature. The truth is, this is the world we have created, a world yet out of our control and ever so painful and frightening. That is what chaos is—what we cannot control.

Fortunately, as well as destructive and brutal, chaos is fecund and lively, and there is where the beauty and the possibility lay. We do not have to merely circle around to the very same thing. We can instead come alive to all that life itself makes possible when we come back around in a spiral, back to the same place, but ourselves changed, with new insight and new attitudes. Our greatest possibility, perhaps our salvation itself, lives through our loving relationship. We are what anchors each other to life and to the real. Nothing but the promise of love evident in the world also can keep us from flying apart into the chaos that we cannot control. And loving relationship requires our attention and our action, so that we might live, here and now, in ways that foster goodness.

In this new place, with new insight and new attitude, I am less afraid. I find freedom in the notion that I can't control anything except where I choose to put my energy. I find possibility in getting very clear on how I want to live my life, regardless of the outcome. I will do what I have always done—throw myself at a problem, at people, at pain. But with new insight and new attitude, I choose which problems and which people and which pain I will become more conscious of and about which I will act. And I invite you to this possibility, too. "Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves."

You can choose, too. We all can. You know what animates you—working against specific oppression, working against restriction of our bodies, working to care for a corner of the earth and small cache of its beings. Choose and act, choose and act in loving relationship, with the human family who feels as you

do, with the kin of all kinds who sees the possibility of beauty and good as you do. "Everything is waiting for you." It takes all of us, each of us, together to make possibilities beyond our individual limits real. So, let us say "Yes," to life and truth, regardless of pain and the challenges a lack of vision. Despite piercing disappointment, let us always say "Yes" to love, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."

Coogan, Michael D., Ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Fourth Ed. Oxford University Press, 2010