

Another Sunrise
March 23, 2008 (Easter)
Ellsworth, Maine

He never really expected to see another sunrise, not after the crucifixion and such. --there's only so much a body can endure before it gives up the ghost. Besides, he wasn't sure what kind of terms he'd be on with god, not after the weeping and gnashing of teeth in the garden, and then the fear and the cold of being so very alone, right there at the end between the two others, the rude one and the nice one. It wasn't much to make you believe in miracles, even though he knew he should, even though he knew he was supposed to, but by the last few hours he was really just tired and cold, really cold, waiting for it to be over like the 40 days in the desert. It hadn't even been that long between the beginning and the end, just a few years or so, a few years of talking and walking and hoping and dreaming between the visions in the desert and the night on the cross. A few years to tell people what he believed, and in the end he wasn't even sure what he believed anymore.

But when the guards came for him, he figured it was all over. And he had died on the cross. He had very nearly died before he ever got there. So when he rolled over and squinted in the light three days later, he figured he was in some kind of afterlife. The scriptures had always been vague on what happened after death, and the rabbis never had much to say, either, so he looked up at the women bathing his brow and sighed. If this was heaven, he could handle it. Except he *hurt*.

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Maybe there was no second sunrise. Maybe he really did die, asphyxiated and suffering and abandoned, and maybe he didn't rise again, not in the way we usually understand the story. Maybe the women sat and wept over his body and then bore him away to a burial in a place where they could weep over him in peace.

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If there wasn't, if it was over, the sun would never rise again, which is surely how it felt that second day. The 31st psalmists had it right: eyes, ears, and belly could all be consumed in grief, and the story could end there.

Sometimes we need a crucible, that hot, intense space that burns away everything inessential. Love does that, and hate, and terror, and grief—we rely on our emotions to tell us when our logic has gotten the better of our good sense. We rely on our emotions to tell us these things matter. And they do. To us whose existences are so brief, the creation and destruction of life are the most pivotal events in the universe. When they happen they capture our whole attention; nothing else comes close.

The intensity of emotion over the course of holy week is incredible: fear, pain, grief, resurrection. Just in case you had forgotten what really matters, holy week will bring it home.

Being alive is crazy work, hard, impossible, rough work that makes calluses of blisters as often as not. It's a miracle anyone survives it at all. And yet

Look at us,
in possession of the same hands and feet
the same fingers and toes
the same hair and eyes as

any sainted sacred figure
of the long history of religion.
We are, in our essentials,
no less and no more than these great
people whom we have,
time and again,
called to lead us.
What excuses us, then, from
making the same miracles,
from having the same wisdom,
from doing the same hard and wonderful work?
How are we any less subject to the call of resurrection—
not to lay down and die but to take up the standard and live despite it all,
despite despair and exhaustion
despite obstacles and impossibilities,
despite the unlikelihood of thriving in a desert
fed on nothing but manna, locusts, honey.
Whether there is empirical truth to be had
anywhere in the historical record or not,
in the end it doesn't matter.
He never expected to see another sunrise,
but the stories carry a truth
beyond logic, beyond reason, beyond anything but love and hope:
he rose in the early morning
and stole away in the darkness,
stole away to birth a faith that has survived
for over 2000 years.

We don't know what happened to Jesus. Some readings of the Quran suggest that he survived, and traveled with his mother east into Persia, ending perhaps in Kashmir. He was, after all, only on the cross for six hours, far less than it would ordinarily take to die by crucifixion. He was, after all, taken down by special request, and entombed in a private cave. At least, that's what the available writings tell us.

Other readings of the literature suggest that he must have died, that survival would have been beyond unlikely into impossible, that if he had simply survived crucifixion that would have been miracle enough and the early Christians would not have needed to make more of it than it already was. (various web sources). We cannot know, not at this time in this place with the tools we have.

So we are left with the unlikely but compelling story of the resurrection, a hero killed too early and raised from his early grave by a faith stronger than death. We are born wanting the world to be fair, wanting the good guys to win in the end. The story of the resurrection is nothing if not the ultimate in superhero literature: an unlikely star rising from humble beginnings to bring a message of hope, love, and peace for all people. The story doesn't work without the resurrection—if Jesus stays dead, if he is killed by the crucifixion and gets buried, his legacy lives but it's no longer amazing. He was wise, but so were a hundred other people. He was

gentle, but so were thousands around him. What makes him inspiring is that he didn't get killed or kill anyone. The forces of tradition are not vanquished, not banished, not destroyed. The forces of tradition are simply brought to balance with the forces of innovation, his innovation, the message of hope and healing and unity that he preached during his life.

There are other versions, ones that sympathize with Judas, that leave us to wonder about Pilate, that leave us grasping for the humanity in the other players, certain that no story can be as cut-and-dried as this tale of Holy Week now seems. But lost in the scrabbling for definitive historicity is the fact that, true or not, the story has power. The story has meaning. The story has grown beyond its truth or fiction, fascinating though those questions are, into an archetype as compelling as Cinderella. A child, born with questionable parentage in an uncertain time under a tyrannical occupation, rises to such unlikely power that he is killed before his radical message causes significant unrest. But he rises again and in the original ironic twist, the faith that turns on his resurrection narrative becomes the state religion for the occupying empire.

No wonder Mel Gibson thought he could make a movie out of it. It has all the elements of good story: intrigue, unlikely hero, crisis, climax, triumph.

And so in many ways it no longer matters what really happened, because the story, like all good stories, has taken on a life of its own. This story is a story about fear and pain and speaking one's own truth, and making change and martyrdom and success, and the price of that success.

And *that's* what matters.

Because we all have fear and pain, we're all faced with the possible consequences of speaking our truths, we all have to decide what will most effectively make change and what price we are willing to pay for it. And we all hope for hope, the hope of renewal, of rebirth, of people to carry on our legacy when we can do no more.

Can you imagine what life would be
if we were not surrounded by death,
if we were not dependent on decay
for our own fragile existence?

Can you imagine life without balance
without counterpoint
without pain or suffering or struggle keeping us on our toes?
It might be bliss.

Or it might not. We might lose context, we might lose meaning
we might lose the need for hope.

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He never really expected to see another sunrise but somehow
the stories are clear and consistent on this,
he did,
somehow he woke,
somehow he felt his spirit in his body
somehow he was flesh and blood enough to be embraced by his companions
somehow he came back

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the stories are clear
the telling consistent:
on the third day he rose;
when the women went
and rolled back the stone
they found the cave empty,
the tomb vacant,
the body missing,
and they were afraid.
The oldest forms of the oldest gospel
appear to end here,
mystery intact;
possibility rife.
The options are comforting:
we can believe
but our belief is not tested,
and our source does not undermine its credibility
with a miracle too big for us to understand.

We are left to struggle with our own human craving for a salvation larger than life and a hero to match—in the face of challenges and frailties and empires that win against all odds and despite all justice, we want desperately to believe in a god who will appear from somewhere and save us, who will set things right, who will punish the wicked and reward us for putting up with it for all these years.

We want to believe it because that's not typically how our world works. We can spend an entire lifetime beating our little fists against a system that seems to reward the canny and the clever regardless of morality and grace; we can spend every one of all of our days absorbed in the unfairness of it all, and we can be right, but not vindicated, not supported, not protected. It's discouraging. It's disheartening. It's enough to make a person put down hope for a just world and embrace cynicism and Machiavellian tactics because at least they get things done.

But religion exists to move us beyond that, to offer us a hard climb out of the pit of despair that threatens us with every breath. Religion exists to convince us, against all the long arc of history, that there is good in the world, and that it is stronger than evil. It's not easy.

getting anything hopeful done in this world requires a kind of persistent rising from the dead, a calling up from the floor and rising out of the ashes. The model of Jesus and his resurrection, the triumph of Christianity from its humble origins as the crazy ramblings of a carpenter's son is the ultimate in miracle tales and relies surprisingly little on the historical question of rising from the grave. Even in branches of Christianity that follow Paul, where the salvific death is more important than the teachings, it is the model of God's ultimate love and sacrifice that makes the story work. It is John 3:16, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that makes the power. No longer are we caught as pawns in a chess game between capricious fates or disinterested deities; we are the focus of a love greater what most of us can even imagine.

And at the same time, isn't that what every parent, every teacher, every mentor does? Do we not all give our charges to the world out of love? Is that not the work of creation and re-creation, and are not these the resurrection of our greatest hopes, our greatest dreams, our greatest ideals? When we seek meaning we begin by giving ourselves and when it is time we pass our legacies to those who come afterwards, and we hope they give what we could not. The resurrection is therefore the story of every one of us, resurrected and resurrecting, at once the light and the hope of light's return. At some point we all stand trembling before the mouth of the cave and wonder where our beloved child has gone who was only days ago safely wrapped and tucked away; and when we realize that they have risen and walked we are afraid, as afraid for them as we are for the world, now that we are no longer in charge; now that we realize what power we have held in our small and insignificant hands.

Each night a child is born is a holy night (Fahs) and each time a child is risen is a miracle.

And each child has days, no matter how we work to avoid it, when they don't expect another sunrise, when whatever is happening seems a little too big for the frail humanity which is trying to contain it. Each of us wakes up one morning astonished at being awake, astonished at the brightness and bigness of the sun, and aware, profoundly aware, that we hurt, and that that wasn't part of the waking-up-again that we expected. The loss of innocence and the sudden knowledge that if we can overcome that (whatever that was) we can overcome anything, which means we have some major work to do in the world, is that pivot point called coming-of-age, when we move from an understanding of ourselves based in the self to an understanding of ourselves based outside our own skin and bones.

We are all resurrected. Jesus just has the best story about it, because his story has been made big, bigger than one man and one community in one moment in one history, bigger than specifics, bigger than one empire, even. The story of Jesus the way we tell it today is the story of hope and possibility and the chance that one person really can change the world.

And if we are all children of god or of the same great universe, then we are all equally qualified to change the world. We are all qualified to perform miracles. We are all qualified to heal the sick, to comfort the sorrowful, to preach wisdom, and to be leaders for ourselves and for others.

As we move toward greater understandings of the historical possibilities we do not strip the bible of its sacredness or of its power; indeed, we increase it. If we can understand what happened, how Jesus healed and led, then we have no excuse—we, too, can heal. We, too, can lead. Common Christian theology makes Jesus an intermediary—a more accessible face of God. He's also an example—not creating the world in seven days, but healing the world's ills. It's an example we can all aspire to—more than the unreachable goal of perfection we have this man, this human, who makes good works possible, even for our small hands.

We are, every one of us, sacred in the eyes of our loved ones. Our beloveds are more real, more vital, more immediate reminders than anything else of all that we want to be and all that we wish to do in this world. Must we not claim that honor and that responsibility with all the grace of a god?

Blessed be

and amen.