

A Glimpse and a Promise: Easter 2015

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I reread [J.R.R. Tolkien's](#) epic [The Lord of the Rings](#) recently, a book that can be read to be about elves and magic, but can also be read to be about the brutality of war, and what things are worth fighting for. In the story, ordinary people find themselves caught up in a war between good and evil, a war which threatens to unmake creation and destroy all beautiful things. The ordinary people in the story are not humans but hobbits, a small farming people who live all the way on the western edge of the world and want nothing so much as to be left alone to live their lives in peace. But a few of them have been drafted into the story as heroes, and two of them--not even the two famous ones, the ones with the Ring--these two young villagers find themselves far from home, wounded and trying to heal on the sidelines of a great battle.

They are reflecting on how they've come so far, and how unfitted they feel to the task they've been given, and what all their struggle means to their small, ordinary lives. One says to the other, "It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose: you must start somewhere and have some roots, and the soil of [our home] is deep. Still there are things deeper and higher; and not a gaffer could tend his garden in what he calls peace but for them, whether he knows about them or not (179)."

There are moments in our lives that bring us to a place like this. All of a sudden, when we have not been paying attention, we find ourselves caught up in a much bigger story than the story of our own days and years. Suddenly our story has become part of the story of humanity. Suddenly we find ourselves walking along the dry sea bottom, Egyptians behind and freedom ahead; suddenly we are standing before the empty tomb in wonder and amazement. We can barely fathom how we came to be part of this bigger story; we don't know where we're supposed to fit or whether we even believe it's happening. Don't be afraid; don't be overwhelmed; don't get caught in the trap that the story must be believed or disbelieved, as though that is what it is asking of you. Love what you love. Start there, and you may get a glimpse of your place in the story.

My own story of faith begins by loving what I love. I'm still looking for God in my life; I have had glimpses of a Love greater than my own small self, but no proof. I'm caught in a story much bigger than I can understand. Still, I love what I love.

One of my great loves in life has been the church. I grew up in church, attending a small Episcopal church in Ravenna, Ohio with my father every Sunday. I especially remember summer Sundays when the service was emptier than usual and I sat by myself while my father played the organ. I would line up the hymnal, prayer book and Bible on the pew next to me, getting ready for whatever came next in the service. I loved the smells of the church: the wood of the pews, the new-carpet smell in the fellowship hall, the melting wax of the candles. I loved the old ladies who knew my name.

When we moved to Michigan I didn't love the first church we tried, and that was painful; and I still remember how much of a homecoming it felt like to go into the Unitarian Universalist church for the first time and be welcomed by the other youth in the Sunday school. It felt like coming home. So even in that church, with its utilitarian, modern sanctuary and little talk of God, I loved what I loved. I loved the Anglican college chapel I attended for one year, and classic New

England Unitarianism, and the feisty agnostic Unitarian Universalist church with strong lay leadership where I did my internship.

I loved my church in New Hampshire, a new plant only 35 years old where a single volume held all the membership information in the entire life of the congregation. That church is all sunshine and moveable chairs; and in those places, the holy lives--you catch it in glimpses--in the way the people love each other and the moments of grace that visited our life together as a community. And I love this church, this First Unitarian Church in Worcester. I love it for the space of this sanctuary, and the choir singing with the organ, and all the history on display and tucked into corners, and its traditions, and for all of you.

I love the way you care for one another and bring the children and youth of the community into your midst. I bet there are some--I won't say old, I'll say mature--ladies here who know the children's names. I love the way you keep the connection with the ground of your being at the heart of the life of the church. I love how you live your diverse beliefs in companionship with the traditions of this community. Despite being a minister, I do not always know where to find the thing I seek spiritually. I can name it "God" but I do not know how to find it. Sometimes all of us are like the woman standing outside the grave, weeping. In my life, I always come back to these covenanted communities of faith, these congregations, these churches. Love this first, I hear my heart saying, and that love will be grounded in something deeper and higher, even if I do not know what it is.

So here we are, in church together, walking on the path together and looking for some assurance that we are not alone in the universe. Some of us seek the presence of something transcendent; some of us seek the knowledge that a human community can pull us out of our small worlds into something greater. We are looking for assurance that our story has a purpose as we walk together on this path.

The story of Jesus' resurrection is part of that assurance. Not, as a fundamentalist reading would have it, because we have to believe in the resurrection as a literal event, on par with the rising of the sun or pancakes for breakfast. Even the disciples did not completely understand what had happened; even Mary was perplexed and mistook her rabbi for a gardener outside the empty tomb.

Knowing that there is meaning in life; assurance of a love greater than ourselves; understanding of these things is a matter of faith and hope, and not a matter of observable fact. It is a truth we glimpse out of the corner of our eye, a reality we see occasionally. It is a moment we approach and see as a flash in our eyes, or the slow recognition of a feeling in our hearts. We are like the disciples, who walk with the risen Christ but do not recognize him until he is gone, or who stand outside the grave and do not see that he is present in the tending of the garden.

Jesus said to his followers at their final Seder meal, "If you love me, remember what I have taught you. My Father will send a helper, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.... You know it, because it abides in you, and it will be in you and among you (John 14: 15-17)." On Easter morning, that spirit was within them and among them but they couldn't always see it. It was there already even during that hard supper, but they couldn't see it. The miracle of Easter was making the spirit within them and among them visible for a brief moment; alive in their community; no longer contained in the person and teaching of Jesus but diffuse and burning in each of them. We still have moments when we feel that spirit. We have some of them here in

this community. Those glimpses of the fullness of life and way of truth inspire us and keep us walking on the peaceable way together.

Walking on that way together means embracing our capacity as co-creators of the world. When we create a world of beauty and truth, we are participating in the presence of the holy among us. Creating, we have the divine spirit alive and working in us and among us. There was an early Christian heresy that taught that the God alive in Jesus Christ was something totally new, and something other than the creator God of Judaism. This heresy held that creation was something wicked and sinful, and that the meaning of Jesus' resurrection was the possibility of transcending the material world. This heresy became the root, in part, of much dangerous anti-Semitism in some strands of Christianity, as Christians came to pretend that their religion was something completely different from Judaism, and not its close cousin.

Even though the primary strains of Christianity rejected this heresy, its idea that the world is fallen and sinful and the life of the spirit is what faith should seek is with us even today. Too many religious traditions teach that the things of this world are sinful. We are too often taught, by religions and by the marketplace, that sufferings of the body are only the just result of our ill-tempered living, and that if we focus our minds on something higher, only then will we prosper.

On this morning, when we sing Alleluia, we are reminded of a greater God than that. We are reminded that we affirm a Love that embraces us in our bodies and blesses the things of this earth. When we create beauty, we are part of that Love. When we act as co-creators, we participate in God. This is what has risen among us today: a reminder that we help make the better world we seek. If we know the Sacred we know it in these bodies and in this life; if we feel it at work in ourselves and our community it is in our work of creating a world beautiful and good. We love what we love; we start with our garden. Christ could be the gardener; the gardener could be us.

Christ was mistaken for the gardener; the gardener could be us. The person we celebrate and remember and wonder over at Easter is named in many different ways in the gospel. He is called Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus being the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua or Yeshua. When his birth is announced the angel says he will be named Emmanuel, or God-with-us. And he is hailed as a king, a political leader, and as Christ, again a Greek word for the Hebrew messiah, or savior. He does not ever quite say he is the Son of God; he sometimes seems to call himself the Son of Man; his followers call him Rabbi or Master. So in the Christian story, which of these things is alive again on Easter morning?

I like to think it is something greater than what can be contained in one life, even one extraordinary life. Jesus told his followers he would leave with them a Helper, a Comforter, a Spirit of Truth. He said it would be in them, or he could have said among them. This is what I believe is in us and among us today in this church. This is the power that touches our community from time to time and gives us a glimpse of the holy life that can be. This is the mystery and miracle of faith: that God-With-Us is not just a hope but a reality in the work of our hands and the dreams of our hearts.

The alleluia of Easter is the alleluia of the growing garden, and the alleluia of the loved child, and the alleluia of people made free. We only catch a glimpse of it, and then we get to work. But the glimpse is enough to remind us of the promise of grace in our lives. It is the promise that God lives in the tabernacle and also in the Temple, in the ark of every church and synagogue around the world where people are loved for who they are, and at the table of peace where we

break bread together. It is the promise that through our work toward truth and beauty, the Spirit of peace and right relationship will come to be in our communities by whatever name we call it.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

May the Spirit of Life and Love bless us all. May we be blessed when we rest in the dark of the tomb, weary and torn, needing respite. May we find wholeness and peace.

May we be blessed on those moments when the stone is rolled away and we are blinded by the light of our tomorrows. May we find courage to go through the open door.

May we be blessed when we are the ones to stand outside the grave and mourn. May we find comfort and solace in our communities and in a greater Love. May we recognize all the ways the one we have lost is still with us.

May we be blessed in our daily work, on our knees in the dirt, pulling weeds and planting seeds. May the work of our hands be blessed, and may our garden bring forth beauty and good bounty.

May we be sustained by all the times we see the divine in the face of another person. May we have the wisdom to recognize it when we see it, and to show forth in our own lives the presence of Love everlasting.

Amen.

Readings

John 20

["Christ as a Gardener"](#) by Andrew Hudgins

Sources

Tolkien, J. R. R. [The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of the Lord of the Rings](#). New York: Ballantine, 1965.