

Shaking off the Dust

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A couple of weeks ago, I was on a panel discussing the play *Gilgamesh* at the Boston Court Theater. On the panel were several religious scholars from the area, and the discussion was moderated by Kitty Felde of KPCC. Early on she asked me—as the theologian and pastor on the panel—with Easter ten days away, whether the epic had any relevance. I replied that, being Unitarian Universalist, Easter was not our story; we are the ones who believe he never got up.

It got a laugh, but it is true. Our faith and our history have focused on the living Jesus, the Jesus who counseled love for others, who told the disciples to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to visit the prisoner, to pray in private rather than parading faith in public. It is the religion of Jesus rather than the religion about Jesus that stirred our founders and led them to create a new church, one dedicated to freedom and living out the promise of faith.

But here it is Easter and all of its promise of new life. Past the bunnies and Easter eggs, the candy and meditations on spring, past the flowers and the lamb, there is this story of sorrow and fear and betrayal and death, and also, life. It is a great story.

Do you know it? The story begins, of course, last week, or maybe especially on Thursday when Jesus has a last Passover meal with his friends. They are all Jews, of course, and the Passover meal is their great celebration of freedom and faith. Jesus tells them that he is going to die soon, and that one of them will betray him. So much for celebration.

A bit later that night (I can't imagine it was much of a jolly dinner) he goes to pray by himself, to ask God that he not have to go through with his death, but God is silent. Jesus is then betrayed by Judas and by Peter; he is brought before Pilate, condemned and crucified and buried.

The disciples are distraught, and who would not be? Having given up everything to follow Jesus, in the end he has been executed alongside common criminals. Not a glorious end at all.

They don't know what to do. And so the women go to the tomb to care for the body. I like this part; it suggests that regardless of what happens in our lives, we need to carry on and do something. Attending to the tasks of living—the little duties of everyday—is where great things will happen. Mother Teresa was famous for saying that we cannot do great things, only little things with great love. So the women go to the tomb.

And, of course, it is empty. So ends the original version of the oldest gospel. An empty tomb, an angel telling them to go, for what they seek—Jesus—is not there.

Could anything be much plainer or more true than that which we seek is not in the dead but in living? That we need to shake the dust off our feet and our lives and get on with it?

We all often walk around as if we were dying. Like those three women, we often expect death. Cynics, skeptics, sure that nothing much will really change, that we will get back on the roller coaster ride tomorrow with bad traffic and bad government and hard jobs, etc., etc.

Let me be plain with you. I understand, I think, what those three women experienced. Faced with the news that I have to go and create a new life, that the past is past, I run away scared and afraid. I pretend otherwise all the time, but—and you know this too—it is hard sometimes to go on, to realize that it really does depend on us. That everything does depend on us.

I am afraid a lot of the time—afraid that the sermon won't come to me, that you will look away in boredom. Like the women, I worry that we will not have enough money for this next year. We are doing well so far, but a lot of pledges are out and we want to be able to have Sara LaWall, our DRE, be full time. I worry that people will die, that people will get ill. I worry that I will not be able to do enough. I worry that my life will not be meaningful.

We walk out of our doors into life, sometimes expecting death, and are instead told to live. And we are afraid. Good at pretending otherwise, but that fear is there. We know these three women because they are us.

Sometimes, though, in those moments, when we expect death, we find life. Scary it may be, but it is still life. That is the Easter story: life, not death. It doesn't matter whether Jesus rose from the dead—who knows, maybe he did. What does matter is that we do. Shake off the dust, I say, shake off the dust of the tomb and get out on the road of life. "Go out into the highways and the byways and share something of your new vision," John Murray said, "give them not hell, but hope, and courage. Shake off the dust!"

Here is my favorite Easter poem. I have read it before. Today, I want everyone here (me included) to hear the nightingales—there is one right next to you. The nightingales, the songs of life. And we can be lifted and "caught up in the annunciation of these high, most encouraging things."

Sunday morning with the Sensational Nightingales

- Billy Collins

*It was not the Five Mississippi Blind Boys
who lifted me off the ground
that Sunday morning
as I drove down for the paper, some oranges, and bread.
Nor was it the Dixie Hummingbirds
or the Soul Stirrers, despite their quickening name
or even the Swan Silvertones
who inspired me to look over the commotion of trees
into the open vault of the sky.*

*No, it was the Sensational Nightingales
who happened to be singing on the gospel
station early that Sunday morning
and must be credited with the bumping up
of my spirit, the arousal of the mice within.*

*I have always loved this harmony,
like four, sometimes five trains running
side by side over a contoured landscape—
make that a shimmering, red-dirt landscape,
wildflowers growing along the silver tracks,
lace tablecloths covering the hills,
the men and women in white shirts and dresses
walking in the direction of a tall steeple.
Sunday morning in a perfect Georgia.*

*But I am not here to describe the sound
of the falsetto whine, sepulchral bass,
alto and tenor fitted snugly in between;
only to witness my own minor ascension*

*that morning as they sang, so parallel,
about the usual themes,
the garden of suffering,
the beads of blood on the forehead,
the stone before the hillside tomb,
and the ancient rolling waters
we would all have to cross some day.*

*God bless the Sensational Nightingales,
I thought as I turned up the volume,
God bless their families and their powder blue suits.
They are a far cry from the quiet kneeling
I was raised with,
a far, hand-clapping cry from the candles
that glowed in the alcoves
and the fixed eyes of saints staring down
from their corners.*

*Oh, my cap was on straight that Sunday morning
And I was fine keeping the car on the road.
No one would ever have guessed
I was being lifted into the air by nightingales,
hoisted by their beaks like a long banner
that curls across an empty blue sky,
caught up in the annunciation
of these high, most encouraging tidings.*