

## “Easter Sunday”

Sermon by Joe Summers for Easter Sunday, April 4th, 2010, on the occasion of the baptism of Gavin Elijah Morgan.

I woke up this morning thinking about the fact that Easter is a little like the spiritual equivalent of the Big Bang. It's so powerful, so beyond our comprehension, that all we can do is trace some of its fragments, and so that's what I'm going to try to do today.

Psalm 118:

“Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them;  
I will offer thanks to the LORD.  
This is the gate of the LORD;  
the righteous shall enter through it.  
I will give thanks to you,  
for you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.  
The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing;  
and it is marvelous in our eyes.  
On this day the LORD has acted;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it. “

Psalm 118 is one of the psalms that we use on Easter, and we talked about it at our last spirituality discussion group. We tend to think of righteousness, being in right relationship with others and ourselves, as something we do. But this psalm suggests it's more like a doorway that God opens for us. That got me thinking about the different kinds of doors that seem to open up to me: some doors I knock on and ask to enter; others are more like trap doors that seem to spring open beneath me.

When I was a sophomore in College, I went to work at the Catholic Worker in New York City for a week over spring vacation. As I walked through the Bowery for the first time, the area of New York City which those who have lost everything through drug and alcohol addiction and/or mental illness descend to, I was pretty apprehensive. I remember being very relieved when we saw the sign over the door saying “Catholic Worker.” Walking through the door I expected to find myself in some monastery-like religious setting. Instead I found myself amidst the same kinds of conditions and people that were out on the street. Further, I couldn't find anyone who seemed to be in charge, for in the Catholic Worker houses there is no distinction made between those who come to volunteer and those who are being served. Instead of serving the poor from some kind of safe base I found myself sharing in the poverty of their lives. I was surrounded by people with significant mental illness and people whose lives had been ravaged by addiction. When I would share some of the horrors I had encountered that day with some of my new

friends at the worker, hoping they would offer some kind of word of advice or consolation, they would instead share whatever horror they had encountered that day. I felt a growing sense of despair. One night I went to sleep, feeling frightened and overcome, beneath a large wooden statue of St. Joseph on the urine-smelling crowded office floor, where I slept at night. But something happened during the night. It was like death had overstated the case for its dominion, for if things were as bad as they appeared, it simply couldn't explain the faith, hope, and joy of those at the Worker.

In the morning, when I woke up, I found myself experiencing what Dorothy Day describes as the faith that is built on faith alone. The rest of that week I experienced the living vital mystery of this new faith, which left me feeling joyful and at peace and enabled me to simply accept where people were and to do whatever little I could do to make things better.

Open for me the doorways of right relationship and I will enter them.

Easter is a kind of doorway into a different world, a different humanity. I want to speak of that doorway, but first, I want to talk about the world that I think Easter is a deliverance from, because I've also had a chance to revisit it recently.

Paul Ricoeur says that all the levels of human consciousness, as they have existed across time, continue to exist in our present consciousness. If Ricoeur is correct it might explain some of the doorways I seem to fall through. It would also suggest that, though I love time travel movies, I'm not quite as crazy about traveling back into the past as I like to think I am, for when I do, it can be pretty awful.

When bad things happen to me, it's sometimes like I've gone through a doorway back into a Pagan world. Only this isn't that fun warm Pagan world where animals talk and God lives in everything, which is the testimony we have from many ancient cultures. My Pagan world is much more ominous. My world is ruled by violent and irrational forces that are out to get you and make life a desperate struggle for survival. For example, the other night after getting some bad news, I dreamed it was night and I was having to walk down and then around this small mountain and into this circle kind of race track, with skiers and snowmobiles whizzing around me. I could see them, but I was afraid they couldn't see me. The only way I could get out of it was by climbing up this small Ferris wheel-like thing that did lift me off the slippery track, but only by my holding onto it, and then as it turned, adjusting myself so I didn't land on my head.

Finding yourself in a world that doesn't make any sense, a world of violent, irrational forces, who seem out to get you, is, I think, so deep in me that it's why I've never liked Alice in Wonderland (another new movie that got me thinking about doors) or the paintings of Salvador Dali, because they describe a world I know only too well, and I don't like to going back to intentionally. It's the world that, according to Sartre, properly leaves us feeling a sense of nausea. Though I've never been able to read his book by that title, I do, however, love the way the band Procol Harum was able to capture this experience and surround it with such a graceful melody

in a “A Whiter Shade of Pale.” \*

If bad things can make me fall down a kind of rabbit hole into a violent irrational world, Easter represents for me a kind of doorway, a portal, out of this world. This is also the testimony we have from many, many ancient peoples who experienced Easter as a kind of deliverance from a universe ruled by violent irrational forces.

Easter is about the doorway into a world where life, rather than being about a race to survive, is about the freedom to be and to love. It is about a world centered in love, an experience of love reigning supreme and its rule bringing coherence and meaning, where formerly there was only fear and the pursuit of survival.

This Easter world is not a utopia. All the same violent forces are at work here, but it is no longer the kind of nightmare where you are controlled by them, for what has emerged is a nightmare-overcoming faith, a nightmare-overcoming self, a self who, when it sees suffering, does not recoil in horror, fearing that it might happen to you, but is able to reach out in love and compassion to others the way the Good Samaritan does.

While we were in Paris, we saw that great doorway, which the sculptor Rodin spent 37 years working on, which he entitled the “Gate of Hell.” I’ve not read anything about it so I may have this completely wrong, but what I saw was many people in hell reaching out and comforting others. Where people can still love and care, you are not in hell anymore.

Easter is about a space where you are not under the dominion of death any more. It is a hell-overcoming, world-overcoming, space that engenders love, faith, and peace, giving us the power to love and care.

Easter is an experience of the impossible being possible. How can you experience joy in the tomb of a loved one who has died? Yet that’s what happens, as the disciples experience Jesus as alive amidst them and within them, so alive, that one of the reasons they took pains to so graphically describe his death, was so nobody would be under any illusion as to whether he had really died or not. Having seen the worst of the worst, the One they loved, tortured and crucified, themselves enslaved by terror, unable to act or support him in any way--the disciples now find that something has happened, that somehow they are now in a different world, that they are different people, that somehow Jesus’ strength and peace and joy and life-fullness now reigns in them.

Easter is about of new way of seeing. It is an about the inner eyes of faith, the experience of seeing a way forward, where it seems obvious that there is no way forward.

Easter is a doorway back to paradise. No, it is not the paradise that our reading from Isaiah says we shall know one day, the paradise of no more war, no more suffering, no more sorrow, but it is a paradise none-the-less, for here we can see and experience the one in whom is heaven.

It is the paradise of the after word. Easter is a mysterious word that we can't yet fully comprehend, but which clearly says death is not the final word. And the presence of this mystery re-brackets our lives, so that we can have lives of freedom and dignity, beauty and grace, even though we find ourselves in the midst of terrible suffering.

No longer is death the final word on the meaning of one's life. It may be part of the cycle of life, but it is not the meaning of the whole cycle. No longer is suffering testimony to our being alone and abandoned in the universe. No longer are experiences of hell a foreshadowing of what is to come. No longer do you have to deny what is awful and painful in life in order to have faith in love and a loving God, because today, all those things have become testimony, not to the absence of God and meaning, but to a God who embraces us in the midst of them and a meaning so deep, it can contain them all.

Instead of bearing our experiences of suffering in isolation and shame, now we can entrust them to the One who knows them all, and on this day reigns, ready to walk beside us as we walk through our own times of terror, humiliation, depression, suffering, and death.

Not being alone with such experiences fundamentally transforms them because, ultimately, what is most terrifying about them, is not these experiences themselves, but the feeling that in the midst of them, we are cut off, that we are alone, and life is meaningless. Shame is the mantle that, in the midst of suffering, wraps us in isolation. Remove the shame and we may still suffer, but have the possibility of connection with others, of connecting with God within us, even in the midst of it. On this day, shame is removed like those bandages and left in the tomb, so that we can experience new life. The power of Jesus' radical solidarity with us in the midst of our suffering makes an eternal difference, creates a new world, for it is hard to feel terrorized and shamed if you are not alone. In this new creation, even experiences of death and the absence of God become occasions where there is the possibility of experiencing the reign of life. Shame becomes nothing to be ashamed of, thus removing its most poisonous arrows. Suffering, becomes simply what it is, suffering, not some message about our being unloved and unlovable.

Easter is about a new heart, a heart of flesh taking the place of our hearts of stone. The stone rolled away from the door is the stone which formerly protected our hearts from the world but which, in the process, also left us dead and cut off and unable to see, unable to truly love and to be loved.

Easter is about a kind of joyful journey out into the world. It's about a faith that's not about hiding behind closed doors, in churches or ideologies, but is rather about feeling called out to encounter--God in all. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Easter is about living fully in the world and in time, God/Jesus out there -- in creation, in the stranger, in the very situations that frighten us, ready to meet us there and to help us overcome our fears, our distrust (the distrust that can poison all), ready to resurrect us when we find ourselves beaten, defeated, dying, ready to call us back to life again, and again, and again.

Easter says we don't have to live, prisoners of fear, slaves to guilt, filled with resentment, buried in shame, We can live lives of love, boldly claiming ourselves and others, filled with thankfulness, empowered to forgive and be forgiven.

This is the new world, the new heart, the humanity, the new communion, the new creation, we are here to claim this day for Gavin, and for ourselves and others, the life of the Holy Spirit, as it is found in an "inquiring and discerning heart", "the courage to will and to persevere", a "spirit to know and to love", and the gift of joy and wonder in all creation.

The power to live, wholly and freely, unrestrainedly letting ourselves love because we're putting our trust in the One who says that ultimately it is love alone that matters, ultimately love is going to be triumphant, ultimately we will know its full reality, just as it currently knows us.

Easter is the sacred gift of a new heavens, a new earth, and a new humanity--what a wonderful world.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

\* Though some see the song "A Whiter Shade of Pale" as portraying some kind of drug induced hallucination, for me it is like a surrealist portrayal of the world of "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. However, here it is a miller, rather than a mariner, who tells a "tale" that causes "her face, at first just ghostly" to turn "a whiter shade of pale."

The kind of nausea captured in lines like "turned cartwheels" cross the floor.

I was feeling kinda seasick,  
but the crowd called out for more.  
The room was humming harder  
as the ceiling flew away "

is contained within and balanced by its grace-filled melody.