

April 4, 2010/Easter Sunday/David L. Edwards

A New Heavens, A New Earth, A New Us

Isaiah 65:17-25 *For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth....*

John 20:1-18 *Jesus said to her, "Mary!"*

*The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth
if God were king. It is God's dream...It is a dream for the earth.*

--Marcus Borg

God's Dream for a New World

There is an important connection between the readings from Isaiah and John's gospel. Isaiah expresses the vision of God's kingdom, what the world looks like when God truly reigns in all dimensions of life. John tells the story of Mary Magdalene encountering the risen Christ. It is her journey from despair to hope and joy. There is a social, even a global dimension to the resurrection. It is not only a matter of what Jesus' new life means for us personally, though that is important. It is also a matter of what it means in terms of the world itself.

This is very important today because we lose hope and sink into a kind of low-grade despair about the world. There are so many overwhelming needs facing us--the destruction of the creation itself, widespread and growing poverty, the cycle of violence and war, our desire to control others, our nationalism. Even religion has become destructive. All of these things speak of our failure as a human family to live in harmony with each other and the world around us. For the resurrection to have significant meaning for us, it must involve both our personal lives and our life as a human family, as part of the whole of the creation.

Religion at its best connects us with hope and a positive direction for our lives. For us in the Jewish/Christian spiritual tradition, hope has to do with what scriptures call the "kingdom of God." It is the way God created the world to be. It is the way God is still working to renew the world. The kingdom of God is human life characterized by generosity, peacefulness, equity, compassion, and right relationships between people. Isaiah 65 is only one of many expressions of the vision of the kingdom of God. We are called to let go of the past and open ourselves to God's re-creation of life, the "new heavens and new earth" that God is bringing about. God means for all children to be born into life that sustains them. The elderly will live out a full life, free of anxiety and fear. People will build houses and plant their crops and not be exploited. They will have meaningful work and their children will not be exposed to violence or hunger or other threatening circumstances. So-called "natural enemies," animal or human, will co-exist peacefully. There will be no violence or destruction in the world that God made.

This is God's dream for the world. It is how God made the world to work. It is what God intends for us as a human family. It is not dreamy idealism. It is what God wills for us and the world, and the life of faith is about living out of this vision of life.

Jesus' teachings and his life were centered in this vision of God's reign over all of life. Jesus fully embodied what it means to live as a human being devoted to God's dream for the earth. His suffering and crucifixion were the result of his uncompromising devotion to the vision of God's kingdom. His death was the fear-filled response of those still attached to the illusions and delusions of power and violence and self-serving. His resurrection was God's affirmation of a life lived out of God's dream for the world. As we gather on this Easter morning, we celebrate the undying hope that is grounded in what God intends for us and the world.

They Have Taken Away My Lord.

We are a community of those Jesus, the living Christ, has called together to bear witness to and live out God's dream for the world. Yet we get discouraged and lose hope. There are times when it all really does seem like a pipe-dream, a bright but too-fragile bit of idealism that doesn't hold up in the face of our human destructiveness and insanity. This is where the story of Mary comes in.

Mary is right where we often find ourselves as followers of Jesus. She has come to Jesus' tomb early in the morning, perhaps to anoint the body or maybe just to grieve. She finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. After Peter and John come to the tomb and leave in an excited hurry, Mary stays behind in grief and shock. For all she knows, not only has Jesus been killed but also his body and grave site have been desecrated. The dream has died and has been trampled on.

Mary looks into the tomb and sees two angels, though she doesn't recognize them as divine messengers. Woman, why are you weeping? They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put his body. She doesn't know who "they" are and she is distraught because now she doesn't even have Jesus' body as an object of her devotion and love. She is in despair.

Now there is a voice behind her. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She turns to see a fellow she assumes to be the gardener. Maybe he knows something. "Sir, if you have moved his body, just tell me where, and I will take him away." Jesus now calls her name: "Mary!" And Mary suddenly springs to life as she recognizes Jesus. "Rabbi! Teacher!" What was dead in Mary is suddenly alive. Her love, her devotion, her giving of herself to all that Jesus was and represented, it all springs back to life. There is in Mary a resurrection of hope.

The gospel writers skillfully avoid giving us a photograph of the resurrected Jesus. They all protect the utter mystery of the resurrection. Mary doesn't recognize the resurrected Jesus; she takes him to be the gardener. Only when he speaks her name does she know him. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus spoke of himself as the good shepherd who calls each sheep by name (John 10). Now he speaks the name of one of his sheep, and she knows his voice. The risen Christ is not something to be proven. He is experienced as he calls us by name, as he reawakens us to our relationship with him, a relationship of devotion and commitment to following him, to living the way of God's dream for life. So Easter is not about our heads. It is not about a doctrine of the resurrection that must be figured out intellectually or defended. It is about our hearts and our whole lives being called to wake up from the dreadful illusions that seem to dominate the human family to the reality of God's vision of life, even the illusion of despair.

Do Not Hold On to Me

Mary must have made a move toward Jesus, to throw her arms around him in joy. He quickly says, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go and tell the others that I am ascending to God." The life of faith is not about holding onto Jesus, clinging to Jesus as a personal possession. In other places the gospels show us Jesus discouraging this kind of holding on to him. Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I ask? (Luke 6:46) Peter wants to build booths up on the mountain to make permanent the moment of Jesus' transfiguration, to hold onto that experience. But a voice from the enveloping cloud tells the disciples to listen to Jesus. Listening in this sense always means doing what one hears, living it in one's life.

The greatest spiritual teachers always discourage their disciples from holding onto them, from becoming attached to them. Instead, they point their disciples to their own lives, to embody in their own living the truths they are learning. It is not about holding onto Jesus. It is about following him, making the commitment to live out in one's own life the vision of God's kingdom that Jesus himself embodied, lived and died for. Do not hold on to me. I am going on, continuing the journey of what God has given me to do. Come, follow me.

The story continues, of course, as a community of the risen Christ gathers and gives its life to what he gave his life to—the reign of God over all of life, beginning with our own lives. As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, we celebrate the renewal of hope as the living Christ speaks our names. It

is the hope that the world can be what God made it to be, that the human family, beginning with us, can live the life of God's kingdom. This is what Jesus gave his life to and what he fully and completely lived out. It is the life to which he calls us each by name, not to hold onto him but to follow him in life of the kingdom of God. It is also the life we share in community, each of us discerning what piece of that kingdom is ours to nurture and tend, what each of us is called to express and be faithful to, with the gifts God has given us. And together, as a community of the risen Christ, through the commitments we make to lives of prayer and service, the inward and outward dimensions of our lives, we sustain the vision of life as it is meant to be. God is always about to do a new thing, creating new heavens and a new earth, and calling us in the life and spirit of Jesus to be part of it.