

March 31, 2013 / Easter Sunday / David L. Edwards

A New Heaven and 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

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 own resurrection from despair to hope, from emptiness to joy. There is a personal and a social, even global dimension, to the resurrection. It is about experiencing God's power of new life in our own lives and in the world.

The resurrection is about hope, not as a lofty idea, but as a reality we experience, something that is grounded in God's presence and activity, what our spiritual tradition calls the kingdom or realm of God. It is the way God created the world to be, characterized by generosity, peacefulness, equity, compassion, and right relationships among people. Isaiah 65 is one of the most eloquent expressions of the vision of the kingdom of God. God is creating new heavens and a new earth—not a heaven without an earth, but a whole new reality. We are called to let go of past and present forms, and open ourselves to God's re-creation of life. This is resurrection language. And it has to do with THIS life, not some other life beyond. What does the Lord's Prayer say? "Let your kingdom come" and "let your will be done ON EARTH as in heaven."

What does this new heavens and earth look like? Children born into life that sustains them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Those who are aging live out

their lives without anxiety and fear, without having their well being threatened. People build houses and plant their crops and are not exploited by others. They will have meaningful work and their children will not be exposed to the hate, discrimination, sexual or other abuse, bullying, guns, or any other threatening circumstances. So-called “natural enemies,” animal or human, will find ways of co-existing in peace. There is no room for violence or destructiveness in the world as God made and is making it to be.

This is God’s dream for the world, what is intended for us as a human family. It is not dreamy idealism, but something we live and work toward, in ourselves and around us. And we can do so with confidence and hope because it is what God wills for us and the world. It is way life itself seeks to manifest and unfold. It is what the life of faith is about—this new life emerging in us because it is our true life, and our discerning the ways we are called and gifted to contribute to what God is already doing.

Jesus’ teachings and his life were centered in this vision of God’s reign over all of life. He fully embodied what it means to live as a human being devoted to and drawing hope and energy from 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 attached to the illusions and delusions of power and violence and self-serving, in disharmony from the created purposes and patterns of life. 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 and indestructible hope that is grounded in what God intends for us and the world. It is a dream that will not die, that is rooted in the nature of God and the creation itself, and that calls us to be part of it in the diverse callings and with the diverse gifts God has implanted in each of us. And if we are living that way, if we let go and allow ourselves to be part of that great stream of what God is doing, we will experience resurrection all along the way—in us and around us. This thing is personal, and it is global, even cosmic.

They Have Taken Away My Lord.

We are a community of those Jesus, the living Christ, has called together to grow in our perception of and living out of God's dream for the world. We get discouraged and lose hope. There are times when it all seems like a pipe-dream, a bright but fragile bit of idealism that doesn't hold up in the face of what we think of as reality—the greed, ignorance, violence, indifference that seems like a flood washing over our heads. And sometimes we feel overwhelmed by our own struggles of mind and heart, our sense of our own smallness or the futility of our efforts. This is where we need the story of Mary.

Mary is right where we often find ourselves as followers of Jesus. She has come to Jesus' tomb early in the morning, perhaps just to grieve over his dead body and the dead dream. 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, Jesus' body and grave site have been desecrated. The dream has not only died but also been trampled on.

Mary looks into the tomb and sees two divine messengers, though she doesn't recognize them as such. 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 even know who "they" are, and she is distraught because now she doesn't even have Jesus' body as an object of devotion and love. She is in despair.

Now there is a voice behind her. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" This must be the gardener. Maybe he saw something, knows something. "Sir, if you have moved his body, just tell me where, and I will take him away." Then she hears 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.

Only when Jesus speaks her name does Mary know him. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus spoke of himself as the good shepherd who knows and 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. We experienced him as he calls us by name, as he reawakens us to our life of discipleship, of following him in the way, the

journey of living out God's dream for life, beginning in our own life. His voice rekindles in us the knowledge of ourselves in our relationship with God, as those who are loved eternally. Easter is not about our heads, a "doctrine of the resurrection" to be figured out intellectually or defended. It is about our hearts and our whole lives being called to wake up from the dreadful illusions, including the illusion of despair, that seem to dominate the human family, to the reality of God's vision of life, God's presence and activity that brings new life.

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. It is not about worshiping Jesus or becoming somehow dependent. 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 "mountaintop experience". But a voice 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. And this "come, follow me" means awakening to our own lives in relationship with the God who is everywhere and in everything as the power of life and new life. It is about hearing our names, as did Mary, the call that touches our deepest, authentic self, the unique and precious persons God made us to be. Following Jesus is not about emulating a great spiritual teacher. It is about becoming and being our truest self, discerning what we are called to be and to do in

the service of the world as the realm of God, claiming and using the diverse gifts God has given us.

For us in this community, it is our faithfulness to the inward and outward journeys of our lives that enables us to touch in ourselves and to perceive in the world around us the realm of God. As we work with our lives as this journey of faith, we will see and touch in ourselves and in the world the Power of Resurrection—God who is always bringing new life.