

“Midwives of Hope”
© Rev. Wendy L. Bell
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“Surely there is not a superabundance of hopefulness...these days.” That opening line from our first reading this morning really grabbed my attention when I saw it again this week. It is from a church newsletter column written by the Rev. Gilbert W. Bowen, who was senior minister for 37 years of Kenilworth Union Church – a large non-denominational church in Illinois.

I found it originally in a book I inherited from one of our previous ministers, Malcolm Sutherland, who had kept it for his own reasons. I then folded it I placed it in the drawer of my night table. Then overtime it found its way into one of my books as a placeholder – a bookmark. Whenever I would see it, I would read it again...and then put it aside and forget about it. But these last two weeks it has been persistent in popping up when I’ve most needed to see it.

“Is anyone really positive about the economy? Do you really see any way out of the impasse in the Middle East? Are we not faced with a breakdown in healthy expectations, a feeling of wonderment, even despair at the way things are going?” Where he asks, “How many are optimistic about our relationships with the communist block?” we might substitute “Islamic extremists” or “terrorists” or even “Somali pirates.”

How timely are these words! Yet they were written over a quarter century ago in 1982. And even back then, Rev. Bowen was encouraging his congregation to “look again at the possibility of achieving a hopeful spirit, yes, right in the midst of a world that so often seems devoid of a basis for such hope.”

His words are very apropos for us this Easter morning. For this year in particular, many of us no doubt find ourselves standing in the midst of our own metaphorical graveyards – graveyards that house the corpses of so many broken dreams, shattered promises, and scattered visions. Some of the devastation is economic, some political, some quite personal. Much of it has left us wounded and scarred. Some of it has left us afraid for our futures and for our children’s futures.

Into those metaphorical graveyards enter Mary Magdelene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. According to the gospel accounts of that first Easter, they went to the tomb of their dear friend, their teacher, to minister to him even after death. They went to dress his body – to embalm it, according to the translation we heard this morning. They were deep in mourning when they stood before that tomb. Their leader was dead. Their inspiration was gone. Everything they’d hoped for, everything they’d dreamed, had been stolen from them. They were devastated. Their futures were uncertain.

They were, however, certain of what they’d find that morning: a closed tomb, sealed with a heavy boulder, which they alone would not be able to move. And behind that stone, a corpse.

They weren't being pessimistic about this, but completely realistic, and that was what they went there expecting to see.

And yet they were utterly surprised and completely astonished by what did find. The stone rolled back. The corpse missing. A young man who told them that Jesus was not dead. They never could have imagined that anything like this would happen.

According to the version of the story we heard this morning, they were so stunned that they went away and said nothing to anyone. But the final verses of Mark and the other gospels tell a different story. They were afraid, but joyful. They went to the disciples and told them what they'd seen. And, as you might expect, the disciples said it was all nonsense.

Jim Wallis, in our second reading this morning, suggests that these women are history's "midwives of hope." In fact, he says, we are all called to be "midwives of hope." What does that mean? He asks, but he never really does give a direct answer. So it is left for us to answer this morning: "What does it mean to be one of history's midwives of hope?"

On Friday night a number of us gathered to hear the re-telling of the Passover story, the story of liberation, of new life for the Jewish people. The story begins with an unnamed Pharaoh, who has grown concerned that the Jews in Egypt have become too powerful. He feels threatened by them, and so he has them enslaved. Then he orders every Jewish boy thrown into the Nile and drowned.

But before that, according to the book of Exodus, he tries a different method of infanticide. He calls two midwives and orders them to kill every male newborn that they deliver. They do not obey his order. That's not, after all, what midwives do. Midwives side with life, not with death. And so the Jewish boys are spared and the population continues to grow. Only then does Pharaoh come up with the idea of having the baby boys thrown into the river.

This story really highlights the importance of midwives to history. They don't actually "deliver" babies, of course – mothers do that. But midwives do, during a very important time of transition, hold life in their hands. How they respond in the face of new life can, in fact, mean the difference between life and death – not only for an individual being, but also for a people.

Midwives attend birth and bear witness to it. Midwives coach, support, and encourage. They prepare the way for new life. They help to ease the transition of the baby from the womb into the open air as it begins to breathe on its own. The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "When conditions are sufficient, things manifest." Midwives are those who help assure that conditions are sufficient so that mystery can become manifest, sometimes surprising us utterly.

Because of the midwife connection, a number of commentators have said that it makes perfect sense that it was women who were at the tomb that morning to hear the news that Jesus was alive. In the deep symbolism of the Easter story the tomb becomes a kind of womb – a birthplace, a gateway to new life. How the women respond to the "birth" means the difference between "life" and "death." In sharing with others what they saw, they keep hope alive for an entire movement.

Now, we might think the story of Jesus' resurrection is impossible. We Unitarian Universalists tend to be very rational and, when it comes to this Easter story, often very literal. But the value in the story is, in my mind, that it **is** a story – a story that illustrates a number of truths...for example, that sometimes that which seems impossible, is, in fact, not so.

Jim Wallis makes the point that so much of history was once thought to be nonsense.

Hope unbelieved (sic) [he says] is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history in the process of being changed. The nonsense of the resurrection became the hope that shook the Roman Empire and established the Christian movement. The nonsense of slave songs in Egypt and Mississippi became the hope that let the oppressed go free. The nonsense of a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, became the hope that transformed a nation.

To be called to be “midwives of hope” means first to recognize the possibility of transformation and new life. It means to bear witness to the fact that something new is being born every moment. Not everyone sees it, but we are called to bear witness to life as it manifests anew in surprising, unexpected ways. We are called to stand at the ready, watchful, vigilant. We are invited to remember and to remind others that sometimes the agony in which we find ourselves – the agony, which can feel like the pangs of death – may actually be newness struggling to be born.

Annie Dillard has written, “...Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”¹ She has also said, “We are here to abet creation and to witness it...so that creation need not play to an empty house.”²

To be a midwife of hope is to stand on the side of possibility, in solidarity and support. It is to look at all the evidence, as contrary as it may be, and hope anyway. And not just to hope, but also to act in ways that support the conditions necessary for new things to manifest. To be a midwife of hope is to be present for, witness to, and an active part of the transformation from “no life” to “new life,” from “no hope” to “new hope.”

This morning, I want to ask you...

What is the tomb before which you find yourself standing this Easter morning?
Is it personal? Is it financial?
And what are you expecting to find there in that tomb?

What is the stone, which feels impossible to move?
What is the corpse that you are certain you will find within?
What is the death – literal or metaphorical - that you woke up mourning today?

What feels impossible to you in this moment? What are you certain can no longer be?
What dreams of yours have been dashed? What plans crushed? What vision has dried up?

¹ From *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 8.

² *Singing the Living Tradition*, #420.

Whether we believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus or not, the good news of Easter for all of us is this – what we know as an end is also a beginning. New life, new possibilities, and new dreams are always on the verge of being born again.

In the gospel accounts of that first Easter morning, the women are told to tell the disciples that Jesus is alive and that he has gone ahead of them to Galilee, which is where they will find him. The symbolic importance of that detail is not to be overlooked. For Galilee is the very place where, according to the story, Jesus had begun his public ministry. Galilee is the birthplace of Jesus' intentions. And although Jesus has died, these midwives of hope are called to invite us to return to that cradle of his dreams and visions and see them born anew.

And so are we, too, called. In times of devastation and apparent hopelessness, we are invited to “look again at the possibility of achieving a hopeful spirit, yes, right in the midst of a world that so often seems devoid of a basis for such hope.” We are called to dream anew and to invite others to dream with us.

As Gilbert Bowen went on to say,

The point is important and critical. If we allow ourselves to become the victims of our moods, given the regnant mood of the day, we will most likely end up cynical and despairing. Life-saving hope is sustained only as we persist in acting in hopeful ways, as we make the decisions, whether in boardrooms or personal chambers, that express confidence in the future.

Hope [he goes on to say] is something you do, and hope is something you owe one another. We are not dealing here with the dispositions of particular types of personalities. We are talking about a moral imperative binding on us all. Why? Because history and human experience demonstrate that facts alone do not determine the future, rather attitudes acted out play a crucial role. Hope is capable of creating new facts.

Whatever the stone before which you stand, may you find it in yourself to face it...
And when the stone is rolled away, may you find the courage to enter the tomb...
And having done so, may you find yourself utterly surprised by what you discover there
May you come to believe again in the possibility of transformation, of newness, of rebirth...
And may you bear witness to that possibility in this world that sometimes seems so impossible.

So may it be in all of our lives...Amen.