

## **The Mess of Resurrection**

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Luke 24:1-5

Upon the occasion of my graduation from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I was given a large rose-hair tarantula. Assuming for some reason that it was male (though later finding out I was probably wrong about that), I named it Romeo.

**Perhaps a spider the size of my hand was an odd gift for a teenage girl, but Romeo eventually endeared herself to me, as my whole family became fascinated with her strange way of life right there in our midst.** Most of the time, she just stepped around slowly, eating crickets and spinning silk. But once in a while, Romeo would stop eating and drinking for a couple of weeks, looking suddenly ancient and grey, patches of hair falling out, like the Velveteen Rabbit of tarantulas. She'd look worse and worse until we'd find her flipped over on her back one morning. The first time it happened, my dad thought she'd fallen over that way and gotten stuck, or died even, so he reached in and flipped the spider upright again to see if she'd recover. We were sure Romeo wasn't gonna make it. But again, when nobody was looking, Romeo flipped onto her back, and this time, **she managed to complete the task she'd been working up to for weeks, as her kind had been doing for 400 million years, of shedding her old skin and emerging once again as a handsome black and red spider, good as new.**

She would go through this transformation at least once a year. During my sophomore year of college, and I promise I'm not making this up, Romeo molted right on Easter Sunday.

**Witnessing Romeo's first molting came at a time of questioning for me, a time when I had experienced a lot of loss.** My family was changing- my parents had divorced and were remarrying. My grandfather, my godmother, and one of my closest friends had all died within a few years, and I started to grasp at a very young age the truth that loss and death are part of life. Part of every life.

**What stunned me about Romeo, then, was how very dead she seemed** just before shedding her skin and being, in her own way, born again.

What started stirring in my heart as I watched Romeo climb out of her old skin and emerge like new was the discovery of a different truth, so unbelievable yet happening right before my eyes: **sometimes what *looks like* death is, in fact, a new beginning.**

And so I joined the company of philosophers and theologians who have asked throughout the ages, **what does it mean to come back to life?** We can't help looking to the natural world to help us find meaning.

Have you heard the amazing story told on the NPR show Radiolab about scientists who have been studying caterpillars?<sup>i</sup> **For millennia, especially in Christian cultures, we have found the lifecycle of butterflies to be heavily symbolic of resurrection,** signs of hope for just how radical transformation can be in this life, and how beautiful a thing we humble humans might have to look forward to after we die. The caterpillar goes into its chrysalis, looks like death for a time, in its tiny tomb, and later reemerges as a beautiful, colorful butterfly.

**But do you know what really happens inside that chrysalis?** Modern science has allowed us to find out more – not exactly more answers, but much deeper questions. **Inside that chrysalis is not a caterpillar growing wings.** Not at all. Once the caterpillar's built its hard casing around itself, **it actually disintegrates into goo** – a soup of cells that doesn't resemble its former body in any way, though its microscopic heart and brain are in there somewhere. Over the course of a month, a seemingly new creature forms, and the wings that have always been within the caterpillar, like tiny rolled-up blueprints of its future form, finally unfurl until it hatches from the chrysalis and immediately takes flight, never looking back.

**Another deep question emerges: is the butterfly the same animal that the caterpillar was?** And, by extension, when we experience some kind of

resurrection, even of the much less literal kind, do we emerge as the same person?

**The scripture we read today shows the disciples confronted with hard questions as their lives are turned upside down again by Jesus.** It's pretty unbelievable, after all. When you have seen death with your own eyes, as the disciples had, you are emotionally and spiritually a mess. **You don't expect life on the other side.**

When Mary Magdalene, Joanna and the other women arrive at the tomb to find the stone rolled away, **they are filled with questions. Are we in the wrong place? Are our memories failing us?** What happened to him? Is there a terrible joke at our expense?

**And the frightening angels ask the most bizarre question – Why do you look for the living among the dead?** Why, where else could the story of resurrection begin?

**Here's a secret: I don't know what happened to Jesus after he was killed and buried.** I find so much reassurance knowing that no one does. We don't know if it happened the way Luke says it did, or John, or Matthew or Mark, **but we know it's true: after he died, he lived.**

**The reality of resurrection, the earthy, messy, strange and beautiful promise of new life, became central to the message of hope that we still celebrate at Easter time. I love that the mothers and fathers of our faith recognized Easter as a season, and not just one fabulous holiday. When spring comes to us in the Midwest, I can't help thinking about how *seasonal* resurrection is in the natural world around us.** In this part of the country, where the seasons are so distinct and extreme, everything seems to be coming back to life, even us. It's not only pet tarantulas and butterflies that go through a bodily resurrection. If you've been around here long enough you know about the big cicadas that lie buried for 17 years, drinking from the roots of trees, before emerging with an earsplitting scream.

**And the Spring Peepers, the tiny frogs, smaller than the cicadas, actually, who live in wetlands and forests.** I first encountered them in Iowa. They survive cold winters, in temperatures as low as 8 degrees below zero, by staying still, and allowing up to a third of their body fluids to freeze. They will thaw back out when the temperatures rise again, and when the weather starts to warm up, they too will sing!

**Some might say I'm reading too much into these creatures. Not only anthropomorphizing them, but also conveniently making them members of my religion.** But where I'm going with all this is really the opposite – I think we don't appreciate how very literal the resurrections in our lives can be. **Sometimes, we overthink it when our bodies and souls just know, like so many creatures do, that it's a natural part of life to go through a time that looks to all appearances like death in order to emerge anew.**

If a radio story about caterpillars and butterflies can inspire such awe and wonder in me that I have to pull my car over off the highway just to listen – **then why would it so hard for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade me to believe that my life could be transformed?** Why is it so hard for any of us to believe that we can heal from old wounds, or a broken heart? Or recover from addiction or mental illness? Or that the pain or grief we feel today could ever be less sharp? Why is it so hard to imagine our nation healing from white supremacy and all the forms of oppression that go with it? Or to envision God's church thriving on the other side of the end of Christendom, rising on fresh wings of hope and witness and purpose so needed in this world?

**Even exciting changes feel like a death to us, when all the while new life waits with its wings curled tight for safekeeping.** When I shared this message a few years back with Robbinsdale UCC and Parkway UCC they were in the messy and sacred process of discerning a new partnership – joining to become one church. As I pondered what that was like for them, I noticed something in the scripture I had never seen before.

The women go back to the tomb after having witnessed Jesus' death and burial, but they waited til after the Sabbath day, "resting according to the commandment." **And it was during that Sabbath day – the day of nothingness and spaciousness, freedom from doing and merely being – when the miracle of resurrection occurred.** The Sabbath is the chrysalis time of restoration to life, the sacred separation from all the doing and earning and controlling and planning that makes up our daily life.

**How hard it must have been that Sabbath day for the women to simply do nothing,** to wait, to fold their hands and let themselves grieve. Their grief was so messy, their fear so real and so permanent, the last thing they could imagine on the other side of that Sabbath day was life.

It strikes me that Edina Morningside and Linden Hills are in the midst of one of those messy and sacred times now too, faithfully anticipating the transformation of church – how are you doing with it? Are you restless to bring the change more quickly? Anxious to peer into the future and know how all the questions get answered? Even in moments of excitement, does a fearful little voice within you whisper doubtful thoughts, thinking the doubt can delay the new life to come? Here's the thing. When the Spirit moves, when Jesus calls, when God acts in mysterious ways, the new life to come is not only a choice or a possibility but a promise. On the other side of resurrection, you will be the same, and yet you will never be the same!

**It doesn't make any sense at all, but it's as natural as the turning of seasons. Look around! Resurrection is everywhere. Everywhere!** Why shouldn't we join the chorus of the cicadas and the frogs who in their short lifespans chant with all they've got that **LIFE is what it's about.**

My friends, I can't put that into words. But in my moments of doubt, anxiety or awe, I look to the poets who can. I offer the words of Hildegard of Bingen as a blessing to all of us in the messy and sacred transitions, the followers of Jesus

suspended in a Sabbath moment that contains the secret of life itself! <sup>ii</sup> Let us pray:

Holy Spirit,  
giving life to all life,  
moving all creatures,  
root of all things,  
washing them clean,  
wiping out their mistakes,  
healing their wounds,  
you are our true life,  
luminous, wonderful,  
awakening the heart  
from its ancient sleep.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.radiolab.org/story/goo-and-you/>

<sup>ii</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, 11<sup>th</sup> Century.