

## *Beauty's Threshold*

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### I.

Today we stand on a threshold. We stand peering through a doorway which has been opened. That door had been closed for a long time, seemingly forever. We couldn't help but wonder what lay behind it. And now, suddenly, the door is open. Light streams forth and we are filled with a mixture of hope and foreboding. What would it mean to cross over that threshold? Would we die or would we live?

John O'Donahue, the late poet and philosopher, who shared with the world insights into Celtic spirituality, reminds us of the origins of the word "threshold." It comes from the word "thresh," as in threshing floor. On the threshing floor, the wheat is separated from the chaff; raw plant is made ready to eat by the critical division of that which nurtures from that which does not. Today, we stand on the threshing floor, and for a moment we hold on to what truly gives life and we let go of everything else.

In a word, today, we hold on to beauty. We hold on to an event that happened once and changed the world forever. We hold on to a new happening that continues happening on Monday morning as much as Sunday morning. We hold on to resurrection, which is a funny way to put it, since the resurrection of Jesus Christ is at once mystery and miracle, exactly that which may not be held, precisely that which cannot be embraced, controlled, or codified.

In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler-Bass includes a chapter on Beauty as a spiritual practice. Beauty is the practice of creating, receiving, and recognizing something that is luminous, elegant, and beyond rational description. Butler-Bass refers to the resurrection as one of those stories, notions, symbols whose meaning is fought over so vehemently. She quotes someone as saying, "It is so beautiful that it has just got to be true, whether it happened or not."

## II.

In the argument over whether it happened or not, I land squarely in the camp of it happened. My evidence? You. Me. The Church. As flawed and hazy as the church can be, it may seem to be a poor piece of evidence to assert the historical reality of a grand event such as the resurrection. The church, the witness to the Risen Christ, the most diverse global community in the history of the world, exists because *something* happened that moved those first followers from sorrow to tomorrow, grief to belief, defeat to their feet.

Consider that in scripture, there are no eyewitnesses to the resurrection itself. There is a stone rolled away. An empty tomb. Discarded cloths. Even angels. But no one telling the story dared claim that they saw it for themselves. Perhaps they knew they were standing on a threshold between seen and unseen, earth and heaven, mind and spirit. That to which they were testifying lay beyond the horizon of their immediate experience.

In 2000, as a prelude to our honeymoon, Brooke and I helped lead a group of youth to Russia to collaborate on a work project with Russian youth. One day, we took an excursion to a beautiful orthodox church. As the group entered a room filled with icons, a young woman named Natalia pointed and told me, “that is my family’s icon.” It was the picture of the child Jesus on his mother’s lap. “What do you feel when you look at it?” I asked. With her eyes fixed on the icon, she held out her hands, opened her mouth slightly, and let out a barely audible breath. She said no more. She was, in that moment, apprehending beauty, receiving it graciously and also finding herself at the edge of language, the limits of reason, the end of explanation.

## III.

In the resurrection narrative of John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene has no categories, no language to describe what she is experiencing. With each movement of the narrative, she gradually awakens to the beauty of what has happened. Unwittingly, she inches closer to the threshold, beyond the confines of common categories of experience.

When Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb and finds it empty, she is concerned with the whereabouts of a corpse. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,” she tells the disciples, “and we do not know where they have laid him.”

After the disciples come and investigate, they return to their homes, but Mary stays on, weeping. As she weeps, perhaps hoping against hope, she bends down to look into the tomb. She inches closer. She sees two angels in white, sitting where Jesus had been laying. They speak to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She inches closer but still can’t let go of her familiar expectations, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

“When she said this,” the narrative continues, “she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.” She’s standing at the threshold and doesn’t even know it. In fact, in one of the most comical lines in the Bible, she supposes him to be the gardener. Her categories for what is possible are so rooted, rote, and routine, that she stares at Jesus, her Lord and friend in the face and does not recognize him. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” She makes one last effort to stay on this side of the door, on this side of comfort, on this side of expectation. But to no use. She has inched too far forward, close enough to hear Jesus say her name, “Mary!” To which she responds, “Rabbouni!” which means Teacher.

It is interesting, even beautiful, that her recognition comes not from seeing, but from hearing. She hears the voice of her shepherd calling her name. In our culture, obsessed with and distracted by images on screens, this ancient scene gives new meaning to the phrase “voice recognition.” Hearing her name called by the one she knows and loves and trusts, a new life opens up for her, a life on the other side of the door, on the other side of the threshold. What a beautiful sound. Here, beauty reveals a new truth, beyond the old categories of cudgels and corpses.

#### IV.

“It is so beautiful that it has just got to be true, whether it happened or not.”

Easter Day, the Day of Resurrection, is our day of salvation, a day of expectations shattered and promises fulfilled. It is a day on which we affirm not the certifiability of an observable event, but the receptivity of our hearts to a new possibility, the possibility that God speaks the word “life” over and against the givenness of death. And we can only receive this new possibility by faith, that is, by an informed trust that God has the final say and that the final word is “life.”

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, Saint Irenaeus wrote something beautiful. He wrote: “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” If our trust in the resurrection results in anything, let it be this, that the Risen Christ bids us be fully alive, in the face of all of life’s contingencies, even in the face of the great contingency, death. Have you seen signs of humans fully alive, even in the face of death? These signs of beauty are everywhere. We need only attune our senses to perceive resurrection power everywhere.

Losing her sight, a 95 ½ year-old woman fully alive, knits prayer shawls for those in need of comforting embrace.

Living with ALS, a man fully alive continues to love his wife and children, to give thumbs up to visitors, to laugh, to cry, and to try new spiritual practices.

In a bustling downtown, a woman fully alive offers free hugs on the street corner.

On church steps during a parade with more than a few paramilitary elements, two people fully alive hold up a banner for hours that reads “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

On the anniversary of a disastrous war, a veteran fully alive stands humbly, voice shaking, before a gathered crowd, describes his wounds, which are many, and says, “I must speak out because it’s the only thing that keeps me sane.”

These people and many more have inched closer and closer to the threshold. In fact, the vocation of the church is to encourage people to inch forward, to leave behind old categories and to behold new beauty. Again, in the words of John O’Donahue, “beauty has the power to heal patterns of repetition.” Beauty reveals an “emerging fullness.” Through the apprehension of beauty, we “cross over thresholds to new ground.” Beauty is “grace, elegance, and depth.” Beauty is a homecoming.

But the homecoming is also adventure. There we find that the closed world of our wanderings opens up onto new frontiers. We cross boundaries we had previously avoided. We fear death no more because death no longer has the final word. The final word is life, and it is spoken by the Risen One whom at first we didn’t recognize. If we listen closely, if we inch closely enough to hear him speak, it sounds like this (imagine him speaking your name).

Uh oh, we inched too close,  
And now, on the threshold, fully alive,  
In the face of worn out categories, fully alive,  
In the face of self-doubt, fully alive,  
In the face of diminishing hate, fully alive,  
In the face of words that demean, fully alive,  
In the face of the body that fails, fully alive,  
Responding, Rabbouni!, when we can’t believe our eyes,  
Always, from now on, fully alive. Amen.