

Easter Us to Joy

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Serendipitously, this year Christians, Jews, and Muslims celebrate the great of Easter, Passover, and Ramadan at the same time. Once every 33 years or so, the three great religions which claim Abraham as an ancestor celebrate at the same time. For all three religions, these are festivals of renewal, rebirth, transformation, and hope.

For Christians, Easter follows the 40-day season of Lent, a time of reflection and introspection, which is also a time to make a new commitment to the way of Jesus. Lent ends with the crucifixion on Friday. For the original followers of Jesus, it was a time of hopelessness and loss, of confusion and deep despair. Everything they had hoped had come crashing down under the brutal, frightening power of the Roman Empire. Empire killed their Master.

On Easter Sunday, these early followers were surprised by the miraculous, loving power of God who brings life out of death. Empire thought it had won. Empire was wrong. Life triumphs over death. Love always wins, even though it appears not to.

The title of this column comes from a prayer poem by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, entitled “Marked by Ashes.” Brueggemann takes us on a journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. “All our Wednesdays are marked by ashes — // we begin this day with that taste of ash in our mouth: // of failed hope and broken promises, // of forgotten children and frightened women, // we ourselves are ashes to ashes, dust to dust; // we can taste our mortality as we roll the ash around on our tongues.”

It’s an honest acknowledgement of the pain of our lives, the sorrow which we endure. We hurt other people, and we are hurt by others and by life. We endure a thousand deaths, from the death of a loved one to the death of failed dreams, from the death we experience with a dreaded medical diagnosis to the death of dashed hopes.

But Brueggemann continues, “We are able to ponder our ashness with // some confidence, only because our every Wednesday of ashes // anticipates your Easter victory over that dry, flaky taste of death. // On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you — // your Easter parade of newness. // Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us, // Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom; // Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth. // Come here and Easter our Wednesday with // mercy and justice and peace and generosity.”

Brueggemann pleads that all the deaths in our lives might be remade into moments of life. I love the way he uses “Easter” as a verb. It becomes an action rather than an event. He beseeches that we might be eastered, that something may happen in us, around us, among us.

He also invites us to be open to being eastered, to join in the power of life, to participate in the healing of the world. His words reach out to touch our hearts so that we might live with “joy and energy and courage and freedom,” so that we may be “fearless for your truth” and live with “mercy and justice and peace and generosity.”

This is an invitation to life. I believe we all hunger for such an invitation to life, whether we are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, atheist, or agnostic. We all yearn for life to be whole and good for all people. We desire to treasure creation, and long for it to be renewed. We hunger for a society in which every person is treasured as unique and valuable. We ache with those who are at the bottom of society, who have been victimized, and who simply can’t make it on their own. We aspire to live in healthy and grace-filled ways. We crave to live in peace and justice so that all can share in the wealth of the universe.

It's this kind of impulse which compels people to donate to help those who are in need. People are reaching out with countless expressions of support for the people of Ukraine. Millions of dollars are donated every year to support people struggling with cancer or to fund research to find a cure for diabetes or to help those struggling with mental health issues.

I believe this generosity arises from a hunger for wholeness in life. That, for me, is the heart of the story of Easter. It's a story of life overcoming death. The story tells our hope that we can exchange a story of death and anger and hatred and division with a story of life and reconciliation and peace and unity.

In that sense, Easter is, and always will be, a verb. It invites us to make the journey in which we grow into a story of life. We pray to be eastered into joy and hope, grace, and compassion.

Easter isn't something that just happened way back then. It is something that happens repeatedly in our lives. It is a deep metaphor for moving from death to life, from pain and sorrow to wholeness, from separation to reconciliation. It is a story of recovering from addiction and overcoming all the "days marked by ashes."

Easter us to joy. It's the same prayer which is sung in "Fiddler on the Roof"— "To life, to life, l'chaim. L'chaim, l'chaim, to life. Life has a way of confusing us, Blessing and bruising us. Drink, l'chaim, to life!"

Easter us to joy. This story is not a conclusion, not an ending. It is an invitation to live fully and freely, in service and compassion and grace. Above all, it is an invitation to a life marked by love.