

CHOOSING LIFE WHEN LIFE IS TAKEN AWAY

John 20: 1-18

How do we choose life when life is taken away? How do we find a new way to walk, to run, to experience laughter and joy, fulfillment and purpose when vital things in life and people in our lives are taken away?

The way we read the Easter story and the way we tell it makes a difference. It's easy for us to read it as a story of triumph. Jesus' enemies thought they had defeated him by killing him in a most publicly humiliating and painful way. But then he rises up and a powerful, world-transforming movement rises up behind him, triumphing over all opposition, even through persecution and suffering.

But the real story is different. And because it's different, it is more relevant to real life and our lives. For as strong as we are, we are also vulnerable. As courageous as we are, we are also afraid. As capable of overcoming many obstacles in our lives as we are, we also struggle with ongoing issues. The struggles in our relationships, the limitations in our capabilities, the losses in our faith and hope, the shortcomings in our capacities to love... all of it can't just be shaken off as if Good Friday is behind us forever in the past and Easter Sunday will mark the present and future uninterrupted. That's not real life as much as we'd like it to be.

But does that have to make life doomed to diminishment? No. Easter Sunday is about being given fresh clarity, fresh courage, new faith and hope and new depth in our capacity to love in ways we are present with others and free to weep with them as much as to laugh with them. Even as we carry the wounds and scars of Good Friday, and the losses too, we are given new ways to go deep with others and to savour life in a way we have not known it before. It's not about being better, but about being different. And different can be rich and rewarding in ways we have not known before. We can honour our losses and our loved ones, and enjoy the taste of newness too. We can keep having to heal our wounds even as we are building new muscle and heart capacity.

OK, so how does that work? In order to hear the story of Easter morning in a fresh way, let me tell another story. This story comes from a book by a philosopher from Harvard University named: Jonathan Lear. His book is entitled: *Radical Hope*. In the book, Lear tells the story of "Plenty Coups" a great chief of the Crow Nation, an indigenous people who hold land that is in the U.S. Plenty Coups was chief of his nation from the late 1800s into the 20th century. He led the Crow through the collapse of their whole way of life when it was stripped from them through colonial settlement. Before he died an old man, Plenty Coups described what happened to his people when their whole way of life collapsed: "When the buffalo went away

the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” Nothing happened for a long time... After their Good Friday, the Crow lingered in a long Holy Saturday death...

But then, things changed... Somehow, Plenty Coups helped lead his people into a new way of existing, and even thriving, once their traditional way of life was no longer possible. He led them into finding new life after a terrible death. He led them through their massive loss of so much that was precious into a new way of life in such a way that they continued to identify as Crow people, even though they had to create new traditions and a new sense of their identity knitting their past with their present and future.

Let's look at the story of the Crow briefly. The Crow's way of life was built around hunting, trapping, and a warrior culture. From the earliest years of life to the final years of life, the people came together to train themselves for success in battle and secure food for strength and nourishment. Their culture was tied to honour and success according to the standards of being great warriors and hunters, and the nurture and support of the rest of the people who provided the infrastructure for that to be possible. They learned discipline, they developed all kinds of rituals and customs. They established rules of decency and respect for each other and for other nations with whom they competed in battle. They learned these values from their elders and nurtured them in their youth.

But something dreadful happened to this whole way of life. The U.S. Government outlawed the free movement of the Crow across the land. They outlawed tribal battles between the Crow and other nations like the Sioux. And they confined them to reservations. Not only that, but over time, they re-negotiated the land settlements, confining the Crow to smaller and smaller pieces of land. So, how were the Crow to live once their whole way of life was pulled from under their feet? How were the Crow to define themselves - their sense of honour, discipline and respect? How were they to hunt when there was no longer any buffalo? How were they to develop skills and principles as warriors when there were no more battles to be fought and contests to be waged? How would they understand themselves as Crow once all their important customs and rituals, centered around their way of life, no longer made sense?

Here's the miracle: the Crow did not disintegrate. In fact, even though the change was so devastating, they succeeded and continued to live together as a people. They took to farming and became successful business people and entrepreneurs. Plenty Coups was also baptized a Christian and found ways to knit his Crow identity and beliefs into his Christianity. Through his leadership, the people rose up again after their total loss. How did this happen? What was it in Plenty Coups that gave him the courage and vision to move as he did and succeed?

Every Crow boy was required to go through a ritual after which he became a man. Part of this ritual involved going out into the forest alone for a period of time, surviving on his own, and

hopefully having a dream inspired by the divine. You see, the Crow believed that Creator spoke through dreams, something we also see in the bible. Thus, a young male hoped to receive some message from Creator which he then carried back to the tribe. The dream would be narrated and then interpreted by the elders who could read behind the symbols and events something of Creator's word to the people.

In the case of Plenty Coups, he dreamed about the end of the Crow nation as a nation in the traditional sense. He dreamed that something like the white man would come and destroy their whole way of life. In fact, his dream suggested that the Crow would no longer be a nation at all. However, his dream also offered some hope. The hope was that if the tribe listened and watched, they would learn how to walk forward and find a new path. Neither Plenty Coups, who was only a boy at this time, nor the elders of his people had any idea what this new path would be. They had no language for it since their whole way of looking at the world, at life, at their future, and so forth was through what they knew. The dream suggested that all of that would pass away. So what would the new way of life look like? How would the Crow find a way to be Crow with none of the traditional sources of their identity in place? Plenty Coups' dream pointed to the disappearance of the buffalo, the end of their freedom to roam the land, to fight, to build alliances, to build their communities as they built them. All of that would pass away, and yet.... there was hope.... And hope would come by listening, watching, trusting and learning to walk accordingly.

It's hard to imagine a future when we are swallowed up by all we have lost. It's hard to trust that new life can emerge when our struggles, disappointments and failures won't stop tormenting us. This is also the situation of the disciples when Jesus dies. Like Plenty Coups and the Crow, their own sense of any future, their whole identity as Jesus people starting a new movement of renewal among their people... all of that dies with Jesus. Like Plenty Coups' description of the soul of his people: When Jesus died, the hearts of his people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again. And it wasn't just that he died. It was the way he died – tortured, crushed, publicly exposed over six hours... And now, on Easter Sunday morning, the women go to the grave to care for his body and what do they find? The tomb is empty! To add to the disgrace of his disfigured body is it's absence! What had his enemies done to it?!

But here's the thing: Jesus' friends and followers who have all caved in in some way in the face of his vicious torture and death, now react differently to this new report of his missing body. Peter and the beloved disciple come to the grave to check things out for themselves. They see, and in the beloved disciple's case, we're told they believe, whatever that means. Mary Magdalene, who had been with Jesus all the way, is the one person in this rendition of the story, who stays. She breaks down weeping, feeling helpless and hopeless. And yet, something happens. She encounters someone. At first she doesn't recognize him. But then she hears her name called – "Mary!" She knows that voice. She sees! She believes! So what happens? Mary

runs to proclaim the news to the others. Mary preaches the first Easter Sunday sermon: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

OK, but what does this mean for Mary and for the rest? What do they do now? The world hasn't changed. Those in power are still corrupt, self-serving and cruel, and they believe they have won... again! And yet, as we know, the story continues. The Jesus community rises up with Jesus and paves a pathway forward. Even as they have not transformed their nation, they will form communities of the kingdom, spaces and places where the risen Christ rules, ways they may each and together be transformed into the hands, feet and heart of the risen Christ who will be with them and in them as Holy Spirit... This is yet to happen, but it will.

Life will become beautiful again. Even though they cannot erase the past, the terrible way that Jesus was killed and the awful ways they failed to understand him and stay by his side... new doors will open for them and they will find ways to be human with a faith, hope and love deeper than anything they had known before... As mentioned already, the Crow, with the leadership of Chief Plenty Coups, negotiated successfully with the U.S. government so that they became successful farmers and they lived independently within a system they had not chosen. They cultivated their language, customs and traditions and found ways to transpose their warrior past and the buffalo hunt into new ways of honour, respect and pride as a people. Of course, none of this takes away the evil of what was done to them, just like none of what happened to Jesus' followers in their new way of being took away the evil of what was done to him by a cruel, corrupt and self-serving leadership in cahoots with Rome.

And this speaks to us in our own lives here and now too. Easter Sunday is not about erasing Good Friday. New life, new relationships, new joy, new pathways in our lives, new learnings, new capacities to believe, to hope and to love... none of it is about pretending all that has been lost is forgotten. In fact, the way we carry our past and integrate it into who we become is critical for how successful our present and future become. What we learn and what we gain is crucial for the humans we become. Have we learned deeper compassion and understanding because of what has happened to us? Have we learned greater patience, grace and forgiveness? Have we built up greater resilience and gratitude, taking things much less for granted? Have we appreciated anew how every privilege in our lives is also an opportunity and responsibility to bless the world and work for a better one? Or have we diminished ourselves with bitterness, fear, shame and feelings of defeat? Have we lost our purpose and not found any new one?

Easter Sunday is the centre of the gospel drama. Everything that leads up to it and everything that follows it depends on how we read and interpret it. And key to that reading and interpretation is how we integrate Good Friday with Easter Sunday. People are suffering and some of those people are close to us. Some of those people are us. The world is not in God's control. But God is moving among us, seeking open hearts eager to rise up into newness. Jesus

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! May he rise up anew in you today and throughout this season of Easter. Hallelujah! Amen.