

April 16th, 2017: Emerge: Easter



So here we are... Easter Sunday... surrounded by such beauty! Beautiful flowers, beautiful music, beautiful people dressed up in our Easter best! We've come to celebrate together this great day of love conquering hate – of hope and new life and resurrection having the last word! It is certainly a day of celebration when we can shout, Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed!

But as fun as it is to get all spiffed up and decked out... Nadia Bolz-Weber, reminds us in her book *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, "Easter is not a story about new dresses and flowers and spiffiness. Really, it's a story about flesh and dirt and bodies and confusion." She suggests that Jesus wouldn't have looked very impressive that first Easter morning, not in the churchy sense. Remember how Mary Magdalene mistook him for a gardener? Bolz-Weber says that's probably "because Jesus still had the dirt from his own tomb under his nails." While the images in churches of the risen Christ never show dirt under his nails (they make him look more like a wingless angel than a gardener), death and resurrection is not a pretty thing... it wasn't for Jesus and it isn't for us. In order to experience resurrection, first we have to die... physically, emotionally, spiritually, or metaphorically. Resurrection is about God taking something that was dead... or as good as... and making it new, breathing new life and hope where there was once hopelessness and despair.

An image that has been utilized for years as a metaphor for resurrection is that of a butterfly. A young butterfly looks nothing like the beautiful, colorful, winged creatures we all love. They begin as caterpillars, creepy crawly, squishy, bound to the earth, without wings to help them soar. When the time comes, a caterpillar forms a cocoon (technically called a chrysalis) around itself and hangs out until one day, the cocoon breaks open to release the delicate flapping wings of a mature butterfly. What a perfect metaphor for the transition that Jesus makes; from traveling this early life beside us, to the enclosure of a tomb, only for a while, until the day of resurrection... Easter morning when he breaks free from death's tomb. This image holds more depth than we often ascribe to it though... for we usually just focus on the end result... the beautiful butterfly... the victory of resurrection. BUT there's more to unpack...

You see... a butterfly doesn't just appear out of thin air... it needs that time in the dark, protective shield of the cocoon, to form and create such fragile beauty. Within the enclosure of the cocoon, the caterpillar nearly melts away, save a few vital organs, the remainder of which is re-created into a new shape and form. This dark time, which looks so much like death, is critical, necessary for the formation of the butterfly. In the same way, as hard and painful as it is to perceive; to get to the resurrection... we first need the tomb. Resurrection would not have been possible if Jesus had not died first. As we gather on Good Friday, we hear Jesus' cries from the cross... "Why? God, why have you forsaken me?" and we wish that his story could have ended differently, that he could have somehow gotten out of the pain and torture of the crucifixion, but that's not who he was. Jesus was too committed to living out the message he came to share, of the love and justice of God, for him to give in to the powers that persecuted him. His death,

while excruciating for him, and painful for us to recall each year, was able to be used for good. God took the mess and ruin within that tomb and re-created something amazing from it. Like the butterfly that emerges from the cocoon, so is the resurrected Christ from that tomb; more beautiful and powerful than we could have imagined before entering the darkness.

And what's pretty amazing about our God, is that this spirit of resurrection lives within each one of us! We are Easter People! People of hope and the promise of new life, not only after we die an earthly death, but also when we die the little deaths that our lives are FULL of... the little deaths that come when we lose a loved one, when our dreams for the future are shattered, when we receive the diagnosis that we dreaded, when those we counted on let us down and break our hearts. These little deaths, familiar to each one of us, are not the end of us... despite their challenge and heart ache, they have inherent tomb and cocoon potential... potential to lead us into a season of resurrection. You know, being Easter People doesn't mean we walk around life in our best Easter dresses with a smile plastered to our faces expecting each day to be a victory. No – our faith never promises to GET US OUT of struggles and challenges, rather faith in God's resurrection power is about giving us the strength to get THROUGH the garbage, the muck, the little and big deaths that we all experience, and helping us to rise stronger, wiser, kinder, with more love and hope than we had going in!

Resurrection is about making lemonade from lemons! I know this saying has been around forever, but there's a new show out that, for me, has brought new depth and beauty to this phrase. How many of you have seen "This is Us"? It is a wonderful show about people... real people struggling through the real challenges of life. Mental illness, obesity, alcoholism, job loss, cancer, death, blended families... In the first episode, two of the main characters, very pregnant with triplets, go into labor and give birth to two healthy children, and one stillborn baby boy. The parents are devastated! They had built their hopes and dreams on bringing three little babies home from the hospital... but now they're faced with the loss of a child. After a caring conversation with their doctor, who had experience with the loss of his own child, the new dad was inspired to make lemonade from the sourest lemon life could give; he convinced his wife to adopt an abandoned infant who had been left on the doorstep of the fire department and brought to the hospital for care. THAT IS RESURRECTION! - an opportunity at new life for an abandoned child and for a family in grieving. Yes, their own child had died... and adopting this new baby would never replace that loss, but opening their hearts to new possibilities and sharing their love created new life and hope where it was sorely lacking.

And that was just the first episode... the season goes on to tell their stories... some beautiful, some challenging, some plain old, messy family stuff! Through each episode, we're reminded that resurrection is not simply a once-and-done thing... the hope and possibility that new life offers is something we experience over and over in life, continuing to say YES to new life, new hope, and new love.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, continuing her reflection in Pastrix, writes, "New doesn't always look perfect. Like the Easter story itself, new is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don't actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I

manage to not mention when I'm right. New looks like every fresh start and every act of forgiveness and every moment of letting go of what we thought we couldn't live without and then somehow living without it anyway. New is the thing we never saw coming – never even hoped for – but ends up being what we needed all along.

“It happens to all of us. God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.”

And that my friends, is the heart of this Easter celebration... the love of God that won't ever let us go, that won't ever give up on us... not in life, not in death, not in all of the mistakes we are bound to make throughout our time on this earth. The God of all creation will continue to “reach down into the dirt of our humanity and resurrect us from the graves we dig for ourselves” – will continue to bust us out of our tombs and cocoons, as we emerge from the darkness into the light of new life, new hope, and always the love of God. For this amazing gift of love, God we give you thanks! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed!