

Our scripture readings this week beg the question.

Do wombs and tombs have anything in common other than their spellings?

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor says in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*: "...new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

I like the idea of a seed covered in the dark nurturing soil waiting upon the warmth of the earth and the sun to shine to know that it is time to grow.

And I am captivated by a new life forming and growing in a womb. Cells dividing... organs, bones and muscles and skin forming in the rich darkness of a womb.

But a tomb? Normally we go to the cemetery and grieve what was... but do we ever think about the tomb being a place for new life?

New life starts in the dark...

In my early 20's I went caving in the mountains of west Virginia and turned off my headlamp just to see if I could see anything. And even though my hand was up against my face I could not see it. It was then that I got scared. What if my headlamp went out? I would never be able to find my way out of the cave. I felt totally vulnerable because I came face to face with my lack of control. This is what it feels like to be in the dark.

We can get confused and lost in the dark. In the dark, the world becomes almost menacing.

I am sure we can all remember stories from our childhood about being afraid of the dark. The ghosts and goblins and witches that came alive out of our storybooks and animated the night.

But as an Easter people we say that there can be no resurrection without the tomb of darkness.

So today, I invite us to ponder the gift of darkness.

And we are going to use the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into butterfly to help us.

Did you know that when a caterpillar becomes a cocoon it stops being a caterpillar?

A caterpillar doesn't go into a cocoon — it becomes the cocoon.

When the caterpillar becomes a cocoon, there is no caterpillar left.

The cocoon effectively has goo inside, and nothing recognizable of the caterpillar remains.

The caterpillar actually transforms into a goo filled cocoon.

All of the ingredients to be a cocoon were inside the caterpillar the whole time. And all the ingredients of the butterfly are in the cocoon. But when it is a cocoon it is neither a caterpillar nor a butterfly. This is the inbetween, the liminal, the unknown, the dark.

And we tend to want to skip over this part. When something ends we want to quickly move to the new thing. But it is precisely in the darkness where transformation happens.

One thing we will never know is what happened to Jesus' body in the three days between Good Friday and Easter morning.

Did God take Jesus' body, heal it, and then put Jesus back in the tomb? Did Jesus just get really great sleep, and then wake up?

We don't really understand how Jesus came to be conceived or came to be resurrected — but we take it on faith that these two things happened and did so in the obscure darkness out of anyone's sight.

We can mischaracterize the dark as a place of uncertainty, fear, and even death. But that isn't the whole picture. Darkness is also a place of incredible possibility.

All change involves a death – the little deaths we experience that help us to grow and evolve.

Like a loss of a relationship or job. Facing an illness or old age.

A loss of a relationship can help us see how we need to work on unfinished emotional issues from our childhood.

Dealing with an illness may require us to let go of an unhealthy way of life,

The pain of losing a job may help us to find a better job was awaiting us all along.

It is through such death that change happens. These kinds of deaths are not something to fear even though at the time we feel like we are stumbling in the dark.

But it is that darkness that gestates the birth of the new.

But often we can only see that once we have journeyed through that valley of death.

A little over 10 years ago, I was working as the director of new faith community development for the Oregon and Idaho conference of the Methodist church. Through the machinations of church politics my position was terminated, and I was assured that I would be appointed as a pastor to a church in the area. Because the bishop knew at that time that Hannah was going to be a senior in High school and it was not a good time for my family to move.

At that same time, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and my family relied on the conference's health insurance so I needed a job.

Long story short... I was only offered a ¼ time church position with no health benefits. The hierarchy was making a statement about how they viewed me and my worth. I was being voted off the island.

This was devastating to me on many levels. I felt forsaken by the institutional church. They made it clear through their actions that they did not value me or my gifts and that there was no future for me in the church.

I was angry and I was also filled with shame wondering what was wrong with me that this could happen. I worried about how I would pay for my medical expenses and help to support my family financially. I was discouraged, numb, depressed, and cried and swore a lot.

Then I had a vision... it was of an ancient doorway with angels surrounding it – my guardian angels. They said, “Beth, we are with you... You can do this... the path is through this doorway. Feel all the feels. Go to the depths of your pain. Abide in this darkness. That is the way forward to be right where you are. This is the threshold to your new life.”

I was the caterpillar turning into a cocoon with all the emotional goo.

So I gave myself over to the darkness, trusting that feeling all the feels, questioning everything and disintegrating into nothingness, was actually the way forward.

Spiritual mystics call this the “dark night of the soul” when we experience spiritual and even existential doubt, emptiness, and discouragement. While it is difficult and painful, the dark night of the soul is a crucial part of the process of spiritual transformation.

After all, It is out of this darkness that creation formed. In the beginning was void, nothingness. And it was out of that goo of nothingness that God said, “Let there be light.”

Darkness is the place that is waiting for the morning to come.

Darkness is where we go to rest and recuperate and recover.

Darkness in the cocoon is a place of mysterious transformation where a worm becomes a winged thing of incandescent beauty.

And if we rush it, the butterfly never has a chance to unfold into its glorious potential.

So, I trusted in that darkness and waited. After my breast surgery, the doctor came in and said, that she had made a mistake and that the breast tissue she took out was cancer free.

That summer my guardian angels told me to sit on my porch and recover. I told them that I had to find a job. They said, sit on the porch. I made a deal – 6 days a week I would sit on my porch and one day a week I would go into my office and try to find work.

My good friend and colleague Paul Nixon wanted me to join his business as a ministry coach. But I had to build my client base.

Then one day sitting on the porch I got my first phone call inquiry from a pastor who wanted to hire me as a coach. And then the next call came and the next call – all while sitting on my porch.

Within 6 months I had built a coaching business that equaled the salary I was receiving from the church.

Now, when I look back through the rearview mirror of my life – I see Grace. I see the metaphysical kick in the pants that I needed to move on and spread my wings.

Through the death of the old something new can be born. Death is not something to fear.

I see that those times of struggle were my refining fire of faith that helped me let go of a story of my unworthiness that no longer served me.

I discovered that feeling into the pain of my situation did not kill me but made me stronger and more resilient.

By abiding in the darkness, I was able to come to find my light, my truth, my worth, my love. I discovered that the more I trusted in the unknown, the more I rested in the freedom to explore new possibilities.

And in that practice of letting go, and “allowing what is” it is amazing what happens... life becomes more joyful and fulfilling than we ever thought possible.

By learning how to gracefully let go of the old life we can say yes to the adventure that life is meant to be.

In other words, Death is an initiation that allows us to move from the known into the unknown so that we can let go of what holds us back from passing through the threshold to the new, from our sense of separation into the possibility of oneness and purpose.

All death requires that we surrender to the gifts that life has brought us so we can remember the truth of who we truly are.

A holy and sacred life can be lived in the time between what was and what is yet to become. The cocooning time.

I invite you to think back on a time in your life when you struggled and maybe felt all alone and forsaken. What was that time like for you? How have you grown? What gifts did you receive? How did that darkness nurture new life in you?

This church has had a glorious past. Our building is well loved and stands as a symbol of its history in this community. But in these post pandemic days our congregation has become small.

And we wonder... are our best years behind us?

“Emerging into new life” – transformation, is inherent in the Christian story and in our story as followers of Jesus. It is the way to the truth and new life. It requires that we trust in this way when we are in the dark, when we aren’t sure what’s “next” for us.

There are things we need to leave behind when we cross that threshold and consent to following Jesus.

Maybe the spirit of God is inviting us to transform as the caterpillar to the cocoon. To become holy goo... curious about what might be next, trusting in the as-yet-unknown. Knowing that God is at work not just in our past, or even in the possible future, but also in this moment, the uncomfortable now.

These stories of the womb and the tomb can be a reminder for us to find the holy, mystical, and spiritual presence of God in the incomplete, in the potential, and in the waiting time.

What a wonderful way to start this Easter Season as we explore the stages of emergence that a butterfly undergoes as it prepares to leave the confines of a cocoon into the glory of whatever comes next!

The question for us is, Will we allow ourselves to trust in the dark where transformation begins?

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