

“FROM DEATH TO LIFE”

Isaiah 65:17-25; John 20:1-18

April 20, 2025

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I recently had a revelation that my perspective on life was backwards. I owe this radical new insight to Sallie McFague who believed that science and religion share a common worldview, namely that creation, and that includes human beings, is constantly moving toward something new; and that the way it and we do this is through sacrifice.

So the trees in a forest lose their leaves in the fall. They become food and help sustain ants and other creatures who break them down until they become part of the soil that brings nutrients back to the trees. In the spring, after a long rest, the trees will begin to consume sunlight, transforming it into chlorophyll that will green up the new leaves. Nature, left to itself, is constantly being renewed, and transformed. The science of evolution tells us that things move to greater and greater levels of complexity. This, let's call it progress, comes through the sacrifice of individual plants and creatures.

From the perspective of individuals, it looks like things are moving toward death, but in nature, death is never wasted. It springs up into new life. When we think about God as the author of this process, what Sallie McFague says in *A New Climate for Christology* begins to make a lot of sense. She writes, “What *really* empowers both God and reality is self-sacrificial giving (one's life) in order that new life may appear” (p.33).

Now most of you know that I had a birthday a couple days ago and I tried out saying, “I'm 66 going on 67.” The prospect of new life, new experiences feels less real than when I was three, going on four. But here's the thing. Jesus doesn't ask your age when he says, “those who want to be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” Religion works the same as reality. If you want something new, you've got to give up something old. If you want to have a happy marriage, you better have something to give to it. If you want to be a good parent, you better be prepared to make some sacrifices.

Jesus gave his life, and Mary didn't recognize him. She mistook him for the gardener. Now there's some irony. She mistook him for someone who grew beautiful things in dead and decaying matter. Gardeners know about seeds, how they have to die, break open, in order for the plant to grow. They know about good soil, composed of dead and decaying matter, how the soil breaks down into its component parts so that the new plant can take in the elements that will help it become what it was made to be.

We planted more daffodil bulbs in the fall. They don't exactly work the same as seeds, but they read the signs. They draw on their environment. They wait for the soil to warm up, for the sun to make its appearance. And even when the air holds on to the chill of winter, they're there

announcing spring, declaring the new life coming. That's why lilies are symbols of resurrection. They reflect the nature of the real world which is always moving toward new life.

We have to work on remembering that the world, that we are moving from death to life. Because it's not how we experience the world. We spend so much time hanging out by the grave, weeping over our losses. There are plenty of losses. Our bodies wear out. Our memory is not what it used to be. Friends and family members die. And so much happens in the world that eats away at hope. Debra Rienstra writes in *Refugia Faith*, "It's easy to survey the world's decay and give into hopelessness. How tempting to cede sovereignty to the law of entropy, to calculate the exponents on the crises we face right now, to surrender to the persistence of human wickedness and foolishness, to resign ourselves to a downward spiral. On some days that seems the most sensible, realistic posture" (p. 157). That's where Mary is. The most she seems able to hope for is to at least recover the body. But she's not in fact in the real world... because Jesus is alive, standing before her.

Her hope is raised beyond her imagination when Jesus says her name, reestablishing a relationship she had let go. Faith says, the real world, God's world is moving away from death toward life. The world we share with God is a resurrection world. Rienstra puts it this way: "We attend to that crux where death and life intersect, deeply imprinted in the cycles of the created world, as if God wants to be sure we don't miss the point: death is ubiquitous, but life is too. Refugia faith recognizes, even amid death, the power of renewal built into creation" (p.157).

Easter is about Jesus leaving the tomb for a new life. From death to life. This is our hope as well, that our lives are being renewed day by day. It doesn't come cheaply. You've got to work the soil. That's what we've been trying to do through Lent. In speaking about pathways to hope, we've been talking about resurrection all along. Fear is a downward spiral, but love conquers fear. Helplessness needs to give way to the call and challenge of God to take action, to do something. Stress makes us forget who we are, but we can keep coming back to the truth that we are children of God, blessed and loved by God. We are of God's spirit. Life happens in community. We need to reject the notion that we are alone. Life springs forth from relationships of love not transactions for things. Remember who we are, who God is, the nature of the world in which we live. Don't forget the places where we have seen God at work.

One of those places was the cross. For a very long time and in large parts of the church have interpreted the cross as the place where Jesus pays the price for our sins to satisfy the requirements of a holy, some would say angry, God. This is not a pretty picture of God. At the very least it shows a God more interested in the deal than the relationship. Jesus doesn't stand between you and an angry God. He reveals God as the very essence of love. Forgiveness belongs to God's character. Rienstra tells us that "the shape of the cross reminds us that woundedness and renewal intersect, and at that intersection, we find the very person of God" (p.157). It reminds us, in other words, that God is as present in the suffering as in the celebration.

We, the world, is moving from death to life, but this does not happen without cost. New life comes with work, the kind of work that involves sacrifice, with the giving (up) something of

oneself. McFague puts it this way: "Whereas the traditional story focuses on individual human beings benefitting from Jesus' substitutionary atonement on the cross, the emptying of the self in the new story is preparation for a new kind of life: a radically *relational* one where self-emptying is preparation for being filled with God and neighbor" (p.25). I know this is a mouthful, but just focus on the cross as "a preparation for a new kind of life." Jesus' gift changes the disciples. Mary changes from a woman just trying to pick up the pieces to the first witness to the resurrection, to a leader in the early church. John, a member of the disbelieving disciples, suddenly "believes" when he enters the tomb. Peter will find courage to give up his life. In the cross, Jesus sets an example of love that overcomes fear. He gives himself for the community and the community becomes stronger for it

This is not new with the cross. He is always giving. When he heals, he gives of himself. When he teaches he gives something of himself. He courts danger when he eats with sinners, sacrificing perhaps reputation or position, that others might find life in him. The cross may be at the center, but resurrection, new life is the point. Christ is risen. (Christ is risen indeed).

When love overcomes fear, we have reason to hope... because Christ is risen!

When helplessness gives way to a resolve to do something, we have reason to hope... because Christ is risen!

When we turn our worries about what we will eat over to the God who knows we have need of these things because we share a common spirit, we have reason to hope... because Christ is risen!

When we gather together as a faith community, refusing to bend to the isolating forces of our time, we have reason to hope... because Christ is risen!

When we give ourselves to people over things, relationships over transactions. When we remember the goodness of God of the evil intent of others. When we give ourselves to and for love, resolve, community, we have reason to hope, moving from death to life... because Christ is risen!

Even when we mistake Jesus for the gardener, we have reason to hope, well, because he's going to call us by name. "God loves to work with scraps and remnants," says Rienstra, "the most unlikely materials possible. God loves to plant a seed when no one is looking" (p. 157). It doesn't matter how old you are, how little you feel you have left to give. We are resurrection people moving toward a new life, day by day... because Christ is risen! Amen.

Debra Rienstra *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth* 2022.

Sallie McFague *A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature* 2021.