

“Dare to Seek Beauty”

John 20: 1-18 (Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the Beloved Disciple find the beautiful emptiness of the tomb.)

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After that marvelous Easter Cantata, never again can any of us think that beauty and discord are not compatible. Creative discord obviously can deepen beauty. We’ll come back to that!

Easter has not always been celebrated at springtime. Christians decided about 1700 years ago to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ at the same time that nature bursts forth with beauty.ⁱ That makes good sense, for at springtime it is not difficult to see natural beauty. For twenty years this Southern Californian who stands before you lived in Ohio, where winter was colored with *rich hues* of brown, grey, and white... One day, usually late in March, I’d walk the one block from my home to work and spot a beautiful sight: one yellow daffodil [**lift up a daffodil**] rising from the hard earth. I appreciated that simple, natural beauty.

Even we in Redlands who lived through a particularly wet winter with many *rich hues* of green and white on the horizon in the mountains are drawn to the beauty of the daffodil, a flower that announces the arrival of spring. However, *our* first sight of daffodils is not likely to be an isolated flower popping out of the earth here and there. No, instead, we come upon them in a bunch, 10 for \$1.99 at Trader Joes! [**Lift up bunch**]

In Jesus’ three short years of ministry, he went about seeking to *unleash beauty*.

Jesus seems to have noticed and drawn attention to natural beauty (like our daffodils). He referred to the beauty of the lilies of the field and he called attention to the birds when he commented on how God cares for all creatures.

Yet Jesus did not seem to be what we’d call a “naturalist”; he did not seem to place huge emphasis upon observing simple natural beauty. What he did most seems to be to encourage his disciples *to find beauty in what others considered ugly or bad*. When he saw a woman whom others called a “beggar,” Jesus saw a devoted mother who wanted him to heal her daughter. When he met a woman others called a “foreigner,” Jesus saw a spiritually thirsty woman. I’m guessing Jesus would appreciate daffodils, but that he would more likely point out the food value of a dandelion [lift up dandelion] or the beauty of some plant most of us would ignore.

Some beauty is as simple as a daffodil in spring. Following Jesus’ example, we might *also* manage to see beauty in what at first seems ordinary. But the Easter events call us to do even more: “Easter” DARES US TO BE ARTISTS OF LIFE—TO SEEK BEAUTY WHERE IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE to find it. If we have wrestled with emptiness or discord for a long time, we are called to **dare to seek beauty** that embraces that discord or emptiness, just as Daniel Pinkham dared to seek beauty that embraces discord in his music. When this beauty that embraces our confusion and chaos finally bursts forth, it very likely will dumbfound us.

Beauty dumbfounded Mary Magdalene when she arrived at the tomb where Jesus’ body had been placed after he was crucified and died and wrapped in burial clothes.ⁱⁱ She went to the gravesite intending to grieve. But as she reached the tomb, there was

confusion. The stone had been rolled away. Had the body been stolen? Mary Magdalene ran to bring Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple to the empty tomb. They all investigated the situation. No one would have stolen the body and left the cloth wrappings. Jesus must have “left death behind.”

Whoa! What is this? This is *a very complex* situation! Where there was discord and death and confusion and pain and fear and jealousy and even hatred now there is something quite Beautiful. The empty tomb reveals a beauty beyond any expectation, an “angelic” beautyⁱⁱⁱ.

The **living** Jesus encouraged his friends to see beauty not only in nature, but also in what people had thought was ugly or taboo.

Jesus’ Resurrection did even more—it dares us to seek beauty we had given up on—in situations blocked by a huge stone. In his rising Jesus the Christ enables us to say with Mary “Whoa! There’s more beauty than I had dreamed of.”

You and I today have been given both a blessing and a challenge: to let Jesus’ persistence and strength rub off on us—to dare to seek beauty today. Our challenge, for our own sake and for others, is to move stones. Instead of being Rolling Stones, we are called to be Stone Rollers!

Juniors and seniors applying for colleges (and many of us when we apply for jobs) are required to write essays. Usually those applying are given a prompt for the essay. I bet that not one of the prompts asks for “an essay about how simple and beautiful your life has been.” [Ask] Colleges and employers want to know “How did you overcome a challenge in your life?” The stature of a person is often estimated by how he or she is able to roll a stone away, whether she or he can rise to the occasion to be an **Artist of Life**.

Some of our stones are labeled, “I don’t know how.” “I can’t do such and such because I don’t know how.”

Our children’s high school was small, yet there was a swim team, understandably, a small one. The schools they competed against were of course small, too. So, there were often not enough swimmers for a school to enter all of the different events—swimmers can only enter four events each. The coach of their high school’s swim team was an **Artist of Life**. When two boys came to try out for the sport who did *not know how to swim*, she did not laugh at them and turn them away. *She taught them how to swim*, sort of, as much as you can within a month. When it was time for the swim meets some of us parents wondered in what events she would enter those two awkward and slow swimmers. Lo and behold, she asked them to swim the events that only a few of the good swimmers wanted—like the very long races. Those two guys, as slow as turtles, persisted, slowing down the entire swim meet by taking “forever” to complete their long distances. But, since most of the schools did not have enough boys to place *any* competitor in those long distance races, those two guys got at least third or fourth place just for finishing—and really helped the point total for the school! The clever coach **dared to seek beauty** in those two novices, helping them to roll away the stone labeled, “I don’t know how.” Those two boys definitely knew how to swim by the end of the season!

Sometimes the stone that restrains us is labeled, “I’ve tried and tried and tried.” Or, “We’ve tried and tried and tried.”

Some dilemmas *seem* unbudgeable. No, they don't just "seem" unbudgeable. They ARE unbudgeable. We probably all know of two co-workers, or two friends, or a couple who have had an "issue" that frustrated them for a long time. They get nowhere, no matter how hard they really try. Then, as they keep trying in different ways, praying sincerely to be open to changes in themselves as well as wanting change in the other, the "stone" between them budges, just a little, and a surprising answer or insight or turn of events occurs that gives them hope for resolution of the issue in their relationship.

Moving stones occurs on a massive scale, too. Think about it, every war throughout history ended. Peoples who had been "enemies" found some way to end their conflict, after "trying and trying." I realize that sometimes this end-of-war leaves such devastation that it can hardly be called "peace." It's basically a cessation of fighting. Yet, with surprising turns of events sometimes just a few decades after fighting each other, nations or groups become friends.

We Easter people are called collectively to **dare to be Artists of Life**. As Stone Rollers we can with good reason **dare to anticipate a beautiful peace that passes all current understanding** in Iraq and Afghanistan and other conflicts around the world today.

Sometimes the stone in our life is "I don't know how." Artists of Life like the swim coach are good role models for moving that stone. Sometimes the stone is "I've tried and tried." Yet, persistence and openness in relationships does often budge that stone so some grace-filled ideas and solutions appear. A completely different stone that sometimes holds us down is labeled, "I'm rejected or I'm not accepted."

Hans Christian Anderson's profound story *The Ugly Duckling* tells of the fowl that is teased by his duck playmates—until, the "duck" goes through fowl puberty and realizes he's a beautiful swan. When you think about it, isn't *all* rejection or disappointment *temporary*? Are we not all swans, if we roll away the stone of other people's opinions? This Easter, may we do more than get new Easter attire—May we **dare to seek the beauty** in ourselves.

Jesus' resurrection *dares us all to roll away a stone that has become an impediment in our lives*.

I want to be heard seriously. There *are* stones, huge ones. No one says the stones that keep us entombed are imaginary or made of cardboard. *But what we are celebrating is a spirit of resurrection that leads us to believe that, though we do not know how or when, stones do roll away*.

Jesus' command to Mary in this *Gospel of John* was "Do not hold onto me." That must have been very hard for Mary, to not hold on.

We today are challenged to not hold onto Jesus, as if Easter were only about his body's resurrection. We ourselves are encouraged by the Risen Christ to **dare to seek beauty not just in nature, not even in the ordinary, but to dare to seek beauty especially in the places or circumstances that we had given up on. We are called to BE ARTISTS OF LIFE.**

ⁱ Date for Easter established in 325 A.D.

ⁱⁱ Beyond the arrival of Mary Magdalene early Sunday morning, the presence of the body wrappings, and the presence of an angel, details each of the four Gospels are different because each Gospel writer chose pieces from the rich set of stories that were circulating about what happened.

ⁱⁱⁱ Angels are present in each gospel