

FROM ASHES TO EASTER

By Mary Etta Perry
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It was about twenty years ago, while planning a Lenten homily, that I read an article in Sojourners magazine that changed my life. I was just fanning through the pages and scanning the contents. I stopped at a page with the not-very-exciting title “Reflections on the Common Lectionary.” The guest writer was Nancy Sehested, then only an inspiration to me, now a dear friend and still an inspiration!

The scripture was from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. In the last paragraph of the column, Nancy repeated the words that held me tightly. “Resurrection comes to despairing people. The only hope we have is in a God who can breathe new life into our dried-up lives. Beyond our despairing comes the bone-rattling, air-stirring spirit of new life.”

As I read that very interesting column, the Ezekiel story became very personally mine—and I knew that the time had come when I had no choice but to speak of my own brokenness. And each Lenten season since that time, I re-read the Dry Bones story, I review my own brokenness, and I relive the beginning of my healing.

A long time ago—and for a very long time—I believed that my brokenness rendered me unfit for service and unworthy of joy. I believed that but for my unfitness, I would have long ago been in Africa, being the missionary nurse I had felt called to be. For years after I denied that “call,” I worked hard to heal my brokenness. Believing that my healing was entirely up to me, I tried to work myself into worthiness. I tried to pray myself into blessed assurance. But my prayers were vacuous, and I found myself in a season of deepest despair.

So one morning, just before the dawning hour, I went out alone to pray—to pray what I thought to be my last confession: “MY BONES ARE DRIED UP, MY HOPE IS GONE, AND I AM CLEAN CUT OFF.”

Perhaps it is significant that the time was the Lenten season, and that the place I was drawn to go for the confession was called The Fountains of Faith. The bronze figures by Carl Miles are of babies, children—girls and boys—young, old and very old women and men, all in postures of departure and ascension.

The pool is the focal point of a sunken garden, created in the shape of a cross and bordered by lush evergreen walls. At the foot of the cross is a bench. And there I sat ...to pray...to PRAY...and to really level with God about the intensity of my despair.

I told God that I was tired of oblique answers and temporary relief. I reminded God that, for years, our only personal encounters had been through the Spirit’s flitting into and out of my life, to rescue me from first one pit of despair and then the next equally as despairing. And I told God that I could do NOTHING more for myself.

Now, I wasn't saying, "OK, God, now I've seen the light, so I'm ready to turn it all over to you." No, I was saying, "SO FAR AS I CAN TELL GOD, IT'S ALL OVER BETWEEN US. I know for dead sure that I don't have what it takes to keep climbing out of these pits you have provided for me.

God didn't respond right away. I didn't like the image of the Pit, and I wondered from where it had come. I certainly didn't choose it; it just popped up and I used it. Then—in the semi-dark silence—nothing moving but my racing heart—I began to recognize the Pit as a theme of a Psalm from which a song is written. It's a song my parents sang to me eighty plus years ago when I was a child. The lines that I remembered were:

"God took me out of the Pit
And from the miry clay
God set my feet on a rock
Establishing my way..."

I had not gone to the waters looking for a bench at the foot of a cross. But the cross was there, and I was there—there to confess my total emptiness and my hopelessness. And from that uniquely personal view of the cross, emptied of all my resistance, bereft of all my worn-out defenses, I was challenged to ask God to define my life: WHO AM I, GOD? WHO AM I?

And God answered: "You are mine, I have made you...my beloved, lesbian daughter."

In that pre-dawn hour, the message rang true, and I believed the unbelievable. And in my believing, God showed me something a lot like Resurrection.

I was shown that ongoing redemption did not require my death. Instead, it requires careful and often painful refining that simply cannot be accomplished in green pastures or by peaceful waters.

I love green pastures. I've spent a lot of time in just such sweet fields. And I love still waters. However, it was in neither of these...but in the darkness of my life's most dismal hour that I learned: Desert pits are not for condemnation, but for transformation.

It was in the pits that I learned about captivity...and oppression and poverty and the pain of alienation. It was in the desert that I learned about freedom and forgiveness and compassion and LOVE. And it was in the Valley of Dry Bones that I experienced the wideness of God's mercy. *My* call was not to go as a missionary to Africa, but instead, to enter into the very skin of people who are oppressed because of color...into the aching, shrinking gut of people who are starved by hunger and poverty...and into the anguish of people excluded because of their sexual orientation or ethnic differences.

It was in the Valley of Dry Bones that my brokenness was clarified, and healing was begun. The first phase of my healing gave me permission to know who I am! Thus, my despair was diminished, and my life became richer. But, healing was not yet complete...

Henri Nouwen has written that God has only two words for people who are in a far country, poor or alone. Those words are "Come home." Those are the words my partner, Mary and I could not find. For more than thirty years. We listened; we heard many words. But never "Come home"...until about six years ago when we drifted into a little church on Merrimon Avenue in Asheville, North Carolina. There we heard, "Come home. Just come on in!"

Those are the words that bound up our residual brokenness. Those are the words that bind up all brokenness—be they heard from the wilderness or the desert pits, from a park bench or a shelter for homeless people, or by people in prison—or, as we heard them, from a welcoming pew in a sweet little church.

They are the words that declare us worthy to serve—to serve and to proclaim the truth that in the face of death, in the process of learning to die to this life, stripped of all illusion of self-sufficiency, we come to know in a precious way that "Resurrection comes to despairing people, whose only hope is in a God who can breath life into dried-up lives." We are called to bear witness that beyond the life-threatening silence of despair comes the peaceful silence of awe, and beyond that comes the air-stirring bone-rattling spirit of new life. Resurrection comes! Joy to the world! Amen.

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