

February 17, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Title "Tomb of Life"



I thank Kirstie and all the staff for all the work they did to allow me to have vacation last week. I returned to the same spot where I vacationed last year about this time. In reflection, I was like those sea turtles who return to the same beach every year create new life at their sacred site. I journey to the beach where my soul breathes and sky and ocean meet as horizon. In her book, "Learning to Walk in the Dark", Barbara Brown Taylor gives the advice: "Don't forget to breathe." Her words were especially good advice on my adventure this year.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers her breathing advice when she was studying darkness by entering a cave. According to stories told, great spiritual leaders spent time in caves. Gautama Buddha meditated in them regularly. Muhammad went to a small mountain cave two miles outside Mecca and prayed for days. Our own tradition mentions caves twenty-five times in the Bible. Elijah hid in a cave and listened for still small voice within. John of Patmos was said to have penned the book of Revelation in a cave. According to Luke's birth story, Jesus was born in a cave. Lazareth was buried in a cave and came to life in a cave. Just as the gospels tell that Jesus rose from the dead in a cave.

We don't often think of it that way. Resurrection- that is. No one saw it happen - whatever happened in the cave tomb, it happened in the dark. Taylor writes, "As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave [where Jesus was buried] , it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air."¹

That's where new life happens. New life starts in the dark. Last fall, I pushed brown withered bulbs into the dark earth- digging little cave tombs for each one. There they lie all winter long, until warm earth calls them forth to a new life this spring. My granddaughter is swimming a in darken womb knitting together tiny toes and fingers in the dark. Jesus was buried in a cave when the Roman soldiers finished their gruesome task. Something new emerges from the darkness. We enter darkness in wombs and tombs, ancient burial sites, caves, night slumber; places where new insights and new meaning can arise. I did not realize that part of my vacation last week would also find me in a new place of darkness. Not floating in kayak cave adventure this time, but beneath them.

I donned scuba gear with plenty of hesitation and a healthy dose of anxiety last week. Weights were slipped into the velcro pockets of the jacket, "but I don't want to go too deep," I explained to the instructor. We started off in the resort swimming pool by afternoon we were on a boat headed out to open water. A few days later, I was scuba certified and a friend was trying to convince me that we were ready to dive the Great Blue Hole in Belize. I was not ready. It is an advanced dive. "But we are here; we can't

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

leave without trying,” she said. “We can,” I assured her. To me, it was like signing up to drive in the Daytona 500 the day after passing your driving test. Nevertheless, she persisted. Finally a compromise was reached. We would take the 40 mile boat trip out to the underwater caves where the bottom of the ocean disappears in crystal blue seas and unknown aquatic life waits to swallow one up in the legendary Great Blue Hole of Belize. She could dive the 130 foot caverns; I would snorkel at the surface. I would then dive on the other two stops of the day which were still deeper than my experience.

Barbara Brown Taylor’s writes about her caving research which described what to do if she got stuck in a cave, “When you are stuck in one, the best thing to do is study the rock. Since it is not letting you go anywhere you might as well pay attention to where you are. ..[It’s like when you want to meditate.] Learn to watch your thoughts. Notice how your mind leaps from thought to thought, creating emotions as it goes. Pay attention to which thoughts give rise to which feelings, and what causes them to recede again. Do not judge yourself, and do not forget to breathe.”

I found those words popping into my thoughts when my compromise gave way and a dive master gently guided me down the coral reef towards the Blue Hole. I got lost in the beauty of a coral formation and forgot my anxiety for a second then the words would come again, Don’t forget to breathe. I watched the brightly colored fish swim by so effortlessly and startled to remind myself, don’t forget to breathe. Each breath underwater is audible - like a yoga breath - or a ventilator in a hospital room pressing air into stilled lungs. The sandy bottom sloped and we followed the wall - looking at one thing after another. I knew my guide was distracting me, so I would not panic. Don’t forget to breathe and relax I said to myself over and over, as light grew dimmer and water cooler. Breathe. Don’t forget to breathe. Good advice. I did not descend as far as the others to explore between the giant columns of underwater stalagmites, but there was so much that I did experience in the liquid dark.

While on her cave expedition Taylor gathered up a rock that glittered when her flashlight shone upon it. At home, she pulled the rock out of her pocket expecting to see it fully as dazzling as she remembered it from the cave, but instead in the full light of day, it looked like a small piece of gravel. She learned it was only when her flashlight touched it in the darkness that the rock sparkled, “the stone is alive only in the dark.” Then she realized, “When I am looking for something large, bright, and unmistakable holy, God slips something small, dark, and apparently negligible in my pocket.” She concludes, “God is a cave I do not want to miss.”

Barbara Brown Taylor is right, “Do not forget to breathe, and resurrection happens in the dark.” We celebrate resurrection in shafts of spring sunlight and green earth, but the hard work happens in the mystery of the unknown, in the caves of our soul, in the journey through the dark when we are not altogether certain what lies ahead or if we will make it out alive.

Somewhere in that darkened water, I learned to breathe differently. Sometime following the fish and turtles, I learned to inhale and exhale and match my own with the ocean’s breathing. Somewhere while I was a tiny dot beside great coral reef walls, something new happened. Sometime in the dark, beauty unfolded, walls shimmered, sounds echoed, fish swam, and oneness surrounded my soul. Resurrection happens in the dark.

We've been taught to fear darkness and flood light into the dark places of our world. We speak language about darkness that perpetuates prejudice and fear. Our society has forgotten the gift of dazzling darkness and God's holy presence within it. We've neglected and avoided the spiritual paths that sojourn through darkness of centering prayer-filled catacombs. We've forgotten that it is the inward journeys of wombs and tombs that allow for new life to take shape.

Our baptismal ritual is meant to remind us of these things. Ancient baptisms were held just before dawn on Easter morning. Catechumens descended down steps into pools of water and were submerged into breathless watery darkness three times. Rising from the waters signaled their new life emerging from the death of old ways.

Baptismal fonts remain reminders of God's grace at work in our lives. They reminds us of God's grace working with us to move us from our old ways to a new way of life - from isolation into community- from death to life. Resurrection happens in the dark as we return home to our sacred beginnings.

May you journey into resurrection living,

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