

I Make All Things New
Easter Gathering
3/23/08

Sunday, Pre-Dawn

Narrator

Introduction

Music Up

Instrumental

Narrator

It is the morning of the first day of the week. You don't know exactly what time--the sun is not yet up to give any clues--but it must be morning. Cocks have been crowing off and on for some time--some close, others far off somewhere in the darkened, unfamiliar streets outside. But even the rising of the sun will bring little information or comfort, as all you'll see of it will be the small cracks of light squeezing between the slats of the shutters you've kept tightly closed for the last two days.

You're eyes are open, but you see nothing in the blackness. You know your eyes are open, because you feel them stinging in your head trying to resolve anything in darkness. You've hardly slept the last two nights, and what sleep you've had was filled with exhausting dreams and violent images, just like the one you awaken from now. There's that moment coming out of fitful sleep where you're not sure where you are, when you are--when you can imagine in the darkness you are anywhere, anywhen--and right now you imagine you are home near the lake with the familiar rugged mountains holding you close and the fishing nets hanging just outside smelling of fish and salt and a day's work in the sun.

You are almost convinced you are home again with your children sleeping nearby, with life and movement and laughter about to return from the dead of night like the color and warmth preparing to flood through the windows with the rising sun.

But as you lie in the darkness listening to the sounds of breathing all around, not of your children, but of larger, grown bodies, bit by bit you begin to remember, and with the memory comes the crushing weight

remembrance brings. How could something so beautiful have come to this? How could something that began with the brilliance of a smile in the sunshine, a dazzling presence lighting up the darkest corners of your soul, end in this shuttered, rented room so far from everything you ever held dear?

It's all gone. It's all over. Everything we'd all worked so hard to build these last few years--gone in an instant. Was there something you could have done? Something that would have changed the critical moment that led to this moment? You find yourself praying to take it all back, bargaining with God for one more chance for a different ending. But the sun is not up yet.

All is dark. All is ash in your mouth, a knot in your stomach, a weight on your chest, a hand around your throat. Here in this room for two days with your friends, the ones you thought you knew so well, but now hardly recognize: cowering in corners, huddling to talk in whispers, tensing at every shadow crossing the door, dreading the abrupt pounding of the soldiers who had found you at last to drag you out into the streets--to the top of that same rocky hill where it all ended. Where they killed the Master.

They killed the Master. Even as you form the words in your mind, you can't comprehend them. They killed the Master. How could they kill what you never believed could actually die? How could his smile, his laughter, his arm around your shoulders, his words warm and close in your ear be gone? Taken. Violently.

He said he would be with us always, and now he was gone. Did we misunderstand or did he mislead? Or was he just wrong? Were we? And what do we do now? If we do escape the city, the soldiers, the temple guards, are we supposed to just pick up our lives where we left them years ago? We are not the same anymore--he changed us. To go home now and try to pretend none of this happened is unthinkable--there is no home for us now. He changed us--and he left us. Was any of it real or was it just a dream of his? Our shared dream of the way we wanted things to be so badly that we convinced ourselves it was so.

But we have changed--I have changed. Though it doesn't seem so now, hiding in this room that has become our prison, I know I am different than before I met the Master. Even this room wasn't always shuttered and dark,

filled with frightened men. When we came here--a few days ago, a lifetime ago--it was filled with laughter and promise and good food.

Flashbacks

Reader 1

I remember Jesus telling me how to find the room for our celebration. It seemed so strange--he said there would be a man carrying a pitcher of water, and that I should follow him home. I'd never seen a man carrying water--women do that sort of thing where I come from, but I guess I'd learned by then not to be surprised at anything Jesus said. When I first met him, by the end of most days, my head would be splitting, trying to understand all the crazy things he would tell us.

Stories of mustard seeds and faith--ungrateful sons, loving fathers, stern kings, and wicked servants. He would tell us of a love that we could barely imagine, then say he came not to bring peace but the sword. He'd say that if we wanted to save our lives, we'd have to lose them, and if we wanted to be first, we'd have to be last. He said that all the rabbis and priests in Jerusalem had nothing on the dirtiest child playing in the street or even the tax gatherers and prostitutes we'd been taught to avoid. He even praised Samaritans and Romans when it suited him, and healed the sick and told us when our sins were forgiven.

Compared to all that, a man carrying a pitcher of water was a rather small thing, I suppose, and so I set off to find something I'd never seen before--and of course it was all just as he had described, as if he'd seen it all before and was just telling me a remembered story. I found the owner of the house and asked for his guest room, and he took me up the stairs to this very room--all furnished and bright and ready for the food and laughter and noise of all of us crowding in to share our meal. And as I lay at the table that night looking around at the ring of faces, so familiar after all our years together, I thought about the path that led us to that room. That it was through the most improbable, unbelievable events--like a man carrying a pitcher of water--that we had arrived at that moment.

And at that moment, I loved every face in that room. I loved being there, and there was nowhere else I'd rather have been in a thousand lifetimes.

And I realized that I had learned to simply take Jesus at his word. That no matter how outrageous the story or how little I understood, I could still act, I could move forward without fear. I could trust him. For the first time in my memory, I could trust. I could believe in something I'd never seen, and that has made all the difference.

Reader 2

I remember how excited I was to hear that Jesus had arrived in my town by the lake. Of course I'd heard all the stories about him. I'd linger at the fringes of the groups that would gather in the streets whenever a traveler would bring news of him. I'd stay back as far as I could and still be able to hear, and I'd hold my veil tightly about my face hoping no one would notice me or recognize me. I knew how they all felt about me--I heard what they said about me, shouted at me...how they would cross to the other side of the street to avoid even brushing by my clothing. I've had to wash their spit off my clothes and clean up after the rocks that would come through my window.

I knew how they felt, but even worse, I knew they were right. They hated me because of what I was--how could they know I hated myself even more. I would have had a hard time telling you how I got to such a place in my life, but it would have been even harder for me to tell you how I could ever get out--become anything else. I rarely went out during the day, and only when I had to. But when I saw groups gathering to hear the news, my excitement overcame my fear because the stories I would hear were of healings and food coming out of empty baskets, of a Jew who would speak with Romans and Samaritans and women--even Samaritan women. Of a man who would eat with tax gatherers and prostitutes and speak of his Father who loved everyone equally. The stories I heard were of a man who might actually speak to me without that look on his face--who might actually see me and care about me, maybe even love me a little.

And my heart was beating so fast as I heard he was here, and I stood perfectly still until I heard the name of the man whose house he was visiting. And even though it was the house of one of the leading Pharisees in town, I knew I had to see him.

I rushed home and grabbed the jar of my most expensive perfume. I didn't even realize I was crying until I arrived at the door of the house. It was so crowded and confused that I was able to push through with no one paying

any attention to me. In the dining room, trying to see through the tears that wouldn't stop, I realized I had no idea who I was looking for until I saw him. I knew him as if I'd known him all my life, and automatically, mechanically, I walked toward him from behind where he was lying at the table. I hadn't thought this far, and had no idea what to do next, standing over his feet extended toward me on the cushions.

Just then I noticed that the tears flooding down my face were falling on his feet. I had no towel to dry them, so without thinking, I began to dry his feet with my hair that had fallen out from under my veil. He didn't move, didn't pull away. Even as the room fell silent and all faces were fixed on me as I bent to kiss his feet and pour the perfume on them and dry them again with my hair, he never flinched or stopped calmly eating, and I understood why as I fell on my knees and sobbed. I heard him telling the Pharisee a story, but none of it got through my tears until he turned to me. I can still see his eyes and his smile as he told me my sins were forgiven--that my faith had saved me. I didn't know I had any faith when I entered that house, but I knew what he said was true the moment he said it.

I entered that house uninvited, sneaking in through the confusion. When I left, the crowd parted to let me pass.

Narrator

The Master left none of us unchanged. Each of us had our story--it was why we followed him. We sensed that in him we had found the missing piece of our lives--no matter which life or which piece seemed to be missing--the Master was always the answer. And now he is gone.

But if the change in each of us was real, then the truth behind the change was real too. And if the truth he taught us was real, then the Master was true. But could the change in us survive the Master himself? We weren't doing very well so far...

The first light has begun to draw bright lines in the cracks of the shuttered windows when the first knock comes at the door. All breath in the room is sucked out as each of us waits for the door to burst open in a wave of armor and bristling weapons. But only the knock comes again, softly but insistently, quick raps with a woman's hoarse whisper behind them.

We open the door and Mary bursts through, eyes wide, breath ragged, and we tense again thinking the soldiers must be right behind her. But that's not it. Not at all...

Seeking the Living Among the Dead

Reader 3

I have seen the Master! He's not dead. I've seen him!

I knew we wouldn't have time to anoint his body before Sabbath, so last night as soon as Sabbath was over, I bought spices and perfumes and prepared them. I was up all night and left while it was still dark so I could be at the tomb just at dawn. I was wondering who I could get to move the stone--it was so big--and I was worried I wouldn't find anyone to help me.

But when I got to the garden, the stone was already rolled away. I looked around to see if anyone was watching, then went inside. It was dark and it took a moment for my eyes to see clearly--but it was empty! It was empty... I stood there for a long time staring at the linens lying just where we had laid him. I didn't know what to do, so I went back outside, and I almost dropped the jars of spices, I was crying so hard.

Then I heard someone ask, "Woman, why are you crying?" I couldn't see him clearly through my tears, and it took me a moment to be able to tell him that someone had taken my Master away, and I didn't know where they'd put him. He asked, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" And I looked down quickly so he wouldn't see my anger and I told him, "Sir if you've taken him, tell me where you've put him, and I will get him." Then he said my name, "Mary."

And when I looked up, it was Jesus--standing--right there. I don't know how I didn't recognize him at first--I suppose I wasn't looking for him anywhere but in the tomb. I called out his name and started to run to him, but he said not to touch him, but to come to you and tell you... I have seen him! He is not dead...

Narrator

Could this be true? How could it be true? Her message is everything we could have hoped for, everything we had been praying for--and maybe because of that, it just seemed too good to be true. Our minds embrace the obvious impossibility and resist the impossible possibility she brings us--we look at each other, back at Mary, then down at our feet. How can this be true? Mary's eyes change from wide-eyed wonder to narrowed anger in a flash of comprehension, and as the door slams behind her, we're left staring at each other again in our shuttered room. What did she expect of us--it's just too good to be true.

But the Master described just such an impossible possibility didn't he? He created it right in front of us... A world too good to be true. Can you imagine such a world? What would be possible there? Can you imagine what it would be like standing at the door of a tomb emptied of all your possible expectations? An empty tomb where in a moment, the world you know flips over--and down is up and dark is light. The impossible is possible. Death becomes life, what is done is undone and all things are made new again.

Can you imagine what it must feel like to stand at the threshold of such a world as this?

Song

I Can Only Imagine

All Things New

Narrator

To realize that the world in which you live is not the world you expected is quite a shock. To realize that it's actually better, infinitely more beautiful and forgiving than you ever imagined is even more shocking. To understand that even death is not final for God, that Jesus lives on--is something that only creeps up on you gradually. It can't be grasped all at once.

Reader 4

I still think it was strange how every time Jesus came to us we didn't recognize him at first. He always seemed somehow familiar, yet a stranger. I remember what Mary had said that first morning, and now I think that we couldn't help but continue to look for the living among the dead. That though our hearts told us he was alive, our minds still had not accepted. Our minds told us that of course he had to be in the grave... Our minds made us slow to see that it was really him--still with us each time.

And every time he appeared it was as if for the first time--he brought new life, like a fresh breeze on the lake when our boats were stalled, pushing us just a little further out.

One morning, before dawn, we set out to fish. And after hours at the nets, we had caught nothing. We knew those waters like our children's faces--just a hundred yards or so from the beach, just before dawn...there should have been fish everywhere--but nothing... Hungry, cold, frustrated, exhausted--it's humiliating to come home empty handed, with nothing to offer those who depend on us. Ready to give up, we started pulling in the nets when we heard a voice from the beach, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" A bit irritated, we tell him no and he says, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some."

Now there are some things just too absurd to be insulting--even to a fisherman. And sometimes the craziest things catch your mind off guard, so that you just act before your mind can kick in and give you all the reasons why not. And so we did.

We put those nets down on the other side of the boat into the same water we'd been dragging for hours, and soon as we did, we felt the tug and the weight. We couldn't haul in the nets at all, they were so heavy with splashing, silver bodies.

Suddenly, I knew that voice. My head spun around and I saw him, "It is the Lord," I said. And Peter immediately jumped into the water and swam for shore--he was always doing things like that. By the time we got the boat and the nets to the beach, Jesus was sitting on his heels in the sand tending a small fire with fish cooking for us all. I can still smell those fish--feel the warmth of the fire and my Master's smile in the cold air... New life, a fresh breeze in our sails.

Narrator

It's no accident that it is in the last book of the Bible, when the world as we know it is being rolled up like a scroll, that God says to us, "See, I make all things new." There, at the end of all things, God is showing us that any end is just the end of the most recent new beginning.

A wise man once said, "Dimensions are limitless; time is endless. Conditions are not invariable; terms are not final." When we are at the end of ourselves, when our world and everything we think we know is in flames, when we think time and space and life itself are over, Jesus comes quietly beside us and whispers in our ear, "See, I make all things new." Conditions are not invariable; terms are not final; God is always poised to make all things new--starting with his own son, who shows us the Way to new life.

And this new life is all around us. We can dive into it at any moment from wherever we find ourselves in life... We've been reliving stories of rebirth from our ancient Scriptures, but such stories are all around as well...

Liz & Robb/Eldon

Personal Stories

Narrator

In the face of a God who is continuously making all things new, what is our responsibility? What part do we play? Just as Jesus said to the woman washing his feet with her tears, it is our faith that saves us. Our faith--a belief deep enough to overcome our fears--is the path to trust, the experience of the goodness of God. Faith/trust allowed Jesus' followers to look for a man carrying a water jar and to cast nets over the other side of their boat. It allowed the woman to overcome her fears and enter the house of a Pharisee. It allowed Liz and Eldon and Robb to overcome everything in their lives that was telling them that all was lost.

Faith/trust saves us because faith/trust is what keeps us from giving up. The only way we won't experience God making all things new in our lives is if we give up on God making all things new. New life is always as close as our next breath if only we don't give up breathing.

Don't give up. Don't lose hope. The Resurrection is our symbol and reminder that even in the tomb, it is not over; God is not finished yet.

And in each of our lives, there is a reason why and a symbol of new life, if we'll just see them. What is your reason why? A reason not to give up, to move through whatever challenges you face. And what is your symbol of the promise of new life? Think about that for a moment.

My symbol is my three-year-old son, who reminds me everyday to see the world through his eyes--all brand new and exciting. He's also my reason why--along with my wife and family. What is yours?

(instructions to group for participation/communion)

Song

Don't Give Up
Amazing Grace

Wind in the Room

Narrator

It has been fifty days now since that morning Mary burst into our room and turned our world upside down--or maybe right side up. And here we are all together again back in this same room that has seen the best and the worst we have to offer as followers of Jesus and children of God--joy and depression, exuberance and fear. And though we have now all gotten used to the idea that Jesus lives, that he rose again and has now returned to his Father and our Father, we still sense that there is a piece missing--something that holds us back and keeps us from expressing and fully living everything the Master worked so hard to teach us.

We gather expectantly--something is coming--we all feel it. We don't know what to expect, but that doesn't matter anymore--we've at least learned to expect the unexpected. Jesus promised us a Helper who would come and stand at our sides forever, and as an impossible wind inside this room picks up to shake the house to its foundations, we begin to understand what he meant, that it is the Spirit of truth that really makes us free. That even when

we think we have arrived at our final destination, God is already there to remind us, "See I make all things new."

Song

Pour Out Your Spirit

Narrator

Closing

Song

My Redeemer Lives