

*Filling Our Baskets* (Matt. 28.1-10)  
Easter Sunday, March 27, 2005  
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church

I used to think that Easter was like going to an egg hunt where nothing had been hidden. In my mind's eye it went like this. It was the day we'd all been waiting for, Easter Sunday, and in the afternoon everyone was invited to the edge of a great lawn. People were dressed in spring pastels and straw hats, some had rolled their pants into cuffs, shedding their shoes to go barefoot. Everyone looked expectant, excited, as they surveyed the grass with baskets in hand. They were waiting for someone in charge to tell them when the egg hunt would begin. But looking across the lawn I noticed that you could see it there. A single egg lying in plain view in the middle of the grass. It was *the* Easter egg and there weren't any others. And what the people were lining up for, with their baskets in hand, what the people were itching to have a dash at, was the only prize that had been left for them to find. This obvious prize was the orthodox interpretation of Easter.

I think that we're all familiar with the orthodox view. It goes something like this. Jesus, after returning to Jerusalem, was tried and executed by his enemies and then laid to rest in a tomb. After three days, we are told, he was physically resurrected, brought back to life by some supernatural divine intervention. Anyone who believes in this miracle, it is said, might themselves be saved by it, rescued from death by the same God who came through for Jesus. All we must do is accept this story in our hearts and we, too, can have the life eternal. This is a rather orthodox version of the Easter story. Therein lies the egg in the middle of the lawn all alone. Take it or leave it.

Sadly, when the story of Easter has been presented in this take it or leave it manner, many of us have chosen to leave it. Some of us wanted to leave this interpretation because we saw how it had been used against people who were different, claiming that Christians had the single, exclusive path to the divine. Others did not really want to leave the old egg but felt that we had to go in good conscience. For when asked to affirm the irrational, the unscientific, and the supernatural, it became too much of a stretch for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century minds. A few of us even did graduate work on the egg, taking it apart piece by piece to examine the shell's fragments and look at the stuff of which they were made. But whatever our reasons, a great many in the liberal church have needed to leave the orthodox interpretation in search of something more honest, something that we can say and at the same time mean, something that feels to us authentic. And we would like very much to look out into a field where there are more eggs than the only one we've been handed, we would like to poke through the tall grass and peek into the hedges and see if there isn't anything else waiting to be found.

So returning to our imaginary scene, I'd like to ask that we hear the person in charge of the egg hunt as she yells, "Go!" The participants take to the grass as fast as they can, racing toward the egg that they've been eyeing. We notice that the great majority reach the center of the lawn right away. They circle the egg, admiring it, whispering to each other about its loveliness, no one knowing if they should touch it, none quite daring to pick it up. Such a crowd has gathered around the egg that we almost don't see the handful of stragglers left behind. They are still standing at the starting line and they look a bit like we do, slightly uninspired, mumbling something about the same egg every year and that perhaps they should just go home. But then one of these dissenters stops talking

for a moment and drops to one knee. She squints toward the flowerbed, gets up, walks over, reaches behind the stalk of a red amaryllis and produces...an egg. It is a new egg, one that we haven't seen before and it might interpret Easter a bit differently. Let me tell you about it.

This egg has actually been around for a long time. It is an egg left to us by African theologians like Bénézet Bujo and Charles Nyamiti. If we were to open it and look inside it would offer the following thoughts about Easter. Jesus, the Africans would remind us, is our spiritual ancestor. And, as everyone knows, ancestors do not die. Ancestors live in a place that is very near to us, we can feel them in our hearts, and in our minds we can still hear their voices. In fact, as we gather to read the sacred stories, like we have done today, as we come to tell the old tales about our ancestor Jesus, it is so that his wisdom will remain alive among us. That wisdom has been passed down by our mothers' mothers and our fathers' fathers in order that we might live well.

Although there is great diversity within African ancestral understanding, the most common elements seem to be reverence for those who have lived before and connection with the circle of all living and dying. Such an understanding may provide us with a strange sense of comfort. For instead of being somehow saved from death at Easter, we can begin to understand that death, too, is a part of life. Jesus lived and died and in his own way continues as we tell the stories about him and try to put his wisdom into practice. And we will also live and die, as a part of the natural cycle. Perhaps we need not be so afraid of the prospect that one day we might become ancestors ourselves. Perhaps we would do better to consider what we will leave for our children, the ones who

will live after us. In this way we could follow the sacred story to become participants in a life beyond our own.

It is decided that this is a really interesting egg and it has got the stragglers at the edge of the lawn a bit excited. Placing this African thought into our basket, the group decides to continue looking for new interpretations. One of them, a young man, walks along the fence line where some tall grass is growing. He looks around every post but finds nothing until he reaches the far end. At the very edge of the fence the young man spots something and calls out, inviting us to take a look at an egg that has been hidden there. This egg is from Central America and as we gather around our friend holds it up and admires its bright indigenous hues.

This egg represents the liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Oscar Romero. If we look inside we'll find an altogether different interpretation of Easter. According to the liberation theologians, the God who is referenced in the biblical stories is a God who consistently sides with those who are most vulnerable. In particular, it is the poor, the widows, and the orphans for whom God is most concerned. And when we remember the story of Jesus, we remember all of the times that he spoke with poor people, ate with outcasts, called the children to himself, and said that these people would make up the kingdom of God. For Jesus' movement was a movement of the people, all the people, especially those who had never before been recognized.

What the liberation theologians hear in the Easter narrative is a certain invitation to the table. Speaking from a long Central American history of exploitation at the hands of the West, these writers have cried out for a generation saying that the story of Jesus' innocent suffering should awaken us to the story of innocent suffering everywhere. "We

see this story every day,” the liberationists remind us. “When the children go hungry and the people find no jobs and the sewage backs up in the tenements, we see the story of suffering.” Yet these voices also remind us that, in the midst of such dire conditions, the story of life and renewal goes on. For even in the most difficult places the people are working for change and when relief money comes or a fair trade price is paid to a worker or a student begins her first day of classes, there is much to be hopeful about. And the struggle to hold onto hope and begin working for justice is, in many ways, what the story of Easter has to offer from the perspective of the developing world.

This is a good egg to find at the margins and it leaves us wondering what else might be waiting near the edge of the lawn. Several from our group go looking this way and that until finally someone emerges from behind a large tree trunk. She is smiling and holding something in her hand but doesn't need to say anything because by now we have come to expect it. Cradled carefully in her hands is yet another egg. Walking over to take a look, we find that this egg is not actually from some other place but from North America. It has been given by ecofeminist theologians like Rosemary Ruether and Sallie McFague. What do they think of Easter, we wonder, as we examine the egg more closely.

The ecofeminists begin by embracing the Easter story for its metaphor. This is not a story to be taken literally, they say, but it is a story that contains a great deal of truth for us. We can sense this truth intuitively, as we tell the resurrection stories every Spring, just as the earth itself is being resurrected, waking from a winter slumber to greet us with fresh green leaves and bright azalea bushes. Rebirth, renewal, resurrection. Whatever we call it, life seems to be all around us in the springtime. The ecofeminists see in this

life all around that everything is connected and that the sacred stories are inviting us each to join in the great movement of life, the things that nourish and sustain it. But according to these theologians, if we are to nourish and sustain life we must begin by broadening the metaphor and then making some very real sacrifices. And here is where this interpretation of Easter turns prophetic.

Listen to the sacred story in ecofeminist language. Every Spring the earth awakens once again and is renewed. This earth makes all life possible, it is truly the Ground of our Being. In metaphorical terms then, the earth itself is the body of God. But if we believe the truth in this metaphor, that the world is God's body, then we are immediately challenged to consider how we treat the world, how we care for the body of God. Are we creating for it a tomb, in which we might bury it once and for all? Or are we contributing to its healing, helping to tend its wounds? The ecofeminist theologians warn us that for generations we have been digging a grave for the world. Speaking to North Americans in particular, they say that our behavior will prove to be ultimately unsustainable. For as we have clear cut the forests, polluted the air and water, and consumed at a higher rate than any other people on the planet, we have been moving in the most dangerous direction of all. And an ecofeminist reading of Easter asks that we take the paradox of the Jesus story very seriously...the paradox that we must die in order to live. This means that we in the United States must die to some of our most destructive habits so that the whole earth might still live, we must limit our consumption of energy and our hoarding of resources so that there might be more for our sisters and brothers everywhere. Only once we begin to change our worst patterns, to let them die, will we be able to find our way into a new life, a life of abundance that can be shared.

While our group is gathered at the edge of the grass, marveling at the interpretations we've found, we notice that the vast majority of Easter participants are still standing in the center of the lawn, next to the obvious egg. We can see that they are pleased with it, we know that it is the egg they've come looking for. But peering into our basket for a moment, we wonder if we shouldn't share some of these more colorful finds, for they contain some very good news, news of comfort and of challenge. Although our basket has only three eggs in it, it seems strangely full, and we reflect on the lessons it holds. Jesus, the basket hints, is our spiritual ancestor. When we tell the stories his words come to us and we begin to live out his wisdom. Jesus, the basket hints, has made a place for all of us at the table. He invites people to join a movement where everyone is welcomed and then asked to work for justice. Jesus, the basket hints, comes to us in the earth as it rises every year from sleep to burst forth into Spring. We are asked not to make a tomb for our earth, but to tend it and heal it, changing our habits in the hope of a more abundant life for all.

We look back toward the middle of the lawn, where the people seem happy enough with *the* interpretation. Then back to our basket. Then back toward the middle of the lawn. Then back to our basket. Then back toward the edges of the grass, along the fence posts, in the flowerbeds, by the tree trunk, across the street. There is more here than we thought. And as we pick up our basket to continue the search, we are met with a fresh wind. We can't tell what direction it's coming from but it has a lovely new accent. Something African...something Spanish...something American as it whispers to all who will listen differently, "Happy Easter."

Amen.

(Recommended readings from this proclamation include: From the egg of ancestral theology – *African Theology in Its Social Context* by Bénédet Bujo and *Christ As Our Ancestor* by Charles Nyamiti. From the egg of liberation theology – *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutierrez and *The Violence of Love* by Oscar Romero. From the egg of ecofeminist theology – *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* by Sallie McFague and *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* by Rosemary Radford Ruether.)