

A Butterfly Dreaming

1 Corinthians 15:12-22,51-58; Luke 24:1-11 (Genesis 1:1-2:4a)

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Luke says, “it seemed to them—the disciples—an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Idle tale—that’s one of those words that you only find once in the whole Bible. This term “idle tale”—it’s really another instance of biblical translators trying to smooth things out and make the Word of God polite and respectable and safe to be read in church.

In fact, the word Luke uses is a clinical word, it’s a word that means “demented.” It means the ravings of a lunatic, it means something like, for those of you who heard *Rejoice in the Lamb* last week, something like the rantings, even if they’re inspired rantings, of our favorite loopy poet Christopher Smart. It means something, basically, chaotic, formless; as we say, boundary-less.

All this talk in Paul about creation reminds us of the beginning of creation in the Bible, when the earth was, in Hebrew, *tohu vavohu*, “without form and void”. There were no boundaries between the seas and the dry land, between night and day, between life and death. Everything was in such a state of constant forming and reforming that you never knew what anything was. You couldn’t tell which is from what else, in our old family joke.

One of the early Taoists has something to say about this. Three or four hundred years before the birth of Christ, a Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tse (I think I’m pronouncing that right) –anyway, it’s a very famous story; you can look it up on the internet: “Chuang Tse and the Butterfly.”

One day about sunset, Chuang Tse dozed off and dreamed that he turned into a butterfly. He flapped his wings, and sure enough, he was a butterfly. What a joyful feeling as he fluttered about! He completely forgot that he was Chuang Tse. In a moment he woke up with fear, and realized he was Chuang Tse. Was it really Chuang Tse dreaming he turned into a butterfly, he asked himself, or a butterfly dreaming he turned into Chuang Tse? After all, Chuang Tse and the butterfly are different. This is what is meant, says Chuang Tse, by the transformation of things.

I thought “a butterfly dreaming” was a lovely way to try to get at this loopy, demented, indescribably glorious way in which Paul is talking about the Resurrection. Indeed, the whole idea of a human being being resurrected from the dead, you’d have to be crazy *not* to think it was crazy. Except that, as Paul says, he appeared to five hundred people. “What is that,” I remember Bryant Kirkland asking, “a collective hallucination, five hundred people?” and then Paul says, “some of whom are still alive?” In other words, Paul’s saying, you can go and talk to them about it. No one is making this up, he’s saying.

Anyway, I thought this Easter I'd just float around like Chuang Tse, and maybe Mohammed Ali, too, just float around some of the meaning of the butterfly, and resurrection, and see what we come up with. Because the butterfly is one of the oldest Christian symbols—did you know that?

There is no mention of butterflies in the Bible. If you look in the concordance, you won't find "butterfly" there, but in fact it's one of the oldest Christian symbols. It fits perfectly with the idea that we start out as a sort of formless, kind of globby, sort of, sometimes even wormlike, creature, and we inch around in life, and kind of don't know what's going on, and we stay very close to the ground. And then, the idea is that the human soul is actually buried in the cocoon, or in the symbolism of baptism, we are buried with God also, and then we reemerge completely different, flying and beautiful—that's the idea of the human soul in eternal life. Which of course has already begun: we are already living our eternal life, even though right now we may feel like life goes on at, if not a worm's pace, then a snail's pace.

And in fact, the butterfly as a symbol of a spiritual reality was there already, before the birth of Christ, in ancient Greece. Did you know this? This is for you psychologists, the word for soul in Greek was actually the word for butterfly. In other words, they took the word for butterfly and used it also to mean the human soul. That word, *psyche*, from which we get the word *psychology*, is actually the Greek word for butterfly.

The whole myth of Cupid and Psyche is a way of talking about the God of love endlessly pursuing the human soul. That's the idea, an image of a person running over the hillside in springtime chasing, pursuing, a butterfly. The early church fathers thought that this was such a perfect "type," they said, (we'd say "typology") of Christ questing after each human soul and never giving up—Christ loving each one of us so much that over and over again, he goes and seeks us like that shepherd does that one lost sheep—that was such a perfect typology of the relationship between Christ and the soul, they thought, that they took it over complete, and you can see drawings of Cupid and Psyche on the wall of the Christian Catacombs. Nobody thought the myth needed any changing at all, or in fact was even pagan, it was such a perfect precursor, or "type," you see: a kind of preview sent from God of the Christian experience.

So that's the first thing about the butterfly, its ancient symbolism. Now, the second thing comes from science, and this absolutely intrigued me. Did you know what happens in that cocoon? Did anyone have a science project and have to study it? I used to think that this became this, and that became that. That somehow some part of the worm sprouts wings, and the feelers get longer, and the antenna and all of those things. That this directly caused that, and this directly became that.

Well, that's not what happens. What happens inside of that cocoon once the worm feels the nip of frost in the air? It goes and it finds a place and it wraps itself in the cocoon, this part we know. But what happens inside that cocoon is the whole animal, the whole little creature, turns to mush, it turns to jelly: yes, it turns to primordial ooze. It turns to that formlessness and nothingness, that *tohu vavohu* of the first chapter of Genesis. And out of those individual cells—each of which had implanted in them by their creator the potential to become worm cells at one point, and butterfly cells at another point—each of the cells becomes reorganized with the others: eye cells become eyes, body cells become bodies and so on. It's not a direct cause and effect; everything kind of swirls around in what must be kind of uncomfortable nothingness, and then reorganizes itself in a completely different way, and some things are recognizable from before, and some aren't.

Think of a children's transformer toy. In a way it's like that, except the transformer toy, instead of just mechanically flipping, actually goes to goo and then becomes this other thing. That's really quite amazing! What I like about it is these things all along were meant to be worm parts, when they were being worm parts, and chrysalis parts, when they were being chrysalis parts, and then butterfly parts, when they were being butterfly parts.

I bet that every single one of us can think some aspect of our lives, some aspect of the world around us, that has behaved in exactly the same fashion. Are you thinking that your life is mush? Maybe not now, but you can probably think of a time when it was. Maybe you are losing control of some things that you used to be able to be on top of, and it's very uncomfortable. But it seems to be part of nature that sometimes things need to revert to something less formed in order to re-crystallize, or re-form themselves, into the new way of being that God wants them to be.

All of the biblical writers seem to be finding their way towards describing this as what the resurrected body was like. They have everybody sitting in a locked room, and then suddenly Jesus appears to them, but then, they say, he eats something. He acts like a ghost, but he is not a ghost, because he eats something, and yet he is not bound by walls and doors like the rest of us are. They are trying to talk about something that really can't be described in the language and experience we have, and that's really what they're doing their best to convey.

So, it's *good* news if something in your life is turning to jelly. Because, as the Bible would say, you're at the beginning of something: you are ready to be transformed and reordered by God into something truly glorious, so that God would say, as God does in the first chapter of Genesis, "*Ki tov!*" "How good!"

All right, now where have we been so far? We first alighted, with the butterfly, on the idea that *God will never give up on us*. That God in Christ is pursuing us, no matter where we go, and no matter what we do.

And then we alighted on the idea that a certain amount of amorphousness, *a certain amount of chaos, is absolutely necessary* in order for us to be transformed into whatever it is that God wants us to be *now*.

The last thing I want to say to you is very simple, and it's something you already know. Wherever that chase takes us, wherever Jesus is chasing you or me, or someone we care about very much, who maybe isn't even here today, wherever that chase is taking us, God is in pursuit, and whatever transformation is going on out of whatever it is, in my life or any of our lives, that seems to be in disorder right now — *God is already there*.

Remember, Paul is saying, in his rather nutty, rather loopy, visionary way of talking about the resurrection, he's saying that remember, God is outside of time, outside of space, bigger than all those things. So where ever our flight, or our chase, or our disintegration, leads us, *God is already there*. Yes, God is already there *with open arms*.

Last night we went to Easter Vigil at a church that does such things. The Easter Vigil is long; it's usually a three-hour-long service, in which sections of the Bible are read and sung to tell the story of God's saving history down through the ages from the beginning of creation. From the waters of chaos, through the waters of the Red Sea, and the waters of baptism, the waters in which we are symbolically buried, up to the Lord's Supper and Passion, and culminating in the Resurrection, with the promise of the sacred festival meal in the Kingdom which is here now, but is still to come — throughout the course of history, *God is there*.

We are all of us a work in progress, and we are all of us known from beginning to end in the heart of God, which has no beginning and no end: God's love chasing humanity, down whatever road we follow, down through the ages, loving us over and over, and over, and over. This human institution, this human life, may be transforming, kaleidoscopically, magically, even alarmingly, but always God is there, to catch it and turn it into something wonderful.

When you hear I Corinthians 15 read aloud, you can hear that music of Handel, that soaring, luminous Easter music of the last third of *Messiah*. And you can hear in Paul's words how this "idle tale" — this demented raving, or this story so strange it might just be true — leads us, with those first Christians, to stay the course we're on, whatever it is, and to trust in God. Because the work, as Paul says, the work that we are doing in the Lord will turn out to have been worthwhile. And it will turn out to have been part of God's transformation, not only of us, but of God's entire world.

Amen.