

# Marjory Zoet Bankson: Fear Constricts – Love Expands

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

## Fear Constricts; Love Expands

Last Sunday morning at this time, Peter and I were sitting at the bedside of his mother, Ellie Bankson, as she lay dying in a hospice room in Sandpoint Idaho.

She was terribly afraid and could not let go, despite our repeated assurances that she had lived her life well, loved her children into full productive lives and would be welcomed by Peter's father, who died almost 20 years ago.

None of that seemed to matter. When she could not breathe in enough oxygen for her system to survive on, she panicked and one of us would ask the nurse for a nebulizer treatment to open her lungs again while the other one coached her into relaxing. I learned again that fear constricts and love expands.

In between these breathing crises, we would sit quietly in the darkened hospital room where she lay, praying for her to make this passage as well as she could.

For all of the training and experience we've had here at Seekers, neither one of us was very comfortable speaking to her about life beyond death. In spite of our yearly celebrations of Easter and stories of the Resurrection, neither one of us could find the language to help her let go of this life with ease.

She rarely went into a church and, as far as we know, does not believe in a spiritual realm beyond what we can see and touch and taste. As she lay in bed, surrounded by the love of two sons and their wives, three grandsons who came and went with their partners and two great-grandchildren who were happy to climb on her bed and play with her wheelchair, I could understand why she was hesitant to release her hold on life in favor of something that doesn't seem real to her.

And so we come to Easter morning, the most mysterious day on the church calendar. On this day, the Gospel lesson begins with Mary's affirmation that Jesus is not in the tomb. That is as much as she knows for sure. "Where have you taken my Lord?" she asks.

Like Peter's mother, all she knows is the terrible fact of death. Her life is constricted to the bare face of his mortality, his bruised and battered body. I thought of that this week as I looked at the battered face of the young American soldier, taken into custody by the Serbs, and as I looked at the vulnerability of our own bodies.

We know, because we have heard these stories before, that this garden encounter between a ghostly Jesus and a frightened disciple is the beginning of several appearances that Jesus made to those who loved him. By John's account, Easter marks an in-between state after Jesus' death and before he had "ascended to the Father." Buddhists call it a bardo state. We mostly don't name it at all.

We do not spend much time thinking about this in-between time, but I want to suggest that it's critically important to our faith. These Easter sightings changed the world for a band of frightened disciples – and for you and me. They point to an ongoing relationship between the physical realm we can count and quantify and the spiritual realm of mysterious connections, serendipitous events and unexplainable occurrences. The bare bones of the Easter story are these: we

are linked by loss, called by name and sent forth to bear witness to what we have experienced.

## **First, we are linked by loss.**

Mary Magdalene did not believe her own eyes when Jesus came to her in the Garden, and for good reason. She had last seen him hanging, bent and broken on the cross. Or maybe wrapped like a mummy inside the stone cavity that served as his tomb. Even though the disciples scattered, afraid for their lives, Mary couldn't leave. She was linked by loss.

She was there, in the dark, weeping for all that was gone; all that was not now that Jesus was dead. Like my mother-in-law, Mary Magdalene could not imagine what the next chapter would be, even though Jesus had tried to tell them in a thousand different ways. She had to live it to know what the words meant.

And we do to. All the talk about afterlife is just that, talk. Until someone close to you dies or you face death yourself.

Loss can be the link we need to step beyond the daily round of *chronos* commitments.

Some of us have been taking a class on Death and Dying from Kate Amoss and Ron Arms. We practice dying each week, with a 20-minute mediation period. We begin with a reading from John Main's book, ..... and then move into meditation with the mantra, Maranatha (Lord quickly come).

Working with Ellie this week, I realize what a gift this discipline has been. I sat for hours in her room, meditating with the *Maranatha* mantra on my breath...breathing in her anxiety and distress, offering my body as a crucible for her fears, trusting the Spirit of Christ to transform it, then breathing out release, surrender, rest.

While my mind was occupied with breathing *Maranatha*, images

formed, stayed awhile and dispersed like fog. Nothing to do. No place to go. A kind of spaciousness developed. I found myself in the lap of God, hearing the words, "*You are my beloved daughter. Beloved. Beloved.*" Then I could see Ellie there, held gently, lovingly, curled up like a baby, and held safely. The 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm came and went throughout the day ...

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ...*

Meditation is one way to experience the dying process before it comes for real. We can practice expansion, letting the heavy cells of our body loosen their hold on this world. We can feel ourselves cross from the *chronos* world of time of schedules and plans to the *kairos* realm of eternal things, from the constriction of our mortality to the expansion of God's eternal love.

Ellie was my teacher this week as I sat in her darkened room, listening to her favorite tape of Tony Bennett songs, open to the Divine Mystery as I rarely am here.

## **Secondly, we are called by name.**

In the Gospel lesson for today, Mary does not recognize the Risen Christ until he calls her by name: "**Mary,**" he says, and suddenly she knows who he is.

It's funny, isn't it? She couldn't see him, but she could hear him. She could hear him call her name. Doctors say hearing is the last thing to be shut off, that even in a comatose state, people can often hear everything that is said to them in a hospital room.

There is a wonderful story called *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* – about a young priest who is assigned by his bishop to a small Indian village off the coast of British Columbia. It's a story of how they teach him to love at the same time he is learning to accept his own death.

When my father was dying of colon cancer, I rented a VCR in order to share the video with him. He'd spent the 10 years after he closed his medical office serving on various Indian reservations with public health, offering (as he said) his experience to people who still respected gray hair. My dad heard "the owl call his name" when the cancer began to spread into his bones and he lost all feeling in his feet. I didn't have the sense that he was afraid to die, but I knew there were certain things he wanted to complete before he died and he needed our help to do them.

The last time Peter saw him alive, he was fretting about the medical records from his office, which were still stored in a barn at his little holly farm. Some people had claimed their records, but most had been sitting there for 15 years, awaiting disposal. We offered to burn them and he seemed relieved. It was not what we imagined for those final hours together, but it was what he needed – raking and burning, completion. Burning pages of notes. Burning a few thank-you letters and drawings from children. Burning years of professional dedication.

Burning the medical records was a ritual of transformation, for him and for us. Letting go, so he could listen for "the owl's call" without distraction. So he could move from the constriction of fear and uncompleted things to a bigger place. We were called into action by his need.

We do not spend much time in this congregation asking about the call and claim of those who are dying upon those who are living and yet, as we watch the news with horror right now, we might ask where someone's death is calling you by name.

**The third step in this transition time between death and new life is a message**

**for those left behind. Jesus said to Mary, "Go and tell the others what you have seen and heard..."**

"Don't hold onto me," he says, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

What an amazing detail! It seems to me that Mary had the power to interrupt the transition between the earthly Jesus and the Risen Christ. She had the power to hold him back, like we sometimes do with a person who is ready to die.

As we surrounded Ellie with our love and presence all night and all day, I realized that we might have been holding her into this life, reminding her of her ties here, keeping her tethered with our love, even though we were more than ready to let her go.

"Don't hold onto me," he said, "But go and tell the disciples what you have seen and heard."

Go and tell. Bear witness to this *kairos* realm. Tell the others who are so afraid it was all a dream that I can be with you in a new way, with a different kind of power and intimacy, a different kind of call. Go and tell them that death isn't the end of the story. That's all.

Not what to do. Not where to go. Simply go and bear witness to your own experience of life beyond death.

It's not to make us feel good or make our lives easier (though it may have that effect). The purpose, according to Mary Magdalene's story, is to give us a picture of how any one of us might encounter the Risen Christ **so we can tell others.**

Just before we got the call about Ellie's crisis, I had a dream. In it, I was standing by the roadside, waiting for a van to pick me up. A dark green Jeep Cherokee drew up and, as

I reached for the door handle, Emily Dickinson's little poem came to me:

*Because I would not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.*

Emily Dickinson spent her life bearing witness to the realm of immortality.

And that's the core of our life together. Not making the world a better place or bringing justice and mercy to those who are shut out of modern care and comfort, but bearing witness to this realm of immortality.

And this week, I learned again how hard that is. How tied to this world we are. How difficult it is to translate mystical vision and resurrection hope into meaningful action with those we love.

Mary Oliver puts it this way in her poem, "In Blackwater Woods:"

*To live in this world*

*you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it*

*against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*

That's the essence of Easter, I believe.

When we come together, we hear the stories and practice the

rituals – like communion – the way we might practice making a parachute jump. Practice dying as we pray by entering into a receptive mode, holding life loosely, so we can give ourselves fully to whatever dangerous or silly or creative or even crazy endeavor God is calling us to.

Those are the bare bones of Easter, as we move from the constriction of fear to the expansion of love, dying each day. Living into the Resurrection again and again.

- Let loss be a link.
- Listen for your name.
- Bear witness to what you know.

May you hear Christ call your name this morning.

Amen.