

April 17, 2022
"Unimaginable"
Isaiah 65:17-25 / Luke 24:1-12
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When I was in 5th grade, I remember what I think was my first creative writing assignment – or if not the first, at least the first I can remember. You'll understand why in a minute.

Write a short story. That was the assignment. For whatever reason, I struggled to come up with an idea, but allow me to quickly summarize what I did come up with.

Picture it: A young boy in a small Midwestern town (in case you don't know this about me, I grew up in a small town in Ohio); a young boy discovers an alien hiding in his backyard – not the scary kind of alien, kind of cute really. After an awkward initial encounter, they become friends. They understand each other.

He brings the alien home to live in the basement. The boy tells his older sister about the alien, and they agree to keep it a secret.

Being far from home, it doesn't take long before the alien gets sick – and on top of that, government officials who had been tracking the alien finally catch up to him. Sadly, the alien dies, and then miraculously comes back to life (resurrected, you might say). But in order to survive, ultimately, he has to get back to his home planet. After the alien rigs up a means to communicate with the home planet, the alien is rescued and does indeed return home. It's kind of a sad short story.

I even included a drawing of the boy, picture it with me: the boy riding his bike, with the alien sitting in a basket on the front of his bike. Silhouetted in front of a big old full moon.

Perhaps my short story from 5th grade rings a bell?

I clearly wasn't creative enough to come up with an original story. I'm not sure how I managed to cram all that action into a SHORT story. I also don't remember what I called it, but I was at least smart enough not to call it "E.T."

Whether it was my first creative writing assignment or not, again, I don't remember. But I do know that it was my first lesson in plagiarism. Needless to say, I did not grade well. It was embarrassing, which is no doubt why I remember it so well.

The assignment was an invitation to use our imaginations, but my imagination did not take me far. It didn't take me anywhere. I couldn't get past my own knowledge or experience – including of a blockbuster movie that had come out the year or so before.

You know it already, but here's a working definition of imagination: "the faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses." In other words, beyond reality as we know and experience it.

As one child psychologist puts it, "Imagination draws on our experiences and knowledge of the world around us and combines them with the complete unknown to make something new. It allows us to explore beyond the constraints of our environment and our reality, into a world of dreams, where creativity and invention are at their strongest."

Sadly constrained by my environment and my 10-year-old reality, I was not able to make something new. At least not that time. The good news, of course, the good news of Easter, is that God is ALWAYS making something new. Amen!

Now picture the disciples. You heard the story, as Grace just read for us. The women among them – including, we're told, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some others – are the first to arrive at the tomb where Jesus was buried. That's true in every gospel account.

They find the stone rolled away, and when they go inside, they find no body. No witnesses to what's actually happened, which is also true in every gospel account.

The women are confused. Two angels, or at least divine representatives of some sort, suddenly appear in dazzling clothes. The women are now also terrified, and the angels ask them why they're looking for the living among the dead.

A good question, perhaps, for all of us. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

They tell them that Jesus, the one, of course, that they are looking for, is not dead but risen. Risen. RISEN. Their minds and their hearts are blown.

The women leave the empty tomb to tell the disciples, the now 11 MEN and some others (Judas, of course, the one among the original 12 disciples who betrayed Jesus, is no longer in the picture).

And hear this sexist trope, the men don't believe the women. The MEN don't BELIEVE the WOMEN. To the men, the words of the women, we're told, “seemed to them an idle tale.” Another translation says it seemed to them like nonsense. And still another says they thought they were making it all up. Make-believe.

Constrained by their own biases and environment and experience and knowledge, reality as they knew it, Jesus' crucified body having been buried in a tomb and all of them huddled together in fear of what would come next, the other disciples could not imagine something new. They were stuck being realistic.

To believe that something new – that new life, say, that love, say, could emerge out of what to every sense looks and feels like death – requires some divine dreaming. Some divine imagination.

You are perhaps familiar with Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell, noted student of the alphabet. He of Dr. Seuss fame.

*“I know ALL the twenty-six letters like that . . .
. . . through to Z is for Zebra. I know them all well,”
Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell.
“So now I know everything ANYone knows.
From beginning to end. From the start to the close.
Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes.”*

That's how the story begins, and if you know THAT short story, you know that young Conrad's mind is about to be blown when he learns that Z is not, in fact, the end of the alphabet.

"My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends," the narrator reveals.

*Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!
A letter he never had dreamed of before!*

On beyond Zebra, Conrad journeys through the rest of the story:

*The places I took him!
I tried hard to tell
Young Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell . . .
There are things beyond Z that most people don't know,
I took him past Zebra. As far as I could.
And I think, perhaps, maybe I did him some good . . .
Because finally, he said:
"This is really great stuff!
And I guess the old alphabet
ISN'T enough!"*

The good news of Jesus' resurrection – whatever actually happened, whatever you believe actually happened – is that love and life, new life, IS possible even, EVEN in the face of and EVEN beyond what to our every sense looks and feels like the end. In our own lives and in the world around us. Love and life get the last word, even in the face of and beyond cruelty, denial, betrayal, rejection, suffering and death.

Where our fatigue or stress or trauma or fear or rage or despair or cynicism or indifference stifles our individual and collective imagination, leaving little or no possibility for love to grow and expand, for new and abundant life to emerge, in ourselves, for each other, for the planet, God's imagination compels us further.

The divine imagination compels us to seek and find love and life even where we least expect to. On beyond Zebra, wherever and whenever our old alphabets are not enough.

It turns out the tomb is not the end of the story, just the beginning of a new chapter.

You know that our Muslim siblings in faith are in the midst of their month-long Ramadan celebration, while our Jewish siblings in faith are in the midst of their weeklong Passover celebration.

You may be familiar with the Passover tradition of singing *Dayenu* (*DIE-AY-NEW*) as part of retelling the story of the Exodus and God's liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Let my people go.

Each of the 15 stanzas recalls a blessing from God during and after the Exodus, up to the rebuilding of the Temple, and each ends singing the Hebrew word, *dayenu*, meaning "enough for us." Or "it would have been enough."

If God had brought us out from Egypt and had not carried out judgments against the Egyptians, *dayenu*, it would've been enough.

If God had carried out judgments against the Egyptians and not against their gods, it would've been enough. And so on, at least one intention of the singing being to inspire mindfulness and gratitude for the richness of any blessing from God – making even greater the appreciation for the entire, ongoing arc of God's ongoing blessing and presence.

The Passover tradition of singing *Dayenu* suggests "it would've been enough," but there is a growing movement within Jewish tradition – and now an organization called *Dayenu*, a specific call to climate action rooted in Jewish values, experience and spirit – that further expands on understandings of "enough."

"We've had enough." And "We also have enough" – as in, enough of what we need to repair and transform the world.

It is an invitation to recreation of the world as we know it, in all of its brokenness – recreation limited only by our collective will to imagine and realize it. As Rabbi Michael Lerner has often said, “The new world will be created by people who know better than to be realistic. Realism is crumbling all around us. We will learn what is possible by struggling for the world we desire.”

Not settling for the world as we know it, for the oppressive and destructive and violent status quo, but working beyond the constraints of our environment and our reality into a world of dreams, toward a new world we imagine and desire together with God.

As Albert Einstein once said, “I’m enough of an artist to draw freely on my imagination, which I think is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

In that spirit, within the Easter invitation to bear witness to the empty tomb and the relentless possibility of resurrection, of new life, allow me to share this poetic invitation from Jewish psychotherapist and spiritual director, Dr. Barbara Breitman – shared this past week in preparation for the Passover:

We praise God
at Passover
'Dayenu'!
'It would have been enough!'

It would have been enough
If You had taken us out of Egypt
but not divided the Reed Sea
If You had divided the Reed Sea
but not brought us to dry land
If You satisfied our needs for 40 years
but did not send us Manna
If You fed us Manna in the desert
But did not bring us to Mt Sinai...
It would have been enough!
We would have been content!

This year I am falling
I cannot say Dayenu!
It is too much!
It is not enough!

I've had enough!
Enough racism
Enough war
Enough vicious white men
taunting the brilliant judge
first black woman Supreme Court Justice
taunting her to ignite rage
call her just another
angry black Radical bitch

Enough bodies
dead bodies
strewn on city streets
Enough maimed bodies
Runover by tanks
Enough stockpiles of nuclear weapons
Enough chemical weapons
Enough weapons altogether!
Weapons incinerating the Earth
billowing carbon into the stratosphere
melting glaciers even faster

Enough sadism
Enough hedonism of the Super rich
Enough billionaires riding rockets to outer space
while their workers
cannot feed their children on the earth
Enough Senators
blocking Climate Change legislation
because they own stock in fossil fuel
because they own coal mines
because money and power
are their Gods

Enough plastic bottles and bags
gagging fish in the sea
suffocating birds in the air
Enough floods and fires
Earthquakes and droughts
Enough melting ice caps
Enough dead birds, dead gorillas, dead frogs
Enough extinctions
Enough desert where
there should be rain
Enough rain where
there should be sun

Enough searing
the lungs of the Earth
Enough Climate refugees
dying at borders to be free

Enough torture and tanks
Enough severed limbs
Pregnant women shuddering
in basements, giving birth
hearing bombs fall on their homes
Enough women watching
kneeling husbands shot in the head
Enough atrocities
Enough rape
Enough liars and thieves and autocrats
and oligarchs

Enough!
Enough!
Enough!

Will you shout with me
from rooftops, from mountain tops
from every Capitol and every dome
from every Church, every Mosque, every Temple
every home?

Can we make a roar loud enough
to reach the Heavens
so it will finally be Enough?

Please!
take my hand
Please!
whisper in my ear
that you have had Enough too

At Easter we can't forget the revolutionary Jesus who was killed, crucified by the Roman state, because he practiced revolutionary love and inspired divine imagination among the people – especially among those the world and its oppressive systems left behind. Because oppressive religious and political and economic systems, then and now, depend on stifling our shared imagination, on ensuring our resignation to the status quo, to the way things are being as good as they're ever gonna get.

And we remember and celebrate, at Easter, the Jesus whose imagination, whose love and life, could not be stifled. Could not be killed. Could not be buried. Whose DIVINE imagination, whose EXTRAORDINARY love, whose RESURRECTED life and presence calls us still, 2000-plus years later, to love and life resurrected, made ever new.

To new and renewed worlds beyond the realities we know all too well. Beyond the crosses on which we continue to CRUCIFY ourselves and each other and the planet. Beyond the tombs in which we continue to BURY ourselves and each other and the planet.

On beyond Zebra. As far as our individual and collective imaginations will take us.

Mary Oliver concludes the first section of her poem, "Evidence," with the following line: "Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable."

Friends, keep some room in your hearts and your lives, always, for the unimaginable. For the unrealistic. For the impossible.

May it be so – for you, for me, for all of us. May it be so.