

Easter Sunday
April 21, 2019
The Rev. Devon Anderson

It was just two short weeks ago that I found myself across the globe, standing on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, on a rickety bridge called the “Razor’s Edge” overlooking the majestic Victoria Falls. One of the seven natural wonders of the world, the waterfall’s first and real name is “Mosi-Oa-Tunya,” or the “Smoke that Thunders.” I couldn’t take my eyes off it. There I stood, as mist and rain from the falls poured down on my head, and just stared. I was mystified thinking how that volume of water has poured over those same rocks for centuries and centuries and centuries – through world wars, drought, tribalism then colonialism then revolution, through lifetimes and family trees, through the ever-changing shape of jungle and desert and glacier.

Standing on that perilous precipice, I remembered a poem entitled, simply, *Water*, by the great Polish writer, Wislawa Szymborska, in which she imagines the unending life of water, how it, as part of creation, lives, dies, and then becomes something else somewhere else and then lives, dies, and becomes something else, somewhere else.

When I returned home, I pulled the book from the shelf and read: *There are not enough mouths to utter/all your fleeting names, O water./You have saved houses from fire, you have carried off/houses and trees, forests and towns alike./You’ve been in christening fonts and courtesans’ baths./In coffins and kisses./Gnawing at stone, feeding rainbows./In the sweat and the dew of pyramids and lilacs.*

As I watched the largest curtain of falling water on the planet tumble and smoke and thunder, I was overcome with a sense of wonder, and, strangely, of comfort, about the pattern of God’s creation -- life, death, and resurrection, life, death, and resurrection – never broken, always in motion, no exceptions. As small as my little life is, in this fleeting moment in history, in the face of these magnificent wonders of nature there since the dinosaurs, I profoundly felt my place, my inclusion, however small, in the great mystical cycle of life.

The occasion for the trip to Africa was a tour of early childhood development projects, the result of a joyful, innovative partnership between Episcopal Relief and Development and the Anglican Church in Zambia. As I mentioned in my Easter letter to the parish, everywhere I went – countryside or city, hotel or cinderblock home, safari or copper mine, be it South Africa, Zambia, or Botswana, I witnessed over and over this pervasive, life-giving, God-created cycle of life, death, and resurrection, or, to use other words: living, death, renewal. The cycle presented itself in the program sites we visited, run by a determined and quietly powerful band of church women, and also in the culture and people around us.

Our tour closely followed on the heels of Cyclone Idai (Oi-YA-day) that displaced, in an instant, 1.8 million people, primarily in Mozambique, causing a breakdown in sanitary and water facilities and resulting in a cholera outbreak. During our stay in Lusaka, Zambia, a national controversy arose over the government’s plans to assist its neighbor with food and medical supplies. Many Zambians panicked and protested the giving away resources badly needed in their own country. But above the fray rose the voice of Zambian Vice-President, Inonge Wina. To her people, in the national newspaper, she said: “We have made the decision...that it is imperative for Zambia to help its neighbors...Calamity can befall any

country [at any time], and we must help those in need...we Zambians *must* be part of the circle of life.” And there it was again (!) – the cycle, the circle, the pattern. Living – Dying – New Life. Not only raising up the cycle, but claiming humanity’s place in it, our participation.

Today is Easter, and we are reminded anew and again that at the core of our being - as a church, as disciples of Jesus, as followers of the Gospel – at the core of our being lives a promise of resurrection, which is *a never-ending, God-given blessing of renewal and transformation after any and all experiences of death*. The pattern is revealed everywhere around us: in nature, art, culture, history, science, and as we discovered during our Lenten Adult Forum, in quantum physics. And that’s no accident. Because God set the cycle in motion long before Jesus of Nazareth, from the very birth and death of the first stars to the creation of the entire circle of life on this planet. The cycle is, in the words of Richard Rohr, nothing less than “a universal pattern of the undoing of death.”

“When I use the word ‘resurrection’,” writes Rohr, “I am not talking about temperamental optimism, not a big Jesus miracle, not a proof that Christianity is the [only] true religion, and I am not encouraging whistling in the dark...I am talking about something much more constant and universal than any of these. If you can see in a mind or heart and body way, you will know that resurrection is a part of almost everything...life and death are not two, but a part of a whole...” Death follows all living, and resurrection follows all death. It’s something we’re invited into – our delight and our salvation, our saving help, God’s promise that we will always be loved, always be alive in some way, always be cared for, living and, in ways big and small, suffering and dying, and then, always, made new, raised from the ashes and transformed.

But, if you are like me, for some crazy, illogical reason, accepting God’s promise of resurrection, much less living into it, is so much harder than staying stuck in the sting of suffering and death. To use the well-worn image, I imagine for you, as for me, we have each experienced silver linings in the darkest of life’s clouds, maybe even too many to count. And you’d think with all of those experiences of compassion and healing, new life – however fragile, however tentative – emerging from the grimmest of life circumstances, you’d think that the life-after-death pattern of the cosmos would be utterly clear to us by now, just a part of what we know and who we are. But here’s the rub, and it’s a big one: loss *always* precedes renewal, death of any kind always comes before resurrection. And *that* is where we fumble, falter, and fight. We get stuck there in the death parth, resisting and repressing our own would-be resurrections. Because we’re human. And we’re part of a long line of humanity with whom we share this reaction. Which one of us doesn’t default into catastrophizing within three seconds of any difficulty, crisis, or dark emotion. For whatever reason, for us mere mortals, true joy is harder to access and even harder to hold onto than anger or fear or denial. We get stuck in the death part. We hold on to, and feed, tiny resentments rather than seeking reconciliation. We focus our best resources on the minutia we can control rather than God’s dream for us to which we can aspire. We submit to the chaos or confusion of any given situation, and in so doing avoid taking a stand or, as we sometimes pray here in church, risking something big for something good. We get stuck in the death part and rail against the resurrection part.

And because this is who we are, and what we do, God gave us Easter. God gave us Jesus – who walked among us and taught us how to be in relationship with each other, and with God. Who stood in synagogues and interpreted the scriptures. Who told strange stories with surprising plot twists so no one could ever forget what he said. Because of who we are, and what we do, God gave us Jesus, who had to

come to his own understanding and acceptance of God's divine pattern of life-death-and resurrection. God gave us Jesus, who, in the end, took a deep breath and gathered his courage, who placed every last cell of his body and his life into the hands of the living God, who risked everything and gave up everything, trusting in God's promise that resurrection and life always, always follow death. God gave us Jesus, and then the Risen Christ, to tell us, to show us, to remind us, to proclaim for us, once and for all, God's pledge and guarantee of what God can and will do with all of our crucifixions. God gave us the Risen Christ, our shining icon of the ancient and unending emergence of life from death, there since the beginning of time, put in motion by God out of the craziest, deepest kind of love imaginable, not because we are bad, but because we are good and worthy of God's craziest, deepest kind of love.

In the end, resurrection is not a miracle to be proven. It is a life and a kind of living into which we are invited. Whether we accept the invitation or leave it, God appears to be resurrecting everything all the time. It is nothing to "believe in" as much as it is something to observe, be open to, to look for, be guided by, and upon which to build our lives.

There's an African proverb that reminds us: *that which is good, is never finished*. Our lives are good. The earth is good. God is good. What would it look like if we clung to this promise? After we fully grieved our losses, and respectfully suffered our setbacks, what would it look like to then move on, and, in the words of mystic Evelyn Underhill, *to expect resurrection*? It might look like living a life of enduring hopefulness, or in perpetual expectation with our eyes wide open listening and watching for the transformation of that death into an entirely new thing. It might look like not being afraid. Resurrection is the gift that opens the door to all imagination and possibility. We are given it anew this morning, and always. AMEN.

Sources:

Poems New and Collected 1957-1997, Wislawa Szymborska, *Water*, pp.58-59.

Zambia Daily Mail, Monday, April 1, 2019, "Wina Calms Fears," p. 2.

Resurrection theology from: *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, Richard Rohr, pp. 78-86.