

**April 6, 2014 – Fifth Sunday of Lent**  
***Prepared by Marj Humphrey, former lay missionary, Kitale, Kenya***

*Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalms 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8; Romans 8:8-11, John 11: 1-45*

“Thus says the Lord, God: I will open your graves and have you rise from them ... then you shall know that I am the Lord, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live.” (Ezekiel 12) “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25)

We have begun the last week in Lent and the readings today heighten our anticipation of the Resurrection. We have done our best to sacrifice, to pray, to reflect on our weaknesses; and now we anticipate Resurrection.

And yet, aren't most “resurrections” unanticipated? The joy, the awe coming from great unexpected things? We teach our children, grandchildren, students, about life, death, and resurrection through gardens, through planting seeds for school projects. And we delight in their surprise at seeing an unexpected form of life burst forth for the first time. We mourn the loss of an elder; feel palpable grief and sorrow, only to be caught off guard by a new birth in the family, or a wedding, that suddenly brings unexpected balm to our wound. Or we are given a surprising insight, in the midst of everyday life, through a person from an altogether other culture and belief.

A number of years ago, while working as a Maryknoll lay missionary health care worker in Kenya, a young couple brought their infant twins to our hospital. One infant was critically ill, barely alive from the ravages of meningitis. The second twin, fortunately, was in very early stages of the disease. I was quite certain the first child would not live through the night, but equally as certain that the second infant, with proper treatment, would survive. I did my best to prepare the parents for this, quite grateful that the husband spoke fairly good English and I could express myself with the necessary nuances rather than try to do this in my fledgling and broken Swahili. I was afraid that after the dying infant passed away, they would no longer believe in “our medicine” and refuse further treatment for the other baby.

As expected, the first infant died that night, in the arms of his devoted mother. And indeed, my worst fears were realized when the father came to ask for the body of his child, and also asking me to discharge the other child from the hospital. I did my best to dissuade him, arrogantly assuming he did not understand, explaining over and over again about antibiotics, the science of disease, the need to keep the child in hospital. The man quietly, but firmly persisted. Exasperated, I finally burst out, “But you don't understand! If you leave here you will have two dead children, instead of one. How can you do this to your child?” (To this day I am still ashamed of my outburst.) The young man looked kindly at me and said in a gentle voice, “No, you are the one who does not understand. You see, it is our belief that if the twin of someone who has died is not present at the burial of his twin, that person's spirit cannot be released to the ancestors. I believe this is what you, in your faith, call ‘heaven.’ His soul will be trapped forever in the grave, and he will never enjoy life with the ancestors. How can I do that to my child?”

The purity and clarity of his belief in afterlife rendered me, the missionary, silent. Many years later, I still ponder this. His absolute certainty in the “resurrection,” of the need to live out his beliefs so that his child could be “raised up,” humble me to this day.

Resurrection is life ... and mystery. The story of the twins is complex and gives me more questions than answers. Some ethnic groups of Kenya believe that the afterlife of an individual, their “resurrected life,” is actually their children living on in this world. Likewise, among many, there is a strong sense of “the living dead,” a belief that the ancestors are alive and well, still present among us, though no longer visible in the body. One of my favorite traditions in Kenya is the ritual “first drink” at family gatherings. Before a celebration can begin, the first drink is dipped out of the communal pot and poured into the ground “for the ancestors.” It says, “You are here with us. You still live among us. You are still living, you have not died!”

I carry these experiences with me into our own celebration of Resurrection. My reflections on these images – that of dried seeds blossoming into new life, our children as some sense of our resurrection, our ancestors as “the living dead” to be revered – bring many questions. How can we better safeguard our earth so that generations of children who come after us may live on in the glory of creation? Will our libations for the ancestors be tainted with the blood of our wars and violence against others? Or tainted with our unfettered greed, blind prejudice toward those with whom we live our daily lives? Or will we honor them with lives of goodness and justice?

Belief in the Resurrection presents us with the challenges that Christ gave us through his own life of service, his sacrifices, his dying to self. It is a holy challenge and a passionate challenge. We have rich symbolism awaiting us: the paschal fire – the light that banishes darkness and gives light to our paths – the fire that gives Life.

I offer you a prayer of the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania:

Receive this holy fire  
Make your lives like this fire  
A holy life that is seen  
A life that has no end  
A life that darkness does not overcome  
May this light of God in you grow.  
Light a fire that is worthy of your heads.  
Light a fire that is worthy of your children.  
Light a fire that is worthy of your fathers.  
Light a fire that is worthy of your mothers.  
Now go in peace.  
May the Almighty protect you today and all days.

This reflection was originally published in 2011, and is found in [A Maryknoll Liturgical Year: Reflections on the readings for Year A.](#)

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