



"My Lord! What a Morning"

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John*

Those who have served in leadership at Eden Church, and (let's face it) those who have attended even one Congregational Meeting in the past year, realize that it is no small miracle that we are worshipping in our newly renovated Sanctuary this morning.

Over the past eight consecutive years of renovation work, we have faced numerous challenges and set backs. This effort has taken almost twice as long and cost almost twice as much as the architect projected in the year 2000, and we have not been able to do all that was envisioned in the master plan. Still, it is *such* a blessing to have reached this milestone in the project and to reclaim our Sanctuary this morning!

Every oral history that I've heard from those who were here in the last millennium—now, doesn't that statement make us feel old!—underscores the challenges of getting our membership on the same page about how to distribute Eden's share of the Alden E. Oliver estate. Key questions were: what percentage would be invested in the restoration of our mission house, and what percentage would become seed money for our newly established foundation?

Once those hurdles were successfully negotiated, another set awaited us, having to do with designing the campus Master Plan. Further challenges—perhaps more daunting ones at that—had to do with how to bring the concepts articulated in the Master Plan forward into the physical changes that had been envisioned, while maintaining a reasonable sense of alignment among the membership about the specifics of that plan.

That's when the fun began in earnest, and about when and where I entered the Eden scene. In my first phone interview about five years ago, Eden's Senior Minister Search Committee asked me, "Arlene, tell us how you would approach Eden's Sanctuary renovation?"

Having never actually been to Hayward before, and never having seen a photo of the Sanctuary, I said something diplomatic like, "I think you're going to need to develop a congregational process that includes education about the theological, liturgical and

practical aspects of worship, and you're going to need to create opportunities for group dialogue, prayerful discernment and grassroots decision-making.

The Search Committee and congregation gave me the opportunity to implement just such a process a few months later. Stephanie and I arrived in Hayward Thanksgiving Weekend of 2002. My first Sunday in the pulpit was the First Sunday in Advent. Within a few weeks, I was meeting with the Worship Team and the Board of Church Ministries to plan the 2003 Lenten Series called "Sacred Space."

On each of the five Tuesday evenings during Lent, the Board of Church Ministries hosted what I like to think of as an "Eden Happy *Half-Hour*" in the narthex which featured soft drinks and hors d'oeuvres before each class session. This "meet and greet" provided time for participants to peruse my architectural display that grew each week and that depicted the several changes in Eden's sacred spaces over our 140 year history.

After each evening's repast, the Worship Team led devotions and facilitated small and large group discussions covering the following topics in succession:

- 1) A survey of our past, present, and potential Sanctuary designs;
- 2) An exploration of how our intentions about the spoken word and the performing arts would affect our new design;
- 3) A study of how we might more intentionally incorporate the visual arts and state-of-the-art technology into this renewed worship space;
- 4) A review of UCC theology of the sacraments and an exploration of how these beliefs would inform our design; and
- 5) A survey of the liturgical rites of our tradition and how these might also inform our Sanctuary design.

The take-away for most of us from the 2003 Lenten series was how remarkably similar our views were about worship, once we understood the historical, theological, and liturgical significance that underlay them, and once we had explored the practical concerns and accessibility needs of our members and prospective members.

In the end, the two most controversial topics that surfaced in the spring of 2003 were: pews or chairs? And, how big is the projection screen?

Look around, and you'll see that we resolved the seating question in good UCC fashion by including pews *and* chairs, and the chairs can even be joined to form a kind of pew called "Unity Seating." Also, since 2003, we have lived into a greater sense of appreciation for the ways that state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment enhances our worship. So now we have a wonderfully renewed sound system, and the only thing holding us back from having a digital projection system under the organ screens in the nave is the size of the checks that we would need to write to pay for that system. Since we're not feeling that flush right now, the Worship Team is developing an interim plan that keeps us moving toward the fulfillment of our longer-term vision for media usage in the Sanctuary.

So now you know *conceptually* what it took to get us to this day. Several key practical steps were also required to bring us to this point with the Sanctuary and West Wing renovation, including the following:

- ◆ The recruitment and selection of a professional construction manager to manage the day-to-day aspects of the project for us;
- ◆ The selection of one and then another general contractor, after the first one (on this phase) abruptly withdrew from the work;
- ◆ The redrawing of the project no less than three times until we landed on a scope that met the minimum requirements of the congregation, satisfied the county building department, and was in line with available financial resources in a rapidly inflating construction market.

Given so many disappointments, so many setbacks, so many—what Steve Ryken politely calls “speed bumps”—in the construction process, it is no small miracle that we are enjoying this renovated worship space today.

Perhaps, given our sordid history, you can understand why Steve Ryken and I were skeptical when our Construction Manager, Naomi Kamiya, kept saying throughout the project, “If everything goes right, I think you can be in the Sanctuary for Easter.”

Having experienced repeated slippage in the construction schedule over the past year, Steve and I and the rest of the committee were hesitant to believe—much less state that this goal was possible and we thanked Naomi for not mentioning the possibility to the congregation. In the final couple of weeks, when at least I became convince that a run for Easter was realistic, we agreed to a heads-down, nose-to-the-grind stone, and keep-your-mouth-shut approach to the finish.

From then on, I began imagining us celebrating Easter in the Sanctuary and began working with the Worship Team to do our part to make this celebration possible.

## II

As we each accepted our assignments, and took steps to implement them, I began to imagine our dreams coming true today, and as I did, I thought to myself, “My Lord, what a morning!” And as those words rolled off my tongue, I thought immediately of the spiritual with the same title, “My Lord, What a Morning.”

I then reached for my hymnal collection and began to study the various verses and versions and some online resources about spirituals to learn more about the lyrics and their meaning. It was through this study that I came to a deeper appreciation of how appropriately this spiritual expresses the significance of our reopening of the Sanctuary today and of the Easter story.

For example, I discovered through my research that there are actually two different titles to this spiritual. One title is “My Lord! What a M-o-u-r-n-i-n-g,” and the other is “My Lord, What a M-o-r-n-i-n-g.” The words Mourning/Morning are homonyms.

I also learned that civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois, in his early twentieth century collection of essays and sketches titled *The Souls of Black Folk*, offers some profound insights into the various meanings inherent in these two titles and texts for African Americans at the turn of the last century, and for all Christians, regardless of our heritage. Du Bois explains:

The text [of the spiritual] can mean either morning (the beginning) or mourning (the end). It refers to the morning when the dead will be raised, or the slaves emancipated, but also the false dawn of reconstruction failed. The trumpet sounds will wake the nations of “underground” Americans both black and white to challenge racism and segregation. The metaphor of falling stars may stand for the Union Army’s campfires, the beacons of freedom, or perhaps the great black men whose spirits flash like falling stars in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a usage that may be traceable to the Kongolesse belief that falling stars are “spirits flashing across the sky.”<sup>1</sup>

Ponder the difference in these two titles, which differ only by the use of the homonyms: mourning (the end) and morning (the beginning.)

When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on the first Easter morning, she was in mourning. She had gone to the cemetery for funereal purposes. She was facing the end. But when she arrived, she found things worse than she had expected. Jesus had been crucified just days earlier, and now his body was missing—presumably stolen from the tomb. So she ran back to Simon Peter, John, and the other disciples, and told them that Jesus’ body was missing, and said that she didn’t know where he had been taken.

The disciples followed Mary back to the cemetery where they discovered Jesus’ burial cloths and the tomb empty of his body, and they returned home. But Mary, a woman in mourning, stood alone, weeping outside the tomb. The man who had exorcised her demons was dead and gone. She wondered from where her help and hope might now come.

Weeping, she entered the tomb, and John says there she saw two angels sitting where Jesus’ body had been laid, and they asked her why she wept, and she replied, “Someone has stolen my Jesus, and I don’t know where they have laid him.”

Just as these words rolled from her tongue, Mary turned around and saw a man whom she presumed to be the gardener, and she inquired of him where Jesus’ body had been taken. According to John, that man was no gardener, he was the risen Christ, who called her by name saying, “Mary!” and in that instant, she recognized his voice, and replied “Teacher,” and she reached for him.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://way.net/SoulsOfBlackFolk/SoulsOfBlackFolk.html>

But Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me...but go to my brothers and tell them that ‘I am ascending to God.’” And she went to the disciples and announced to them that she had seen the Lord, and she told them these things.

At the outset of that first Easter, Mary Magdalene headed to the cemetery feeling quite certain that her life was coming to a screeching halt, but as the day unfolded and she communed with the resurrected Christ, her grief turned to hope. Her mourning turned into a bright new day.

### III

If we can lay aside our sometimes narrow pursuit of scientific facts in an effort to grasp the larger truths of human existence, and allow ourselves to attend to the metaphors and symbolism inherent in the Easter story, I suspect that we, like Mary Magdalene and W. E. B. Du Bois, could move spiritually from what could be our own private dead-end experiences to a great reawakening that God can do and God is doing something new in our lives and in the life of our congregation and wider community.

“What might that new thing be?” That’s the question.

The answer depends, as it did with Mary Magdalene and with African Americans after Reconstruction, on our willingness to attend to our own grief processes, to make that trek to the cemetery, and to heed the heralds of hope at the empty tomb who encourage us to become messengers of the hope that we seek: in the words of the gospel, to “go and tell John what you’ve seen and heard,” and with the lyrics of the spiritual, “...hear all Christians shout, ‘Cause there’s a new day come about,...”

What would it look like if we became heralds of the hope that we seek in our time?

Perhaps our grieving processes might be transformed through a recitation of Lamentations, by weeping at the cemetery like Mary Magdalene, or through a New Orleans jazz-style funeral whereby we sing, play, and pray our way through grief, so that we are better able to go and tell others about the new life we have found, rather than hiding in fear and hopelessness like most of the disciples.

To become heralds of hope, our individual grieving process also might be transformed through journaling exercises, such as writing down personal vignettes, or even our life stories, for ourselves or for a wider audience, as opera star Marian Anderson did. In her 1956 autobiography titled *My Lord, What A Mourning*, Anderson graciously and powerfully described how she experienced and confronted racism as an African American woman who had been denied access to performing at Constitution Hall and who became the first to sing with the Metropolitan Opera.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marian Anderson, *My Lord, What a Mourning* Viking Press: New York, 1956.

Our grieving process might also be transformed as we awake at the trumpets' call to join in solidarity with others who, like us, are struggling to embrace a new life and new hope. One way that we are striving to embrace a new life and new hope at Eden Church is by taking time to discern our call to minister with persons in our congregation, and with other organizations in the community, who share our passion for a better world. Last Sunday, the Board of Community Ministries facilitated a very important conversation about our individual and collective service vocations. Some important insights and synergies surfaced in that conversation, and I expect great outcomes will flow from these kinds of prayerful conversation.

Another very concrete way that we are striving to embody solidarity as a congregation with persons who are striving to experience Easter's new life is by including in this final renovation phase provision for new and expanded quarters for the FESCO administrative staff, at a below-market rental rate. Last weekend the FESCO staff and their friends moved to our campus, and over the course of the past week they have been settling in. I'm pleased to report that FESCO's administrative offices will reopen for business tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m., right here, at the mission house that we know as Eden United Church of Christ. So, for us, and for FESCO, this Easter a new day has come about!

My Lord, what a morning!

Let us join the mighty chorus, on earth and in heaven, singing about the life transforming work that Christ has already begun in and through us.

Amen.