

A Queer Easter Vigil: resurrection after religious trauma

[00:00:00] In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor offers a framework for a faith life that is lunar moving from light into darkness and back cyclically. This is Taylor's antidote what she calls a full solar spirituality, in which one proves that one is blessed by never struggling, and thus there is no room for grief, doubt, anger, or fear without everybody questioning your faith.

I love the idea of a lunar spirituality.

This concept of faith has been my framework for several years now. This lent however I have started to think about queer people of faith, and particularly queer Christians, as a crepuscular people-- that's a big word that describes something relating to or resembling the twilight, that nebulous space between day and night, night and morning.

Crepuscular creatures defy the supposed binary of nocturnal and diurnal, being most [00:01:00] active in that twilight time, the dawn and the dusk. We are a Crepuscular people-- we whose genders blend, bend, or break beyond the binary of male and female. We occupy the liminal spaces that others skirt around or hurry through; we venture out into uncharted waters, unbury ancient wisdom, build homes in the gaps and at the borders. I.

Those of us queer folk who are also people of faith are particularly familiar with Crepuscular living. We are told that queerness and religion are as different as night and day, and too often our refusal to choose between them leaves us somewhat stranded, struggling to find acceptance in both our spiritual and queer communities.

But we are the dawn and dusk that sew night and day together. We embody the truth that what is queer is sacred and what is sacred, queer.

As Christians spend [00:02:00] today, good Friday and tomorrow, holy Saturday, contemplating the fact that in Jesus Christ, God died, we are in a truly crepuscular moment:

that space between Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection. What we find is that the divine does their best work in the twilight.

So it's been a while, huh? I'm sorry for dropping away without [00:03:00] warning again. Last fall got so busy for me-- mostly good kinds of busy, lots of very cool writing gigs that I was so excited to get-- but it became that pesky cycle of well, the podcast has to go on the back burner. Oops. Now I've skipped a month. Oh, and another, and another, and at this point it's awkward to do anything about the situation at all. Oh, well. I know some of you know what I'm talking about. Fellow Neurodivergent folks, I see you.

But now it is spring and the world is bursting back to life, sprouts and buds shaking their fists at corrupt human leaders who have no power to restrain them. In a year of uncertainty where cruelty is king, when liberation seems a long way off to mourn all crushed by empire is holy; to work towards resurrection is the liberation movement.

So I just wanted to share something unexpectedly wonderful that has happened to me [00:04:00] this lent; something that has resurrected parts of me I thought were dead.

Oh, also, before we get started, I want to note that this episode talks a good bit about religious trauma and how that trauma impacts how you engage with religious communities from that time forth.

I grew up Catholic, and even though I've journeyed beyond the Roman Catholic Church as an institution to a denomination more affirming of queer folk and women, Catholic tradition remains my spiritual heart.

But in the spring of 2023, I had a soul crushing experience at the Catholic church I grew up in and loved deeply. I don't really wanna talk about it in this episode, but I'll include a link to a lovely article that a queer person who also grew up in that church wrote about it.

Encountering queerphobia at my childhood church and all the fallout that followed kind of [00:05:00] broke me.

My worship attendance had been sparse for years anyways, thanks to other smaller traumas throughout the years. But after May 2023, it dwindled to almost never going to church of any denomination. I've been hurt so many times in small ways and big that it has long been impossible for me to worship with other people without my body mind going on high alert, ready for the worst. That last incident made this issue even worse than it had been before. It now feels impossible to worship with others without spiraling, wondering when

they'll finally reveal that they can't stand me or despise everything I am, which really, really sucks.

If you are in a similar situation, my heart goes out to you, and I hope that the story I'm about to tell encourages you a little, gives you a little hope that there are people of faith who will not reject you, who will [00:06:00] love you for who you are and who are eager for you to share your gifts.

But while you dwell in dusk, God dwells there with you. Divinity draws closest when the world holds you at arm's length.

But I'm getting sidetracked.

Lent always reawakens my yearning for Catholic ritual and tradition -- protestants just don't do it like Catholics do. I'm sorry, but it's true.

The day before Ash Wednesday this year, I decided I felt stable enough to slip into the back of an ash Wednesday mass. I just had to choose a local Catholic church that seemed, you know, relatively safe. Imagine my surprise when a quick search online pulled up a Catholic church just 10 minutes away from my home that included on the website an L-G-B-T-Q Bible study. Surely it was too good to be true. It's a Roman Catholic church in good standing, could they get away with a queer group that's like [00:07:00] actually fully affirming rather than some sort of support group for those struggling with "same sex attraction"?

Well, I attended the Ash Wednesday mass without incident, so I decided I'd test out the L-G-B-T-Q Bible Study Group the following week as well. If it sucked, I'd hit the bricks, but if it didn't... well, that would mean a whole lot.

And it did not suck. The people there were mostly queer and definitely not of the, "you can't help being gay, but you gotta be celibate" variety. They were completely affirming and very welcoming of me.

Even more incredible to me, the parish priest had invited them to lead a stations of the cross service one Friday during Lent, which to me meant that this group isn't just tolerated, just allowed to quietly take place in the building, but they participate in wider church life.

This group very kindly welcomed my participation in creating reflections for all 14 stations of the [00:08:00] cross. For anyone unfamiliar, the stations follow Jesus from his arrest to his crucifixion and burial. Some of the stations draw from the gospels-- like Simon of Cyrene being conscripted to carry Jesus's

cross-- and some draw from ancient Catholic legend like a woman named Veronica, using a cloth to wipe the sweat and blood from Jesus' face.

I really could not believe that we would be permitted to read reflections relating Christ's passion to queer experiences, during Catholic worship, from the pulpit. But the others seemed sure we were allowed. So I wrote and submitted my two assigned stations. And that Friday I showed up at the church ready to play my part, but more than a little bit on edge.

I mean, the church had printed pamphlets with our reflections in them, so presumably we really were allowed to read them.

But would parishioners leave the pews once we began? Would someone yell at us? My past traumas made it [00:09:00] really hard to believe that this really would turn out okay... but it did.

Everyone's reflections were magnificent, poignant, thought provoking. We shared struggles we'd faced and how we saw connections in Jesus's struggle: being viewed with suspicion, rejected without cause, stripped of dignity-- but also the good news that connected us to Jesus: our tenacity, our faith in spite of everything, the support and acceptance we finally found, the way we share our God-given gifts, the new life that comes, even when we think we'll die of grief and pain.

I won't share everyone else's reflections because they're not mine to share. But I will share my two stations, starting with the third station, Jesus falls for the first time.

" Though he was in the form of God, [00:10:00] he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming like human beings." -Philippians two verses six through seven.

It is a queer thing, impossible to wrap my head around that in Jesus, our omnipotent God became weak enough to struggle, suffer, stumble.

We fear falling. We fear failure and being seen as weak. Essentially, we fear being what God made us: finite, fallible, human. And it's a reasonable fear. When society demands we do the impossible-- pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Pretend we are not utterly dependent on God and others for our survival.

If you are queer or disabled, a person of color or otherwise marginalized, you may know the added pressure to always appear strong, calm, and [00:11:00] in control. You can't let your patients fail for a moment lest you be seen as threatening or ungrateful. You can't mess up or give up, lest people use you to confirm their own bias about your whole community: "well of course you couldn't do it, you're /insert identity here/." when your humanity is constantly in question, you cannot afford to be, well, human, with all the messiness that entails.

But God does not shy away from perceived weakness. In fact, God so loved humanity that one person of the Trinity emptied himself to become one of us, limits and all. In his journey to the cross, Jesus shows himself strong enough not to fear weakness, humble enough that he could not be humiliated. He shows us that what the world calls power is worthless. That true power is found in compassion and acknowledging our need for one another.

[00:12:00] Skipping to the 10th station when Jesus has arrived at the top of the hill and is stripped of his clothing.

"And Jesus said, 'father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments." -Luke 23 verse 34.

Above all else, crucifixion was a spectacle. The Roman Empire's way of making a show of its brutality in order to terrorize dominated peoples into submission.

If you dared dissent, you knew what end awaited you: you would be stripped of your autonomy, stripped of your dignity, and [00:13:00] finally, literally stripped bare before a crowd, your naked, wounded flesh a warning to others to comply or die.

In our own time, transgender and intersex persons are likewise made into a spectacle. Our bodies and private medical histories are put on display for others to gawk at pity or judge. New laws attempt to strip us of our God-given free will, denying us the autonomy to respond to God's invitation to participate in the ongoing creative act that is embodied life.

In school and at work, at home and in church, we face every manner of violence. And when these evils wound us to the point of suicide, or when we are murdered, our deaths are lifted up as a warning: "see what happens when you refuse to comply?"

But through the cross, Jesus transformed shame and death into new life. Though he was the one who was [00:14:00] stripped, his execution exposed both the evil of Empire, and Empire's ultimate fallibility.

When we dare to be who God made us to be, society's spotlight may make us feel like one raw wound exposed and vulnerable. We may even be subjected to social death. But we refuse to be ashamed any longer for being the beautiful embodied spirits, inspirited bodies that God calls beloved. Even when others try to strip us of dignity, status, or autonomy, Christ brings us into joyous, abundant life. The cross is not the end of the story. [00:15:00]

Catholic churches have artistic renditions of the 14 stations of the cross on the walls, usually between the stained glass windows, and during the stations of the cross service, all worshipers rotate their bodies in the pews to face each station as we get to it in the reflections.

One person holds a crucifix and moves more actively, carrying that crucifix from station to station as we go. It is this crucifix that the rest of us follow with our bodies, like sunflowers turning their faces toward the sun.

At the start of each reflection, a call and response is given: "we adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world." When the worshipers recite the second line, all kneel briefly, a genuflection to the crucifix. I don't know how to articulate the emotion that weld up inside me to watch this very Catholic ritual take place in [00:16:00] between our very queer reflections, but something torn inside me knit back together.

The parish pastor was in the pews during our service. When it was over, he made his way to us. I couldn't help a reflexive shrinking back, a rush of adrenaline. Anyone with trauma, which let's be real, is the vast majority of human beings, understands how the body mind responds to just about anything as a potential threat.

But what the priest said to us was, "that was wonderful. Thank you."

I still struggle to believe I got to read about the queerness of Christ from a Roman Catholic pulpit, but I did, and no one screamed at me or chased me out. It was really, really cathartic.

I don't think that anyone is obliged to keep engaging with communities that have harmed them, especially not when no apology or real reform has taken place. But for those of us who choose to stay, even if only [00:17:00] on the peripheries, this is why we do stay. Sometimes people surprise you.

When you choose to go, God goes with you. When you choose to stay, God stays by your side.

If you have stories of finding new life, either in the going or the staying, I would love to hear about them. Hit me up on social media or at queerlychristian36@gmail.com.

I'll close this episode with the last reflection. It's one I wrote not for the stations of the cross, but for Holy Week liturgy published by a sanctified art, home to progressive, poetic, powerful worship materials that I highly recommend. It was a joy to work with them.

what I'm about to share fits the 11th and 12th stations of the cross well: Jesus is nailed to the cross and Jesus dies. It's an imaginative retelling from the perspective of one of Jesus's fellow crucified criminals. All three were executed for charges of sedition against the Roman Empire.[00:18:00]

A reading from the Gospel of Luke chapter 23, verses 39 to 43: one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him, "aren't you the Christ? Saved yourself and us." Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, "Don't you fear God seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? We are rightly condemned for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."

Paradise. That's what my comrade and I are guilty of: intent to bring paradise to our poor, oppressed people, no matter the cost.

That's not how Rome sees it of course; they charged us with robbery and sedition. We'd heard Jesus was back in town, [00:19:00] that he'd ridden in like a king of old and challenged to Pontius Pilate's Grand Parade, and we thought he must be here to kick off a rebellion after all his preaching about the nearness

of God's kingdom and calling himself son of God in defiance of Caesar, what could he possibly be promising but revolution?

And how does revolution come about, if not with swords?

So we ambushed some Roman soldiers to seize their weapons. Clearly, it didn't go as we planned. Clearly, Jesus never meant to lead an insurrection after all. So here we are about to die with him anyway, and I get why my comrade feels betrayed, why he mocks the man we'd pinned all our hopes on.

Still, I can't bring myself to hate Jesus. All the way through my arrest, my trial, my struggle up this hill, I've been pondering: Could Jesus know a different path to paradise? A way to hold yourself [00:20:00] somewhere between violence and passivity as you fight for justice. A kind of revolution that refuses to use the empire's weapons, and instead creates its own tools for dismantling Rome.

I shouldn't have any hope left. Not hanging here between life and death with no riot, no liberation, no second chance for me. The Messiah we thought would overturn Rome is slowly suffocating to death beside me. Things are hopeless--and yet absurdly. I hope.

Today I head for paradise in heaven. Tomorrow, others will take up the work for a better world until God's kingdom comes to earth at last. [00:21:00]