

Gen. 2:4b, 7-8, 15, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, Meister Eckard, Charles Cummings

We're in the liturgical season of Easter, and the season of Spring in the Northern Hemisphere. We are looking all around us for signs of new life in nature. We look for flowers – crocuses then daffodils, tulips and irises coming out, forsythia and rhododendron bushes budding and blossoming. We look for birds – the return of robins, cardinals, hummingbirds. We look for butterflies – there are over 100 kinds of butterflies in Massachusetts. Some of the more easily identifiable being swallowtails, fritillaries, white admiral, painted lady, and monarch. When we see butterflies again in late spring, winter is long gone and the transformation of the earth revealed.

The Easter story is one of transformation and new life. None of the four gospels reports any witnesses to the actual moment of transformation that happens in the darkness of night, in the tomb, when the crucified, dead Jesus is metamorphosed into the risen Christ. In the dawn's early light of the first day of the week when the women go to the tomb, the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb has already been moved away and the body of Jesus is missing. The original ending to Mark's gospel was added onto, so that all the gospels end with the unexpected, with the transformation from the dead Jesus to the glory of the risen Christ. When the women try to tell the male disciples, they aren't believed. Those who haven't seen the risen Christ for themselves have to rely on the reports of others. It's a lot like my relying on the Facebook groups for New York and Maine birders when the first songbirds arrive, even though I haven't yet seen them for myself.

Christ is Risen! is the Easter proclamation. The Bible is really talking about a deep, wide spiritual truth, not a doctrinal test to see if you get a right answer. Spiritual matters are not rational, they defy logic, they do not make sense. So our human brains resort to metaphor to explain the unexplainable. We seek out analogies so that something familiar can give insight into something mysterious. When Christians try to explain how Jesus died and then was transformed, somehow still living, the example of a butterfly is often used. In Romans 12:2, the instruction to be "transformed by the renewing of the mind" uses the NT Greek word "metamorphosis." In Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthian Church, in chapter 3, the quote that we "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" also uses the Greek verb "metamorphosis." That is the term we use in English when we describe the life cycle of a butterfly, which begins with a caterpillar, then a seeming "death phase" of a cocoon, then the break-through into a beautiful butterfly.

Monarch butterflies are the only butterfly to make an annual migration like songbirds do. The Eastern Monarchs travel over 2000 miles to overwinter in Mexico; the Western Monarchs overwinter in southern California. The lifespan of an adult butterfly, once it is out of the cocoon, is only a few weeks. The Monarch butterflies that end up in the Northeast US are about 4 generations past the butterflies that spend the winter in

Mexico. Some instinctual generational patterns lead monarchs to not only summer and winter in the same place, but to choose the same flight patterns and stopping places for their biannual journey.

Both the Western Monarch butterfly and the Eastern Monarch butterfly are threatened species. Winter 2025 only 12,000 were counted when there used to be up to 10 million butterflies wintering on the California coast. That is a 99.9% decline in population. The Eastern Monarch butterfly population has also seriously declined – numbers are 80% fewer than in the mid-1990s.

When I began seminary at Duke Divinity School 50 years ago, I was Presbyterian so I had to learn Biblical Hebrew and Greek in addition to other ordination requirements. My Biblical Exegesis was about the Garden of Eden Story in Chapter 2-3 of Genesis. One of the things that struck me was the way that verse 15 of Chapter 2 had been incorrectly translated into English, obviously due to bias in the minds of the translators.

The New Revised Standard version says the Lord God put that 1<sup>st</sup> human into the Garden with the command: "to till it and keep it." The Hebrew words are to *avadah* the land and to *shamarah* the land. Other translations say:

"to dress it and to keep it." (KJV)

"to farm the land and to take care of it." (NOG) (GW)

"to cultivate and keep it." (AMP)

"to tend and guard *and* keep it." (AMPC)

"to work it and watch over it." (CSB)

"to farm it and to take care of it." (CEB)

"to cultivate and care for it." (CJB)

"to cultivate it and guard it." (GNT)

"to work the soil and take care of the garden." ( ERV)

"to have him work it and guard it." (ISV)

"to serve it, and to keep it." (YLT)

The Hebrew root *avod* means to serve, and when made into a noun means a servant. So, the garden command that God gives is to serve the earth. But, the Western interpretation of human history is that agriculture marked the beginning of civilization, and therefore learning how to work the land to produce crops was the seminal activity of human beings, This worldview undoubtedly influenced how the Genesis 2 story was understood and translated. Instead of the command of the Lord God being for the human to serve the earth, it was misguidedly interpreted as the human should work the

earth, cultivate, till it, to tend it. And the Hebrew root *shamar* means to guard, to protect. But instead of understanding that God was giving a command to protect the earth in an active way, the translations say things like "keep it" or "take care of it." When the true meanings of the Biblical Hebrew words are understood then the purpose given the human in the Garden is safeguarding environmental protections. Notably, the divine command to *avodah* and *shamarah* the earth are never withdrawn or mitigated. Environmental justice is not some optional sideline activity, but a major call on human life. When butterflies and other pollinators like bees suffer declining populations and are threatened, that is not just a worldly concern but a spiritual one.

In the winter of 2018-2019 I volunteered at Goose Island State Park on the Texas Gulf Coast for 3 months, November – January. This state park is next to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, which has helped whooping crane populations recover. This area of south Texas is also on the migratory route as Eastern monarchs head south to Mexico for the winter. About the 2<sup>nd</sup> week in November seemed to be the peak, with monarchs filling the sky. When I tried driving my car across the causeway down to Rockport Texas to go to the grocery store, my car wiped out hundreds of butterflies. I felt guilty because they are endangered. "

Back home in Central New York, some people try to let milkweed grow in their yards or fields because monarchs lay their eggs there and caterpillars feed on milkweed. But milkweed is a pernicious weed, and a single plant becomes dozens of volunteers, as I discovered in my own backyard in Cortland. I was torn between wanting to provide food in case a monarch came by, and wanting to get those stupid plants out of my flowerbeds.

Monarch butterflies are losing out because breeding habitat has been lost. Their overwintering habitat has also been lost. Irresponsible use of pesticides has also harmed butterflies in addition to the insects they are intended to target. And finally, Climate Change has impacted butterflies, so that the timing of their migration is now off. One of the magical creatures that God placed in our natural world is the butterfly. And they are threatened.

When Jesus taught disciples 2000 years ago, he used agrarian metaphors and examples from nature. Jesus taught that God knows when a single sparrow falls to the ground. A beloved spiritual hymn declares that "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." We can extrapolate that God's eye is also on the butterfly. God's compassionate care extends to us as human beings, and also to other living beings – including butterflies.

God's plan for human beings is for us to metamorphosize, to spiritually transform into the children of Light, to become like Jesus, the Light of the World. Just as a caterpillar has to leave its old life behind, and enter a cocoon in which it will metamorphosize, to finally emerge with wings and fly, so we who are counted among God's children are

being lured by the Holy Spirit to die to the old self so that we can metamorphosize into the wondrous beings we were always meant to be.

When we understand that the Easter story is about metamorphosis, about Truth revealed in our time, not just in ancient history, if we see that Christ is Risen is not a narrow, limited truth but an expanding truth, a change not just for back then but for every age and time since – wow. John's gospel is the one that reports Jesus proclaiming to his disciples that you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

A 1972 film used the title "Butterflies Are Free" – with heroine Goldie Hawn saying her favorite quote is "I only ask to be free. The butterflies are free." This is actually a quote from Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*. In God's natural creation, butterflies are free. They flourish in their natural habitat, they fly in providential patterns across generations, filling their niche in the eco-system. God created us human beings to be free as butterflies. To not be captives bound by destructive forces, but to flourish and rejoice in the gift of life.

For us as humans to be transformed, to metamorphosize spiritually, we also need to help butterflies to continue to metamorphosize, to expand their populations back to healthy numbers, to stop the human activity that is destroying critical habitat. If butterflies aren't free, then humans aren't either. I'm speaking the truth about butterflies as God's creatures. For the truth to set us free, not just one species – human – needs to be free, but so do butterflies... and all of God's creatures, great and small. Amen.