



## Ramallah Friends Meeting (Quakers)

### Easter Message 2017

*This Message is shared as the Palestinian Christian community and many other communities around our world prepare to enter Holy Week.*

*It is, at the same time, the culmination of a spring meditation series which sought to recognize the diverse outward expressions of our spiritual journeys, while honoring a common desire for inward transformation.*

*May our spirits be fed, sustaining us for a journey of all times and places.*

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## A Loving Solidarity

by Jean Zaru

From the land of Palestine, I extend loving greetings to you as sisters and brothers, both near and far. In just a few days, our Lenten journey will culminate as we celebrate Palm Sunday, mindfully walk through each day of Holy Week, attend prayer services and reflect in solitude.

Good Friday is a day of sorrow, reminding us of the crucifixion of Christ. For Palestinians, the crucifixion reminds us in a very distinct way of our own pain and long standing suffering.



### Cakes, Eggs and Travel Permits

Ultimately, Resurrection arrives and it is a time of joy, hope and sharing. In Palestinian households, we bake small cakes for this occasion which are rich in symbolism. Even though the cakes themselves taste sweet, their shape represents the last bitter moments before Jesus' torturous death. We transform ring-shaped cakes filled with dates into crowns of thorns. Another type of cake is filled with walnuts and shaped like the vinegar soaked

sponge, which instead of water, was offered to Jesus. These cakes are baked by both Christians and Muslims, alike, for their respective special occasions. With similar import, eggs are naturally dyed a deep red color to represent the blood of Christ. Colored eggs are the joy of children and adults alike, who exclaim "Christ is Risen!", when cracking them open.

Indeed, this is a busy time when churches and families are hurriedly preparing for the upcoming Easter festivities. Some are preoccupied with the spring cleaning of their homes, while others find their time consumed with securing a travel permit to Jerusalem for pilgrimage and prayer. Meanwhile, the spiritually devoted are preparing their bodies and souls through fasting and contemplation. All of us look forward to gathering with family to share a festive meal, hold egg hunts and distribute chocolate bunnies to the children.

### **Instinctive Compassion**

All the while my community holds tight to these very meaningful spiritual and cultural traditions, many throughout the Middle East region are experiencing great affliction, suffering, and loss as victims of war. We feel that their pain is very close to us. How difficult it is to know that your neighbors have been displaced, made homeless and are struggling to survive as refugees in the cold desert, cold seas and in foreign, often unwelcoming lands.

They confront death and the nightmares of death, each and every day. They cry to God, out of the depths of Gethsemane proclaiming, "If it is indeed your will, take away the cup of death!" Yet, they fiercely carrying on, trying as they might to affirm life in the midst of unfathomable death and destruction.

They represent a modern-day version of the Psalms and the book of Lamentations. They cry out, "God, why have you forsaken us?", and yet, many of the suffering hold an unshakeable faith in God –a faith that propels them to maintain a strong human connectivity with others. Surely, it is this connection which binds us together into a near instinctive state of compassion, one that beckons us to love and care for others no matter the depravity of our circumstances.

Yes, religious occasions are times for rejoicing and celebration. Temporarily liberated from everyday responsibilities and in the company of family and friends, we can render the bonds of community and experience something of the fullness of life. In most cultures, sharing a festive meal is an indispensable part of any celebration. The shared meal is a kind of liturgy of thanksgiving to God for sustaining and protecting the community. In celebration, human beings are able to transcend the scarcities and limitations of everyday life. Joy is the emotion which expresses this experience of overflowing abundance and gratitude.

Are we not called to hold together in deep human connection, both this joy and the affliction of life?

## Invited to the Table

Throughout his ministry of preaching and healing, Jesus invited people into the joy of the kingdom by inviting them to the table. This happened so often that his open invitation to share a meal has become a parable of the Kingdom of God drawing near. Without hesitation, Jesus would share the table of fellowship with those whom the religious authorities of the day had dismissed as unworthy sinners.

We learn through scripture that Jesus was a mystic. He had vivid and frequent experiences with the Spirit. He was a remarkable healer, wisdom teacher, and social prophet. An outspoken critic of the domination system, Jesus was also an organizer, an initiator of inclusive movements that shattered the social boundaries of his time.

How Jesus lived and related to people involved a process of dying to an old reality and then being born into a new one. Jesus affirmed a meal practice of bread and inclusivity –again, a radical departure from the domination system. While interpreting Jesus in strictly political terms does not allow us into a full understanding, we also risk reducing his message if we exclude the political dimensions of his life, death and resurrection.

Our struggle against the inter-related threats of oppression, violence, warfare and the destruction of the environment can be and should be understood as **one** struggle for life.

Challenged by the suffering and hope arising within my own context and from those on the margins of life, I experience this struggle as the breakdown of life and peace in Palestine and throughout the Middle East. It is a breakdown that has brought enormous suffering and whose effects will require generations to heal.

## The Way of Transformation

Do we have a theology of Justice and Peace? Are we capable of transforming structures of violence and domination so as to build the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven? Are we inclusive and open? Do we advocate for pluralism?

The way of transformation calls us face to face with the forces of death and destruction, both within us and around us. It challenges us to reject surface changes and the re-arrangement of furniture in our lives –whether that be in the structures of our psyche or of the planet. Transformation is about life. It is about the passage from death to life.

## Loving Identification

Jesus actualized Gods' reign on earth through his loving identification with people. By preaching an indiscriminate message of God's benevolence towards everyone, Jesus' love excluded no one.

This loving identification crossed all boundaries and reached people in all the varied aspects of their human condition. He treated women with respect, acknowledging their rights in a society of unequal standards. Let us hope that the patriarchal religious entities of today will remember this model of inclusivity.

In a similar way, children were not accorded a social status that protected their basic rights. And yet, Jesus repeatedly expressed his love for children and made a young child his model of how we might be present in God's kin-dom. To enter the reign of God, all must become like a little child.

Are our countries, leaders, and communities as inclusive as was Jesus? Stripped of all human dignity, exhausted by prolonged torture, helpless before his executioners, deserted by his friends and seemingly by his God, as well, Jesus was reduced to a helpless victim. His great suffering, however, did not deprive him of the spiritual strength to publicly express concern for others nor did it turn him blindly inward –as we so often are tempted to do. With tremendous strength of faith, Jesus prayed for his executioners that they might be forgiven.

## **A Crucified Solidarity**

The crucified Jesus is God's loving solidarity with all who suffer. Any ideology which encourages us to ignore or minimize the sufferings of some in the interests of others is forbidden to us by the cross. A crucified Jesus offers us a God who is always present with the victims. Even with the victims of the victims.

The risen Christ is our future. The risen Christ points us in the direction of God's perfect will for all creation. This is the inspiration we must carry in our effort to change the world.

*"God does not die when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."*

*+ Dag Hamarskjold*

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