

October 20, 2013  
Claire Feingold Thoryn  
Legends

We bring so much into this sanctuary with us.  
This week, if you hit one out of the park,  
or you fumbled and fell down  
or if you did both,  
you are welcome here.  
May we bring our joys and sorrows  
into this time and place,  
and worship together.

**Reading: “From Out of the Cave” by Joyce Sutphen**

When you have been  
at war with yourself  
for so many years that  
you have forgotten why,  
when you have been driving  
for hours and only  
gradually begin to realize  
that you have lost the way,  
when you have cut  
hastily into the fabric,  
when you have signed  
papers in distraction,  
when it has been centuries  
since you watched the sun set  
or the rain fall, and the clouds,  
drifting overhead, pass as flat  
as anything on a postcard;  
when, in the midst of these  
everyday nightmares, you  
understand that you could  
wake up,  
you could turn  
and go back  
to the last thing you  
remember doing  
with your whole heart:  
that passionate kiss,  
the brilliant drop of love  
rolling along the tongue of a green leaf,  
then you wake,  
you stumble from your cave,

blinking in the sun,  
naming every shadow  
as it slips.

### **Sermon: Wake Up**

Wake from your everyday nightmares.  
Wake up and stumble out into the sun.

Our worship theme this month is legends.

Here is a story about a legendary man. Gordon Hardy told me this story about his great great grandfather. He was Jamie:

“a cheerful but restless Scot who washed ashore at Prince Edward Island, started a family, found his chances limited and occasionally took off to seek his fortune in New Brunswick. He was a well-loved wit, dancer, and ladies’ man. After one trip, he never returned.”

The family didn’t know what happened to him until Gordon’s grandfather (Jamie’s grandson) went on a business trip in New Brunswick, and stumbled across his grave and some people who knew how Jamie’s tale ended. As the story goes:

What had happened was that while he was standing on the dock, a shipload of Scottish immigrants from County Kincardine rolled in [on their way to New Brunswick], and he joined them... The bagpipers were playing, the singers were singing and a general air of good fellowship was prevalent.

A great deal of dancing and merrymaking followed the arrival of the party at its new home, and apparently Jamie overexerted himself. One morning following an all-night dance, he was found alone, dead of heart failure and fully dressed, on the floor of a cabin. As his fellow clansmen in the distant past had been buried in their battle armament, he was fittingly put away in his dancing pumps. He lies today in a grave marked by a wooden cross, high in the hills [in] Kincardine, New Brunswick.

Gordon’s grandfather wrote:

Only three members of the original Kincardine party were alive when I found his grave, but they all remembered him. One woman, Mrs. William Chapman, who danced with Jamie the night he died, wept when she recalled him.

“Ah, Jamie,” she said, “you that was well liked, always on the go and never seemed to have any troubles.”

When, following my talk with Mrs. Chapman, an energetic gravestone salesman tried to sell me a stone ‘that your grandfather may not be forgotten,’ I stopped him easily.

“Any man whose memory makes a woman weep after sixty years needs no tombstone,” I insisted, and the salesman agreed.

A story of a man beloved by many, who disappeared mysteriously, and is remembered to this day. Yes, I am about to make a heavy-handed segueway...

There is another man like that, a legend who still makes many women and men cry after 2,000 years. He has no tombstone, but many a cross marks his passing. Yes...Jesus.

I never really got the appeal of Jesus until I went to college.

Other people I knew seemed really into him. But I felt sorta “meh” about the guy. The only exception was when my high school drama program put on *Godspell*, if I remember the boy who played Jesus was pretty cute.

In my house his name was pretty much only heard when someone stubbed their toe.

Then in college I decided to major in Religion and one of my final classes was the Jesus Seminar.

We delved into the history of Jesus’ time and what the historical Jesus may have looked like, eaten, worn, what he spoke, who he knew, what he may have really done, what he probably didn’t do. And somewhere along the way, I got it. This guy was so remarkable; so charismatic; so loving; so bold and rebellious and fearless that 2000 years later we can’t forget him.

He doesn’t need a tombstone. He regularly makes men and women weep with simply his memory. No one living today ever knew him, touched him, danced with him, heard his voice. Yet his words are still speaking, through the stories he left behind and the way you and I and everyone else interacts with those stories. I don’t have to worship him to respect that type of legacy.

Someone once told me that everything Jesus said and taught can be boiled down to two words: “Wake up.” Wake up to oppression. Wake up to your own power. Wake up to the lies told by our leaders and wake up to the fear that keeps us under their thumb. Wake up to love, to gratitude, wake up to life, this one and only life.

wake up,  
turn  
and go back  
to the last thing you  
did with your whole heart.

Last Sunday Marie Tulin preached, and she told one of my favorite Bible stories. In the story a man named Jairus comes to Jesus, wailing that his daughter is dying. The girl doesn't even have a name—a common problem with female characters in the Bible. She is simply “Jairus’ daughter.”

Before Jesus gets to Jairus’s house, word comes that the daughter has died. But Jesus goes to their home anyway. One thing I learned when I visited Israel was that my imagination of what houses had looked like in Jesus’s time was all wrong. I always pictured little thatched huts. But is HOT in the Middle East, not much shade at all, and of course there was no air conditioning 2000 years ago. So most homes were caves and dugouts into the cool earth. So Jesus walks down into this dark home, a cave, where a little girl is lying lifeless.

There, he tells them that “the girl is not dead, but sleeping.” And everyone laughs at him. Imagine that hard angry painful laughter. They thought Jesus was mocking them. But then Jesus says, “Little girl, get up!” and *she does*. She wakes up. She begins to walk around. And Jesus tells the family to get her something to eat, and he leaves.

Wake,  
stumble from your cave,  
blink in the sun.

When I read the Bible, I read it for the metaphor, for the spiritual lessons I can glean. What was it like to be that little girl, to have your family give up on you? All hope seems lost. The earth is closing in. And then someone says, Wake up. Wake up, feed yourself, and live.

Waking up is a spiritual practice. Waking up can be a joyous epiphany and it can also be no fun at all.

Our reading this morning alludes to another ancient story, hundreds of years older than Jesus.

you stumble from your cave,  
blinking in the sun,  
naming every shadow  
as it slips.

She is referring to the *Allegory of the Cave* by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. If Jesus used parables to dress up the truth, Plato used allegories. And in this allegory, Plato uses a dialogue between Socrates and another philosopher in which Socrates imagines a cave. In this cave people are imprisoned in such a way they can only face the wall of the cave. The only images they see are shadows on the wall of the cave. The only light is the firelight behind them, that casts the shadows. For these people, the shadows are the only reality that they know.

And then, in this allegory, we imagine leading one of these people out of the cave. The light is far too harsh. The things and people they now see are disturbing in their sharpness, alarming in their clarity.

The shadows were not unreal, but they were not *all* of reality, either. The eyes must open gradually, blinking in the light. As Plato writes, in the voice of Socrates:

...first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; ....

Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.<sup>1</sup>

The spiritual struggle with waking up is that we have to keep waking up again and again and again. We know we aren't dead, but it turns out we were still sleeping.

This call to Wake Up rings especially true in my spiritual approach to anti-oppression work.

The more work I do on intercultural understanding, the more I realize how many shadows overlay systems of oppression. We may be awake in some areas, and still sleeping in others. We may think we are looking at the sun, but it turns out we've only been looking at a reflection of the sun in water. There are so many layers of our own privilege, our own cultural assumptions, that we can wake up to. It is one long walk out of that cave. This is something I am constantly working on.

Being an anti-racist ally, and an ally to the queer community, as a white straight person, means constantly trying to wake up more. And often this waking up hurts, the way our eyes throb when we move from the shadowy cave to the too-bright sunlight. Waking up means, sometimes, having the hard realization that we may have hurt people, or groups, without intending to over the years. It can mean we have to leave behind things or customs that we have loved.

It is hard, too, to be someone who asks other people to wake up. People hate alarm clocks. No one likes that insistent buzzing in their ear. It takes bravery to ask people to wake up to subtle racisms, sly sexism. It takes courage to pull people towards the light, even as they yell at you for hurting their eyes, even as they laugh at you for believing these difficult topics are not dead, but only sleeping.

Wake up! said Jesus. And then he said, "Give her something to eat." Because doing this work of waking up is hard, and we need nourishment to keep on going.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato's Allegory of the Cave can be found reprinted here:  
<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/allegory.html>

And that is where the joy of waking up comes in. The spiritual nourishment of opening our eyes to beauty and amazement. The Bible stories about Jesus, the writings of Plato: these ancient legends can be clues that help us delight in the life we have been given.

Joseph Campbell, speaking about the Power of Myth, said:

People say that what we are all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive—so that the life experiences we have on the purely physical plane will have resonances within that [connect to our] innermost being ... so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive... Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.... The inner value, the rapture, that is associated with being alive is what it's all about.<sup>2</sup>

When did you last watch the sun set  
or the rain fall?

Go back  
to the last thing you  
remember doing  
with your whole heart.  
Name the shadows  
as they slip.

Wake up. Be brave. Give yourself something to eat. We'll need strength for the journey.

May we shake off the comforting shadows.  
And may we walk, with courage, into the light.

*Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, Part 2, The Message of the Myth (interview with Bill Moyers)