The Turtle Story: A Reflection for Holy Week and Easter
by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on APRIL 9, 2017.

I love the writings of Barbara Brown Taylor, a 65-year-old American Episcopal priest, professor, writer, and theologian. Her books include *The Preaching Life*, *Altar in the World*, and *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In 2014, *Time* magazine named her on its annual list of the 100 most influential persons in the world. Currently she lives on a farm in northern Georgia with her husband Ed.

This is a true story she tells in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. Somehow, for me, the story seems very appropriate for what we celebrate in our rituals during Holy Week and on Easter. Maybe you will get a similar feeling...

A few years back Taylor and her husband were exploring the dunes on Cumberland Island off the coast of southern Georgia. Her husband was looking for fossilized shark teeth. She was looking for sand spurs so she wouldn’t step on one. This meant they were both looking at their feet when suddenly they came upon a huge loggerhead turtle. She was alive—but barely. Her shell was almost too hot to touch. Immediately they knew what had happened.
She returned to the water, her true home…

During the night the turtle had come ashore to lay her eggs. When she finished her task, she looked around for the brightest horizon to lead her back to the sea. But she had mistaken the lights on the mainland for the sky reflected in the ocean, and she had gone the wrong way. Now her flippers were buried in the sand and she was stuck, half-baked in the noonday sun.

Taylor began to bury the turtle in cool sand while her husband ran to the nearest ranger station. She writes, “An hour later the turtle was on her back with tire chains around her front legs, being dragged behind a park service Jeep back toward the ocean.” The poor turtle’s mouth was filled with sand and her head was so bent, Taylor feared her neck would break. But it didn’t. When they got to the edge of the water, the three undid the chains, gently flipped the turtle right side up, and “watched as she lay motionless in the surf.”

But gradually the waves began to bring her back to life. After a little while as the waves lifted her up, she pushed off with her back legs, and swam back “into the water that was her home.” Taylor concludes: “Watching her swim slowly away after her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.”

Some thoughts…

The paradoxes in this story... in order to be saved, the poor turtle has to undergo a nightmare of a journey that almost takes her life... In laying her eggs to bring new life into the world, she almost loses her own life in the process...

The story makes me reflect on all those individuals who have had to undergo nightmare journeys of their own—perhaps chemotherapy, bone marrow transplants, and painful treatments or surgeries of all kinds... At times they too must have wondered: am I being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down?

And what about Jesus? Wasn’t his life turned upside down in Gethsemane? Doesn’t the crucifixion raise a million questions like these: Why did he have to die? How was he able to endure the injustice of it all, the mockery, the beatings, the torture, the
pounding in of those nails, the hanging in the hot sun for three hours? And where was Abba during all of this?

I pray for those individuals right now who are enduring their own passions... those suffering from famine, wars, violence, racial injustice, human trafficking, religious persecution, natural disasters, abuse of all kinds, and the list goes on and on... And I beg God to be with them... and to move the hearts of good and generous people to aid them and give them comfort... and to move my own heart to reach out to someone in need...

And I pray for a greater realization of the power of the Resurrection... as we make our journey back to our true home, the open sea of God's mercy and love...

And I wonder: Have you ever had a time when you thought it was the end, but it was a new beginning? An experience where life emerged from apparent death? Where goodness was born from apparent evil?

I chose an ancient hymn for our song today: “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” It was written in the 14th Century in Bohemia—where my ancestors came from! And, with this song, I wish you all a very Blessed Holy Week and a very Happy Easter!

Would you like to share any thoughts on Holy Week, Easter, or this reflection with us? We would love to hear from you!
**PS:** A big thank you for your prayers for last weekend’s retreat at the Franciscan Spiritual Center in Aston, PA. What a beautiful group of participants we had! Quite a few are readers of this blog. My next presentation is Saturday, April 29 at the Norbertine Center for Spirituality in De Pere, WI (920-337-4315). The presentation runs from 8:30 am to noon and is called “How Do I Know If I’m on the Right Path Spiritually?”

I will also be co-directing a retreat with Bishop Bob Morneau from April 30- May 5 for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross. I ask prayers for both of these endeavors. Thank you!

---

**Share this:**

- Facebook
- Twitter
- LinkedIn
- Delicious
- Email
- Print
- PDF

**Tagged as:** a story of a turtle, Barbara Brown Taylor story, Easter reflection, holy week reflection

---

**30 comments... read them below or [add one]**

**John Hopkins**  
April 10, 2017 at 9:37 am

Good morning, Sr. Melannie. What a beautiful story! So many layers. The fact this husband and wife were taking a contemplative walk; they were not hurrying through nature, and so they were able to serve as Samaritans for the natural world. You are so right about the pain we must sometimes suffer – the darkness of pain – before we achieve release and liberation. A life turned upside down – it can happen in an instant. We must pray with the psalmist, and hope that someday we “have no fear of evil news;/with a firm heart [we] trust in the Lord” (Ps. 112). Today’s blog is a perfect meditation for Holy Week.

**REPLY**

**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
April 11, 2017 at 10:32 am

Dear John, Thank you for your wise words—again... Yes, our life can be turned upside down in an instant. So we must always remember in whose loving hands we live and move... Sr. Melannie
Karen  April 10, 2017 at 10:05 am
Thank you for this weekly reflection. Today’s is particularly relevant for me and I hope and pray to discern God’s purpose in the trials that I face. Wishing you a blessed Holy Week and Happy Easter.

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:30 am
Dear Karen, I’m happy that God can use my simple words to speak to you... Thank you for writing. And Happy Easter! Sr. Melannie

Pamela  April 10, 2017 at 10:13 am
Sister Melannie- Thank you for your weekly blog as you are truly inspirational. May I ask for prayer for my Mother, Karen as she will undergo some testing this week. I wish you a very blessed Holy week and Easter. Kind regards. -Pamela

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:29 am
Dear Pamela, Yes I (and my readers) will say a special prayer for your mother Karen... Blessings on your Holy Week and Easter. Sr. Melannie

Jean  April 10, 2017 at 10:20 am
Thank you! May you have a blessed Easter.

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:27 am
Same to you, Jean! Sr. Melannie

Sister Bridget  April 10, 2017 at 10:28 am
Blessing this Holy Week and Happy Easter!

Looking forward to retreat with Bishop Morneau and you!
What a team! God bless.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:26 am
And I look forward to meeting you, Sr. Bridget! Blessings on your Holy Week and Easter! Thanks for responding to this reflection! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Anne Busch  April 10, 2017 at 12:02 pm
What a powerful story! Pain for new life. A wonderful analogy with the Resurrection. Have a blessed Easter!

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:25 am
Dear Anne, I liked your simple sentence: “Pain for New life.” Happy Easter to you! Thank you for writing... Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Shirley  April 10, 2017 at 12:32 pm
Thank you Sister for a wonderful story. May you have a blessed Holy week and Easter!

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:24 am
You’re welcome, Shirley… And blessings to you too! Sr. Melannie

---

Suzanne April 10, 2017 at 12:45 pm

Thank you, Melannie, for a nourishing weekend experience in Aston. It was a wonderful way to begin Holy Week. Thanks, too, for sharing this story and the richness of your reflection.

Easter blessings and joy!

Suzanne

---

Melannie Svoboda SND April 11, 2017 at 10:23 am

Dear Suzanne, It was wonderful being with you this past weekend! Thank you for coming. And Easter joy to you too! Melannie

---

Beverly April 10, 2017 at 2:21 pm

What a great story!! And, even better, what great thoughts you gave us to ponder! Thank you! And may you and yours have a Blessed Easter!

---

Melannie Svoboda SND April 11, 2017 at 10:22 am

Thank you, Beverly, and I wish you a Blessed Easter too! Sr. Melannie

---

Patty April 10, 2017 at 4:55 pm

Dear Sister,

God has always been by my side; all the days of my life. I believe that my faith was made stronger, especially from May 2009 to March 2012. Because of a physical disability, I was no longer able to get up and down my stairs, and was
home-bound for 1039 days. Family, friends and neighbors even brought me my mail and newspapers. The local supermarket and laundry are a block away, so no worries about food/clean clothes. After fighting the good (three year) fight with the condo board, a stairlift was installed and I was able to get my mail, my newspapers, and feel the sun on my face on March 26, 2012. I'm reminded of a quote, by St. Augustine: “Patience is the companion of wisdom.” I thank God for being by my side, each and every day. Peace – Easter Blessings.

**REPLY**

**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
April 11, 2017 at 10:21 am

Dear Patty, My goodness! It sounds as if you have been dragged through the sand dunes for quite a while. But how nice that you family, friends, and neighbors helped you during this challenging time for you. Thank you for sharing your story with all of us! Sr. Melannie

**REPLY**

**Annie**  
April 10, 2017 at 11:41 pm

What a wonderful story about the turtle! And how wonderful that you will co-direct a retreat with Bishop Morneau! I will pray for that as you asked, but I think those are really lucky retreatants!

**REPLY**

**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
April 11, 2017 at 10:19 am

Dear Annie, I consider myself very lucky to be teamed up with Bishop Bob Morneau. He's a good friend even though we have met only once in our lives. Thank you for your prayers… Melannie

**REPLY**

**Rose**  
April 11, 2017 at 4:47 am

Dear Sr. Melannie, Thank you for this wonderful story. May I ask for prayers for my daughter in law who is struggling to recover from a most difficult childbirth that nearly took her life to bring my beautiful grandson into this world. Easter Blessings.
Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:18 am
Dear Rose, I join with my readers in praying for your daughter-in-law during this difficult time... Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Anne  April 11, 2017 at 9:13 am
Sister Melanie, I just had the time to read your post. My dear husband of 48 years passed away yesterday. He had been dragged through “dunes” for almost 11 years and now he has reached the life giving waters. What a wonderful place to celebrate Easter. Thank you for your words of comfort.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 11, 2017 at 10:17 am
Dear Anne, My deepest sympathy to you on the death of your dear husband. Yes, he is swimming in the life giving waters once again. I will hold you and your husband in special prayer during this Holy Week. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Tom  April 11, 2017 at 10:24 pm
Melannie, what the story brought to mind for me was my completely unexpected stroke, which took me away from the sense of aloneness I was experiencing as a retired priest residing in a rectory in exchange for a wonderful sense of community in an assisted living facility dedicated to the care of priests and religious.

God’s plan always seems to be one up on ours. Blessed Easter to you.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 12, 2017 at 11:28 am
Dear Tom, I’m sure that having a stroke is a major upheaval in one’s life... Talk about being flipped over... talk about being stuck in the sand... But this “nightmare” was certainly a “blessing in disguise” for you. It led you to a beautiful community at the assisted living facility where you now find yourself. Yes, I really agree with your words: “God’s plan always seems to be one up on
I admire you for being able to see that—and for being able to embrace God's plan for you. Thank you for sharing! Melannie

Mary Fran  April 12, 2017 at 2:51 pm
Dear Mel,

What a perfect story and reflection as we journey through the week we call Holy trusting we are facing the Easter dawn!
Many Thanks-
Mary Fran

Melannie Svoboda SND  April 12, 2017 at 3:44 pm
Thanks, Mary Fran. Yes, when we feel as if life has flipped us upside down... and we are being dragged... and our mouth is filled with sand, we must TRUST that we are being pulled to that Easter light and those Easter waters...
Melannie
SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME WITNESS DAILY TO
GOD'S GOODNESS AND PROVIDENT CARE.