

# The Snap of Grace: Asking the Easter Question of Faith

*Terrance Klein*

In attempting to answer the question, “Do I believe?” the author encourages those in ministry to find an alternative image to faith as a journey in the Easter experience of the immediacy of faith as *kairos*, as instantaneous transformation, as the “snap of grace.”

St. John of the Cross begins *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* by writing:

“The darkneses and trials, spiritual and temporal, that fortunate souls ordinarily encounter on their way to the high state of perfection are so numerous and profound that human science cannot understand them adequately; nor does experience of them equip one to explain them. He who suffers them will know what this experience is like, but he will find himself unable to describe it.”

John went on to write that he did not undertake his task “because of any particular confidence in my own abilities,” but because “it is extremely necessary to many souls” (69–70).

John saw souls held captive by that which is not of God, and he wanted his writings to free them. Fortunately I have a simpler task. I only want to free Christian

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ministers from what the famous Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would call “the wrong picture holding us captive” (Wittgenstein, 1967: ¶115, 48e). No Christian minister should ever stop asking the question, “Do I believe?” But once that question is posed, one must also ask, “What are the criteria for its answer?” I want to suggest that the metaphors one uses for the spiritual life, especially in the evaluation of such a life, matter greatly to a Christian. You can get the wrong answer without the right question!

Are there ministers of the Gospel who have not had people sit down in front of them and confess that their faith is weak because something has caused them to doubt the very existence of God? Is faith really weakening at such a moment, or growing stronger? How does one speak the healing word of grace, one that tells such a person not to despair, because something wonderfully positive is occurring? What picture or image will explain the mystery of a faith growing in the darkness of doubt? That is the task of this essay.

### *Two Opening Scenes*

Allow two opening scenes. The first one, set more than fifteen years ago, when I was a newly ordained priest. Our priest-retirement program was under discussion at a clergy conference. Some diocesan official, during the course of explaining how benefits would be paid, and under what conditions, was fielding questions about what constituted investiture in the diocesan program. An older priest, foreign-born Irish and a former military chaplain, a man known for his lone-gunman comments at meetings, raised his hand. I liked this priest. He was very kind to me, but his hard humor had an edge that rattled my newly-assembled priesthood. Also, his vocabulary always seemed more military than priestly.

“I have a question. What if we lose our faith?”

“As a question of justice, we’re currently discussing to what extent a priest who leaves the priesthood after many years of service would be owed compensation for retirement.”

“I didn’t ask about leaving the priesthood. I asked, ‘What if we lose our faith?’”

No one knew how to respond; I think very few thought that he was being serious. Fortunately, he was always kind enough in his humor to release the dull-witted, and he allowed the question to drop. It dropped right into the middle of me and has remained there, all these years. “What if we lose our faith?”

The second scene comes from the writings of the Desert Fathers. It is a little vignette I can recite by heart. (I wonder why we retain the things we do? How does memory know how to pack for a journey it has yet to make?) An old monk, one long-esteemed as a saint, lies dying. His fellow monks are gathered around his bed, perhaps hoping to see heaven itself receive his soul. As he entered “the

throes of death, the devil appeared before him and shouted at him: ‘You destroyed me, you wretch.’ ‘I am still not sure of that,’ the Saint replied, and reposed” (Chrysostomos, 24).

### *The Thesis: A Dual Potency*

Opening scenes concluded, it is time to present the thesis, which is this: **O**I think George Lucas had it right. His triple *Star Wars* trilogy, though not yet complete, is fashioned around a simple, and absolutely foundational, Christian insight. The dark side of the force and its light side are not points measured by distance along a number line, like negative and positive integers, as in +38 is a long way from -38. The light and dark sides of the force are a metaphor for the spiritual life, akin to the gospel wheat and weeds. They grow together, like a double helix. One can pass easily from darkness to light. It is not a question of traversing a distance, one measured in integers along a spiritual number line. It is only a question of alternating between parallel potencies. Do you remember the story? Anakin Skywalker was a Jedi Knight, one pledged to the good, in whose strength he grew strong. When he crossed over, he became Darth Vader, instantly taking all of that power with him into the darkness. He did not go from being a strong Jedi to a weak opponent of “the Force.” No, what he had made of himself remained potent, active. It simply turned.

Dante Alighieri’s grounding in Thomistic philosophy allowed him to express the same point in Canto VI of his *Inferno*. Dante asks whether the suffering of hell varies in depth. Virgil tells him, “Return to your science, which has it that, in measure of a thing’s perfection, it feels both more of pleasure and of pain” (Dante, 2000: VI, vv. 106–8). In the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, every creature is an admixture of act and potency, of that which is and that which is coming to be. Dante is simply suggesting that souls in hell suffer according to the very capacity for blessedness or woe that their earthly lives have produced. On a brighter note, the same would be true of heaven. It would have gradations, dependent upon the capacity to receive that one’s earthly life has hewn. The same teaching is found in the Church’s newest doctor, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Saints in heaven are like glasses, equally full but not equally large (Thérèse, 44–45; see also *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1053).

One misses the uniqueness of the Christian message without acknowledging its fundamental paradigm. Light and darkness, darkness and light, are not so long distant. The movement between the two can occur in an instant. Note how distinctive this teaching is. The spiritual life, in so many diverse religious traditions, employs the metaphor of the journey. We move in increments, taking slow and often plodding steps towards enlightenment. For a Hindu or a Buddhist, enlightenment is usually so gradual that one should expect the process to demand

more than one lifetime. A Taoist conceives of spirituality as a question of cosmic balance, and would be rightly suspicious of anyone claiming to have found that equilibrium in an instant. Even Judaism and Islam, whose faithful believe so forcefully that God has entered human history, would advise any would-be adherent to devote an entire life to long, and personally penetrating, study of the Torah, or the Qu'ran. None of these religions believes in what one might call "cheap grace," and they have their wisdom.

It is not the wisdom of Christianity. The spiritual life as journey is an archetypal image, but it is not the fundamental gospel metaphor. The Gospels see the spiritual life as gained or lost by a single decision. Everything rides upon a single moment in time: what the Greek New Testament calls *kairos*. "Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you" (Matt 21:31). "Zacchaeus, come down quickly. . . . Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). We speak of "amazing grace" because sometimes the distance it travels in an instant takes years to calculate. Augustine's life did change with one reading session in the garden. When Martin of Tours met that beggar on the road, he divided his cloak and his life in half. Anthony of the Desert walked into church to hear the Gospel one day; in an instant, and for the first time, he heard the Gospel. Luke's Good Thief did steal heaven as his last earthly act!

And do not forget the dark paradigms. The fall of Satan is not a gradual loss of fervor or obedience, but a lightning-like expulsion from the realm of God. The betrayal of Judas, as John's Gospel describes it (13:21-30), is a darkness entering his heart at precisely that most holy of Christian moments, the final table-fellowship of the Lord. Consider Peter in the accounts of the passion. Desperate love of the Lord and betrayal were both wound in a tight, double helix. Were the gospel writers trying to tell us that Peter was particularly schizophrenic, or that his experience was a foundational paradigm of the Christian spiritual life?

### *The Easter Encounters as Paradigmatic*

Where did we get such an idea that one could gain or lose faith in an instant? Why does Christianity want to divide the world between darkness and light? The comparative study of religions tells us that before Christianity heaven and hell did not exist. The dead simply dwelt among the shades. Why have we polarized the cosmos itself? The devil in the Hebrew scriptures, and in the *Qu'ran*, is nothing more than a mischievous imp who still serves the purposes of God. Why does Christianity make him into the satanic adversary, the Father of Lies and the Prince of Darkness? Why have we divided the cosmos into twin, albeit greater and lesser, potencies? Why do we see conversion from sin to salvation as our core belief, and why do we believe that enlightenment, which any sage should see as gradual, can occur in an instant?

Why? Because two thousand years ago, the hearts of Jesus' disciples were plunged into darkness with his death. Hope itself died on that cross. To love another, to truly love another, is to allow that person, quite literally, to grant meaning to your life. They had loved Jesus, and now he was dead. Love was ripped from their lives, and with it the only meaning those harsh lives had ever known. Was not his message that he had come to seek out the lost, to offer table fellowship with those who had no hope of earning it? Had they not come to believe that God was doing something new in this man, offering in his words and actions an unheard of time-and-distance-warping, access to God? What did any of this mean, if death could crush him? If the life of Jesus ended at Calvary, God is once again the distant goal of a life's journey. The spiritual life reverts to the only paradigm it has ever known: the long journey, a gradual, constant, all-too-insufficient exertion towards a long and distant goal.

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But the Magdalen goes to the tomb on a Sunday morning! One cannot blame her for lingering at the grave of the only man who had ever quickened her life with love. Some loves, often female ones, are so strong, that they take time to wither. His male disciples deal with the disaster in a typically male way. They hide; they go silent; in their fear and disappointment and anger, they flee each other. But she goes to the tomb. Nothing, not even his resurrected self, is comprehensible to her, but John says that when he speaks her name, a world of meaning is not only restored but transformed, made holy, redeemed. Her experience would be echoed as the news was proclaimed to others. A single event, one snap of grace, and everything was changed!

Theologically, the experience of the single, post-resurrection call of grace would be written back into the call of the first disciples. Like Mary, they know in an instant that everything changes when he calls them to himself. I am suggesting that the resurrection itself was the pivotal event, the *kairos*, which demanded an immediate response from all of the disciples, that of either faith or disbelief. This paradigm would be written back, just as so many others were, into the gospel account. Otherwise one is left with the assertion that the apostles literally followed a stranger when he said, "Come." On the contrary, the historical experience of the call, which surely occurred a bit more gradually in the lives of many, has been recalibrated precisely to express the radicalness of the post-resurrection experience. One goes farther than scholarship will allow, however, to suggest that a sudden shift could not have been the pre-resurrection experience of any of the disciples. Indeed, that is what I am suggesting often occurs in life.

Christianity has its metaphor of the journey. It believes in patient exertion. Some people think that is what Lent is all about, but Christianity is never true to itself without a certain spiritual giddiness in the face of vertigo. This news is too good to be true, too cheap to be believed, too trivial unless one allows it access into the very core of one's life. Everything can change in an instant. Time and space, and the fruits of their union, belong to God who created both. The tomb is empty; Jesus is risen. Great lengths of time and great distances can be traversed in a spiritual instant. Darkness immediately gives way to light. Where did we ever find such a notion? In an empty tomb.

### *Losing My Faith, All Over Again*

**B**ack to scene two. The dying monk, esteemed by all his brothers, tells the devil that he is still unsure whether he has defeated him. The battle is not over. It cannot be until the field is vacated. Perhaps in his last moments on earth, pride over how he has lived his life, will swell and bloat his heart. He has spent his years on a long, arduous journey, but that journey has always been within himself. One never journeys away from the self, never steps out of its twin potential for good and evil. By growing in the good, he has not left the dark behind. It remains as shadow, as alternative potency.

Back to scene one. The crusty, veteran priest asking for instructions should loss of faith occur. What is he doing in my consciousness after so many years? One might whimsically say that he plays Darth Vader to my Luke Skywalker, but that blurs the point. I am not afraid of becoming him; I am not in danger of becoming him; I have become him. Have I lost my faith? Yes and no. Yes, I have lost it. There are times when I simply do not believe, and I know that I do not believe. At such moments nothing but inertia (and never underestimate its power in the spiritual life) and knowing that the moment will pass keep me in my place. This brings us to the "no" part of the answer. Faith does keep coming back and, after so many years, I simply await its return.

But that's not the full story. It doesn't do justice to the spiritual lives that old priest and I share. I think he truly did want to know what the institutional Church would do if he had to announce that he had lost his faith, because he had grown wise enough to know that he could lose his faith. I have become him, and in reading that I await the return of faith when it is absent, one misses the real terror and growth that has occurred in my life if one thinks that I presume upon its return. Faith is not going to return to me simply because we are old companions. There is something as sovereignly personal about faith as there is about me. Anyone my age knows not to take relationships for granted. They do end, sometimes in the proverbial instant.

Perhaps one must have attained a certain age in life before illness, death, the crash of a career, or the wreck of a relationship can teach one that life does

change instantly. Granted that deep and powerful forces precede such a shift, the point remains that these forces remain neutrally potent until the last moment, when they can go either way. Only when they have coalesced into decisive change do we realize their inevitability, but this is always discernment after-the-fact. In his *Ascent*, John of the Cross offers a perfect illustration of what can happen under the surface, unknown until its surfacing.

They must not rely on their sharp intellects or upon the gifts received from God as to believe that their attachments or appetites will not blind, darken, and cause them to grow gradually worse. Who would have thought that a man as perfect in the wisdom and gifts of God as Solomon could, when he was old, have sunk into such blindness and torpor of will as to construct altars to countless idols, and then worship them himself? (91)

### *Misleading Criteria*

All of this comes to mind in posing that most fundamental of religious questions, the one whose answer we take our lives to write out: “Do I believe?” If there has been growth in many years of discipleship, it should reduce to the clarity with which one can confront the question. Certainly the passage of years should preclude, not encourage, answering the question by means of credentials. “I am a minister of the Gospel.” Peter was that, but it did not stop the cock from crowing. The Church has never found a way to preclude a person from being both dead and dark while remaining in her ministerial ranks. Examples of other misleading criteria? “I’ve done a lot of good work.” But people who do not believe, at least people who would describe themselves as not believing, have done good work. Good work seems a basic demand of our humanity. “When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have only done what we were obliged to do’” (Luke 17:10).

People who are dead and dark can be good ministers and do good deeds. Even if one knows nothing of Augustine’s battles with the Donatists, a group that had denied the efficacy of sacraments administered by public sinners, that seems an assertion one has to grant as soon as one recognizes that grace is always a gift. Grace comes from God, not another human being. Where would the most wretchedly powerful of human beings find the power to stop God from imparting grace, if God chose to do this, as is so often the case, by means of a spiritually decrepit life? I think Teresa of Avila realized this when she wrote that, if forced to choose between a holy and an intelligent spiritual director, she would take the intelligent (94). Holiness comes from God, and sometimes, it comes through the most unlikely channels. Intelligence, however, has its pedigrees.

I fully grant the scriptural injunction that faith without works is dead, but looking at one’s works does not prove the existence of faith. One may not have

true faith without works, but one can certainly have works without true faith. Is not part of maturation in the spiritual life the realization of just how tainted with self-interest so much of one's work has been? Until the self makes its way into its final embrace with God, the real and abiding presence of self-interest remains in every human action. Awareness of self-interest is the real result of a growth in grace. It can be calculated. One might take some satisfaction in that growth, were it not accompanied by the realization that the capacity for self-deception tends to keep pace with it. As the years pass, the uncovering of delusions can become so continual as to leave one, not with confidence but with something more akin to a spiritual "house-of-mirrors" vertigo.

### *The Dance of Insight and Action*

The realization of one's shortcomings, makes it difficult to conclude that grace has triumphed, not when one sees ever greater shortcomings! Insight is an essential moment in conversion, but insight is not yet action. The Gospels insist that people knew where to find the Christ. Some just did not bother coming to the wedding feast. The demons knew his identity, but they certainly did not embrace it. Do not discount insight! It is the first stirring of grace, and productive action cannot come from any other source. Allow insight and action to dance. They will each graciously allow the other to lead.

### *Letting Metaphors Meet*

Perhaps the idea that insight must produce action lies behind the comment that St. Francis of Assisi was often said to repeat. "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing" (Francis, 2000: 640). It is a fascinating comment, one which at first glance might suggest that the spiritual life is akin to Sisyphus and his rock. The perception of forward movement in grace would thus be a cruel deception because one is always beginning again at the same place. I do not think that is what Francis meant. I think the comment beautifully combines the two metaphors of journey and instantaneous transformation. Again, one needs the image of a spiraling helix. Insight shows us the moment of *kairos*, of decisive gospel action. It often comes at the end of a long journey. Having arrived at the moment, one chooses either to embrace it or not. The embrace leads to new revelations, new insights, new journeys.

But the insight that the dominant metaphor of the Christian spiritual life is *kairos* and not journey brings its own liberation. Who has not talked to souls who have grown weary with years of effort to eradicate that which is not of God? He is ashamed to confess the same sin. She is embarrassed that she still remains

in a relationship which she knows is not life giving. Can they really be trying to serve the Lord and produce so little? The metaphor of the spiritual journey might suggest that they have not moved at all. The metaphor of *kairos* reminds us that we must all await the movement of grace, the sovereign freedom of God. Remember that to wait with expectation, with longing, is the very act of faith that discovered Easter!

In chasing the question of faith down so many blind alleys, where do we end? If faith-as-journey must be the subordinate metaphor to faith-as-*kairos*, as Easter-morning-rapture, what is the right question to ask if one wants to answer the question “Do I believe?” Oh Dorothy! It has been there all along! You had only to click the heels of those ruby slippers. Simply to ask the question “Do I believe?” is already to have answered it. Who asks such a question except someone already in the light of grace? The question is always worth asking. We do need to know, as St. Ignatius of Loyola would say, if we are progressing or regressing on the journey, but only those who have felt the stir of grace can even pose such a question. No matter how much satisfaction, or regret, one’s position on the journey might produce, the question is never posed except by one who has stepped over, into the light coming from that tomb.

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