

Easter Day, 2008

In the name of Christ who has shown us the way to eternal life. Amen.

My Mother picked me and my ET back pack up from Kindergarten. Obliging our weekly routine, we proceeded to the grocery store, the Safeway Supermarket. Outside, there were draping, colorful, triangular flags waving in the breeze. The billowing bits of fabric could have been Tibetan prayer flags, except that these were adorning advertisements for rump roasts and sales of celery, not the Almighty. But do not think that the Almighty and the Safeway Supermarket were mutually exclusive entities. For in the entrance of said supermarket was an octagonal, pink and purple display carousel shrine devoted to one of my favorite lower case g gods: Candy. It was a Brach's Candy display case with sectioned bins overflowing with caramels, starbrite mints, butterscotch and cinnamon-disks, root beer barrels, maple nut goodies, circus peanuts, and some absolutely worthless, sugar free confections, which held as much sway as mildew. My Mother pushed our shopping cart right by this Almighty altar of sugar. But I somehow wiggled free and stayed behind.

I knew that my Mother never allowed intra-day candy trading. This was forbidden fruit-flavoring and the tree of the knowledge of good and sweet. But there was no harm in looking, I reasoned. And so I predatorily perambulated the perimeter of this tantalizing temple. I gazed and grazed the options, Spitzer-orally salivating. I ran my fingers over the tight, clear cellophane, ever so gently, when suddenly one of those delightful square shaped caramels, you all know the ones, dropped to the floor. Dutifully, quickly, I picked up caramel, and I thought, "this is no good for sale now. It has been sullied." And to protect the other consumers, I selflessly stuck that piece of caramel into my pocket. Soon, other pieces of candy had "dropped" to the floor. With my fingerly persuasion, six other pieces of candy fell to the floor and subsequently went into my pockets. I dreamed of unfurling those crinkly, slightly damaged wrappers, later, in the privacy of my room.

But on our way home, something gnawed at me as I had earlier wanted to gnaw at my maple nut goody. I tried to hush its moan, but guilt crept in, and I realized that I had stolen those six pieces of candy. I was not protecting others. I had done something wrong. I attempted to collect myself and mask my sulky shame. To make myself feel better, I told my Mother about the candy, but instead of the full truth, I told her that these candies must have accidentally fallen into my pockets as I walked by. I deigned surprise and even added that it was really quite fortuitous, if things were falling into my pockets, that I had not been standing too near the Brussel sprouts.

My Mother, was not amused. "We're going back to the store" she said and turned the car around toward the now unsafe, Safeway Supermarket. I dreamed of potential criminal prosecution and, worse, black and white jumpers. When we did arrive at the market, I was told to go back into the store, to find the manager and apologize, and to pay for the candy with money that was a loan from my allowance. And I had to do it alone.

My guilt-filled, candy-free stomach took up residence in my throat, but I managed to go into the store alone, pass that Almighty temptress, and find the manager. He was a tall, imposing man adorned with a bright red smock and a name badge that read "Dean." Dean menacingly leaned down and said, "What do you need, young man?" His hand went to his hip. I looked down in speechless shame then back, behind me to find an escape route from Dean and his omniscient red smock. But in doing so, I realized that I was not fully alone. My Mother had *NOT* abandoned me. She stood about 10 feet behind me, urging me on with kind eyes. Her care gave me enough strength. And so, through blushed face and now gushing tears, I said, "I stole some candy, and want to pay for it." I even added a "Sir" for good measure. Dean, looked me over. He took the money and winked at my Mother. Then, Dean patted my shoulder and said, "Ok.. I'm glad you came back to pay. I don't want to see this happen again."

I ran back to my Mom who now stood with open arms. She held me tightly and quieted my tears. There was no jail, no permanent record. Shame and guilt melted into a penance of love and forgiveness and embrace. This is the story of Easter. Our world seems like that naive kindergarten boy who cowardly stole some root beer barrels. We have been and are there now as a people and a world. We have not always acted as we know that we ought. Sometimes we have attempted to rationalize unbecoming behavior. We have reacted in anger; we have over-consumed, been complacent citizens of a nation in unjust wars, too easily allowed racism, sexism, homophobia and starvation to pass by unnoticed. And the same was true of the people around Jesus. There was lots of stolen candy around Jesus. As we know, the people around Jesus eventually stole even his life, even as he loved and forgave them.

It is three days after that event that we hear from John today. Three days after Jesus' death, Mary Magdalene, alone, goes to the tomb, while it is still dark. Like my going back to the Safeway Supermarket, she must have feared facing the truth: Jesus had been abandoned, scape-goated, and killed, not by God, but by people who could not understand the true sweetness of God's love. And everyone else was hiding away, in shame. Mary somehow alone courageously faces her own pain of not being able to stop what happened. And she goes to the tomb to clean his body and anoint him with spices, a last, if only, bit of dignity. But the tomb is empty, the stone rolled away.

Mary Magdalene weeps at this, believes that the injury done to Jesus has only been furthered. Someone has stolen or at least removed his body. And she lets her pain and penance overflow in salty tears, much like my own at that supermarket. But in the midst of her crying, and perhaps because of it, angels appear, just as my Mother did, and they tell Mary that the shame, the pain, and the death of Jesus are not the end of the story. The end of the story is something wildly new and different. Forgiveness and love will overwhelm every other power: shame, betrayal, even death. And Jesus appears to Mary with that good news. She is not abandoned and never will be.

The Safeway Supermarket is not generally known as a place for moral compass development. The same could be said of spending time with a no-count Judean peasant. But in that supermarket, I realized that my Mother would love me no matter what. And in the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, we realize that not only does God love us unconditionally and that we are never abandoned but also that the power of that love is the hope of our world. For it is the power of that love that will eventually transform our cowardly kindergarten world still clinging to its shame and pain into a loving, caring, life-giving place. In a world which is still trying to gain control by grasping for stolen candy, it is easy to despair. But we know the end of the story. Shame, guilt, and even death will melt into love, forgiveness, and the embrace of a new, un-ending life. And that sumptuous candy goodness is simply open and given to all. The love of God is given to our world, and it is sweeter, richer, more nougatty and fuller than we have ever imagined.