One day a group of scientists got together and decided that human beings had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell Him that they were done with Him.

The scientist walked up to God and said, “God, we’ve decided that we no longer need you. We’re to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don’t you just go on and get lost?”

God listened very patiently and kindly to the man. After the scientist was done talking, God said, “Very well, how about this?

Let’s say we have a man-making contest.” To which the scientist replied, “Okay, great!”

But God added, “Now, we’re going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam.”

The scientist said, “Sure, no problem” and bent down and grabbed himself a handful of dirt.

God looked at him and said, “No, no, no. You need to begin. Go get your own dirt!”

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The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don’t dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be.
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

---Leonard Cohen

Mitch Albon says: “All endings are beginnings; we just don’t know it at the time.

And Anatole France says “You have to die to one life before you can enter another.”

Standing at a Roman crucifixion must have been a cruel affair to watch. There would be no way that one could think that something good could ever come out of this, no conception at all that the world’s largest religion was actually being birthed. That out of this event Western civilization, with its schools, universities, hospitals, art and music, was also being birthed by the teachings of this good man who was dying on a cross.

To claim that this was actually a beginning would be utterly foolish—and yet it was. This ending and beginning stands as the paramount example of the truth, that the end is always also a beginning.

On March 31 2.81 billion Christians across the world celebrated Easter. Two thousand years ago, two disciples on the road to Emmaus gave a graphic picture of how that death was received at the time:

“They stopped walking when a stranger approached and told him all about it. Their faces were full of gloom. They spoke of their leader being handed over to the Chief Priests, who sentenced him to death, and the Romans, who crucified him. Quite obviously they were distraught. They had been hoping that Jesus was the man to liberate Israel from Roman domination. They also had a report from their women, whom they did not believe, that he was mysteriously alive. They knew that the tomb was empty; they had checked that out, but they were still in gloom. They had no idea that, 2,000 years later, I would be talking about them, and 2.81 billion Christians alive today would be part of a new beginning that started away back then in utter tragedy. But that is the story of Easter.

Now all of us know on one level that the end is always a beginning, and we accept it as a truism. Kindergarten ends, and we start grade 1. As year follows year, we progress along, some of us going as far as advanced degrees before we quit formal education. And so there are a lot of endings and beginnings. And these ends and beginnings are often joyful and full of achievement and a sense of progress. We start a job and then get promoted or leave for a better job. We are single and get married (unless we run into a roadblock like California’s Proposition 8!). We separate and get divorced. We change countries and leave the old life behind to begin again. “So what?” you say. This is a truism—nothing remarkable at all.
But wait a minute here, because it really matters that we remember, when the end is hard, that every end contains within it a new beginning. This also applies even to death itself. The early disciples of Jesus did not understand what was subsequently called the resurrection. It was a mystery to them, but the New Testament writers were content with this mystery because they had picked up on one thing, the only thing that mattered to them—Jesus was not dead, but alive, and apparently active in the present in their lives. Incredibly enough, they were experiencing a new beginning that they had never expected.

In the past three weeks I have been working with a family who lost a man to suicide who was son, father and husband. That was a tragic ending to a life otherwise well lived. He got depressed, so depressed that he took his own life.

And you say to me, how for him or his family could that ever be a new beginning?

I think that Jesus set his life down for the cause that he believed in most. He knew that if he stayed outside of Jerusalem he would be safe because he was popular. But in Jerusalem the power matrix was different, and it was against him, and he knew it. But out of that choice to set down life there came a miraculous new beginning.

I think it was similar in some ways for the man who took his own life. Although God supports us to live our lives to the full, when we cannot for whatever reason, there is always provision for a new beginning. For God, as the Muslims always remind us, is merciful. God does not abandon us, ever. God is present and loves us in life and death. The first Easter made that clear as countless other religions had done before, and today there is abundant evidence from Life after Life experiences that life goes on. So when we die there is every reason to think that life itself has a new beginning.

This is the great parable of nature herself. The old tree looks dead but then sprouts new leaves. After the winter there is a new start in so much of nature. And all around us in Sacramento we see these new beginnings: the baby ducks on the river, the willows turning green, the return of the mockingbird. These signs call to us to believe in a greater reality than death as an end to everything.

Many of the world’s great religions celebrate the fertility cycle. The seed pod of last year is broken open to create a new beginning. The caterpillar becomes still in chrysalis and then struggles to get out as a butterfly that flies—something a caterpillar could never do. It flies almost without effort. Who would ever think that a butterfly would come out of a caterpillar unless we had seen it with our own eyes?

So the message today is this: Whatever you are facing that has come, or is coming, to what may be a very difficult end, take heart! No matter what it is, there will be a new beginning. Believe it and be free of fear about death!
What Easter teaches us is not an easy truth, for it has to deal with the tragedy as well as give hope. When we lose a loved one to suicide, or face another bitter or difficult ending in our lives, we are often angry. We don’t want to start again, and if someone tells us happily that every ending is a new beginning we can say how insensitive! How cruel! You don’t get it. I am hurting. Don’t come to me with your nice fluffy words. They don’t help!

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., is clinical professor of Family and Community Medicine at the UCSF School of Medicine and Director of the innovative UCSF course The Healer’s Art. She is founder and director of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness, a professional development program for graduate physicians. She has been featured on Bill Moyers’ program.

Dr. Remen tells this story of one of the angriest people she had ever worked with. He had been a high school and college athlete, and his life had been good, filled with beautiful women, fast cars and personal recognition. He went to the doctor who diagnosed him with bone cancer of the right leg. They removed the right leg above the knee and saved his life.

He was unable to see any future for himself, and so he descended into self-destructive behavior. He refused to return to school, alienated his former friends and had one auto accident after another. Filled with a sense of injustice and self-pity, he hated all people who were well.

In his second meeting with Naomi she gave him a drawing pad and asked him to draw a picture of his body. He drew a crude sketch of a vase. Running through the center of it he drew a deep crack. He went over and over the crack with a black crayon, gritting his teeth and tearing the paper. The tears in his eyes were tears of rage.

Naomi found it hurtful even to watch him. She folded the picture up and saved it. It seemed too important to throw away…

In time his anger began to change. He would bring newspaper articles in to Naomi about people who had lost a leg, been burned in a house fire, a boy whose hand had been destroyed in a chemistry set explosion. If experts opined on these issues, he would say angrily, “These idiots don’t know the first thing about it.” As far as he was concerned, no one understood, no one was there for them, and no one was able to help them.

Naomi, encouraged, began to sense that a concern for others was growing in him and so she asked him whether he wanted to do anything about it. At first he said no, but on his way out he asked if he might be able to meet others who had similar injuries to his.

In the San Francisco hospital where she worked, there were opportunities to meet patients who had similar injuries, and so Naomi set up visits for him with these young people.
He came back from these visits full of stories. He often was able to help when no one else could, especially with the anger and acceptance. And in the process his own anger faded, and he began a kind of ministry.

One day he was to visit a young woman of 21. Breast cancer had claimed the lives of her mother, her sister and her cousin. Another sister was in chemo. This had driven her into action. She had both her breasts removed surgically.

He visited her on a hot summer day wearing shorts, his artificial leg in full view. Deeply depressed, with her eyes closed, she refused to look at him. He tried everything he knew to reach her. He got angry, told jokes. She did not respond.

Frustrated, he stood up and unstrapped the harness of his artificial leg and let it drop on the floor with a loud thump. Startled, she opened her eyes for the first time and saw him. This young man formerly one of the best dancers on college campus began to hop around the room snapping his fingers to the music which was playing in the background, laughing out loud to himself. After a moment, she said “Fella, if you can dance, maybe I can sing.”

They became friends and began to visit other people in the hospital together. Eventually she became his wife.

Naomi had worked with him for two years, and on the last visit she got out the original drawing of the cracked vase. She showed it to him, and he said, “You know it’s not really finished.” Taking a yellow crayon from the box on her desk, he drew lines radiating from the crack in the vase to the edge of the paper. Thick yellow lines. Naomi watched, puzzled. He was smiling. Finally he put his finger on the crack, looked at her and said softly “This is where the light comes through.”

Naomi, reflecting on her many years of watching people handle suffering, said that what he was discovering was a kind of natural law. She says, “Suffering shapes the life force, sometimes into anger, sometimes into blame and self-pity. Eventually it may show us the freedom of loving and serving Life.”

And when it does that it creates a new positive beginning.

When something comes to an end that is extremely painful to bear, the Good News of Easter is that we can choose to begin again. There is always hope, when we begin the freedom of loving and serving others who need our help.

So:

Don’t dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be.
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.