

Camouflage *(April 1993)*

Jane and I had just begun to climb Corona Heights in San Francisco – a hill topped by prominent rocks above Market Street with a view of the Mission district, the Bay and, to the left, the skyline of San Francisco, which on this day looked like a vast Cubist painting, what with its rectangular buildings of every size and shade and its Transamerica pyramid. Jane and I go there on every anniversary of our son Philip's death because it overlooks where he lived and died on Duboce Street and because the last time we saw him we were driving up Market Street and he pointed to the Heights and said that was his favorite place of retreat and if he ever had to live on the streets that's where he'd stay.

To make the climb easier steps had been cut into the soil and reinforced with two by fours. We had only climbed a couple of steps when Jane said, "Look, a butterfly." She was pointing to the step in front of us. I couldn't see anything but she insisted there was a stationary butterfly, which had just closed its wings. Of course that's why I couldn't see it – because with its wings closed the butterfly was so camouflaged we could hardly distinguish it from the soil, pebbles and sticks at our feet. As Jane pointed, I looked hard and said, "Where?" And she said, "Wait." And then the butterfly's wings opened and I beheld the sudden splendor of a monarch butterfly in all its orange, black, red and white spotted symmetry! It was like an apparition out of nowhere.

It then took flight but only to alight upon the next step where it again folded its wings and disappeared, became what looked like a sliver of wood. We waited and watched and again it opened its wings and transfigured the ground and repeated this ritual for several steps upward until I got the message and said to Jane, "The butterfly is telling us that Phil is here. We can't see him but he's here and if he were to open his wings we'd see him in all his splendor." And so we continued our ascent sensing that Phil was with us all the way – camouflaged by death but still present with a transcendent beauty.

Is that not what happened to the apostles after the death of Jesus? Even when Jesus was alive they failed to perceive what he really was. They imposed on him their presuppositions. Take those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Here they were walking beside him, engaging in conversation with him as when he was alive but did they see him? No – not until he sat with them at table and broke bread. That's when he opened his wings and displayed for a moment the monarch he really was! And so it was with all his apparitions to his disciples. Were they not moments when, by opening to them the deeper meaning of the Scripture, he opened the essence of what he really was – the Grace of God? And in opening his own wings throughout all those resurrection episodes did he not compel his apostles to lay aside their own camouflage, to open up their own wings, to reveal their own capacity for gracious being? And do not all these Gospel episodes throughout this Easter season demand that we too lay aside the camouflage by which we conceal (even from ourselves) our own redeemed beauty?

I must say that experience of that monarch butterfly helped me feel (in relation to Philip) something of Mary Magdalene's joy when, assuming the risen Jesus to be only a gardener, she heard him say simply "Mary" – saw him simply open his wings - and realized he wasn't dead after all.