Last evening, my family and I returned from a week of visiting colleges during spring break. It was an enlightening experience. While in some cases the odds of entry are perilously low and the costs of attending perilously high, the educational opportunities are extraordinary—at least for students who have access to them.

For those prospective students in the running, however, the pressure is enormous. They are expected to present excellent transcripts, superior standardized test scores, compelling letters of reference, and evidence of extracurricular activities that show both range of interest and depth of commitment.

And then there are the application essays. A typical required essay might read: “In 200 words, why this college?” The optional essays are even more challenging—and not necessarily optional. Here’s an example: “If you were a tree, what kind of a tree would you be, and why?” Or the essay might be prompted by a single word, like “Wednesday” or “broccoli.” The point, as one admissions officer put it, is not for the reader to learn more about broccoli or Wednesday. It’s for the students to convey a compelling sense of who they are. I have 10,000 applicants, and most of them are academically qualified. I can admit 3,000 students. Give me a reason to make you one of them.

Sometimes even students who make the cut break down under the pressure. One school we visited had experienced a spate of three suicides in less than a month—and two of those occurred on consecutive days. While the overall suicide rate at this university apparently conforms to national averages, three in such a short time gets your attention. It’s a sign that some students feel they have no hope and no future. The end might as well come. And so, tragically, it does.

Whenever we feel that we have no hope and no future, it’s time for Easter. Whenever we have failed and need a second chance, it’s time for Easter. Whenever we have made a mess of things and need to start over, it’s time for Easter.

Easter is not about bunnies—though bunnies are indeed cute. I used to raise bunnies as a child, and I’m in favor of bunnies. I especially liked the photo on the New York Times home page several days ago of two gay bunnies. Nor is Easter a symbol of spring—though early Christians did borrow the idea of Easter from a springtime celebration of the fertility of the earth. I would note, however, that most people who talk about the true meaning of Easter don’t have in mind a fertility festival. Nor is Easter about miracles—though many people reduce Easter to an argument that the laws of nature don’t always apply.

Easter is about what remains after everything has crumbled. It’s about the hope that follows despair. It’s about the beginning that comes after the end.

According to the gospel of Mark, on Sunday morning, two days after Jesus’ death, three women who were close to Jesus took spices to the tomb to anoint his body, as was customary. Along the way, they wondered who would roll away the heavy stone from the entrance to the tomb. To their surprise, the tomb was already open, and a young man
sat inside. He was dressed in a long, flowing white robe—the conventional garb of an
angel. Sensing their fright at his presence, the angel reassured them: “Do not be
alarmed.” He went on to explain that Jesus had been raised. “He is not here. Look, there
is the place where they laid him.”

For those of you concerned about the question of bodily resurrection, the verb
translated “raised” was a widely-used Greek verb that would typically have been taken to
mean something like “he has been lifted up,” as though his body had been taken
elsewhere. The verb was also used metaphorically on occasion, so you can get the idea of
resurrection out of the text if that’s what you need.

After explaining Jesus’ absence, the angel told the women to go find the other
disciples. He said that Jesus would be there as well. Jesus had often told his disciples
that he would never leave them, that his presence would always be with them and his
spirit would always remain among them.

And so the three women went and did as angel suggested. Despite the harrowing
experience of Jesus’ death, his followers found a spirit in their midst that comforted
them and gave them hope. They eventually called this inexplicable and ineffable
presence the Holy Spirit. It enabled them to find new hope and to make a new start.
Comforted and guided by the angel, they found within and among themselves a spirit
and purpose that would never die.

When things fall apart and the end looms near, we need an angel to comfort us
and give us hope. When I was my daughter Zoe’s age—a junior in high school—the twin
pillars of my life were church and school. I was a Conservative Mennonite, and I made
good grades. Which is why I decided after college to go to seminary—what a Mennonite
young man like me was expected to do in those days.

Midway through seminary, I realized that the faith of my upbringing wouldn’t
work for me. It required me to remain apart from the world, which I was no longer
willing to do. So I left the church and, for the most part, had to leave my family behind
as well.

When I graduated from seminary, the question was what to do next. I was a
preacher without portfolio. I decided, after a period of assessment, that I wanted a PhD
in classics. In college, I had switched to a classics major midway through my sophomore
year and had liked it a lot. So, I applied to several programs PhD programs and
accepted an offer of admission from one of them.

There was a problem, however. My classics background was appallingly meager. I
had taken four years of Greek; eight was the average of the other applicants. I had taken
only two years of Latin; ten was the average. I had not taken even one classical history
course. Why was I accepted in the first place, you ask? It might have been my
application essay, which apparently argued that my lack of preparation was actually an
asset, rather than a liability.

Within a year, however, my lack of preparation caught up with me, and I had to
withdraw from the program. It was a devastating blow. After a lifetime of academic
success, I had failed utterly. I had no church community, my family was mostly
estranged, and my academic career had crashed. I had nothing left.

I needed an angel. In my case, the angel was in memory, not in person. His name
was Doc Herr—a member of the Mennonite congregation I had served as a part-time
minister during my years in college. He took me to lunch one day during my junior year
in college and talked about my future. He told me that some of the decisions I had made

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about my life might not always make sense. The path I had chosen might not always be the right one. When the time comes to make a change, he said, you'll know what to do.

Doc Herr was right. Years later, his words kept me company through many lonely days and sleepless nights. His confidence in me gave me courage to reach out for help. His assurance gave me hope as I tried to make a new beginning.

Maybe you find yourself in need of an angel today. Your job may be in jeopardy or your children in crisis. You may be facing an empty nest or an empty bed. You may have lost your sense of purpose or failed in your sense of duty. You need a second chance, a new beginning.

Welcome to Easter. This is when we find the courage to roll away stones of failure and loss. This is when we find the hope to move forward and begin again.

Angels come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes they come as the face of a colleague or the shoulder of a friend. Sometimes they come with the sight of the sunrise or the sound of a melody. The key is to look and to listen. And ask: is there an angel in the house?

In one of her recent poems, the contemporary poet Pat Schneider asks that very question. She writes:

“Is There An Angel in the House?”

If there is,  
come to me.  
Roost, if you roost, on my shoulder.  
Put the cool palms of your hands  
lightly on my eyes.  
Wrap my nakedness in wings

and if you aren’t too tired,  
or otherwise occupied,  
and if it isn’t too tacky a request,  
please  
rock me.  
I am bruised.

If you will hold me until morning,  
I promise I will rise and light the fire and break the bread  
and put back on my shoulder my corner of the world.

But for now I could use the shelter of a wing.  
Excuse me,  
Excuse me,  
is there an angel in the house?

The answer is yes. It’s Easter—the dawn of comfort and hope, the season of new starts and second chances. Don’t be alarmed. Whatever end you may be facing, there is a beginning that will follow. Rise with the sun, and roll away the stone. The spirit of Easter will guide your steps and give you hope. There is an angel in the house.