

Easter

27Mar16

John20:1-19; 1Corinthians15:19-26; Acts10:34-43

"Yes, we need a little Christmas, right this very minute—need a little Christmas now!"

Alleluias may be more appropriate tunes for the day, but it strikes me that this category of songs for Easter is missing. We don't even note that "it's beginning to look a lot like Easter, ev'rywhere I go."

If you can forgive this overlap of seasons, particularly so soon after you weren't quite done with snowfall for the season, we might reflect that while Christmas can be summarized in the synecdoche of an evergreen wreath or a wrapped gift or a HoHoHo, somehow such aren't so apparent for Easter. It is tougher to picture the embodiment of Easter, and I mean that quite literally with the body—an infant, a baby at Christmas we can wrap our minds—and arms!—around (even if that baby also contains the concept of God's incarnation). But the body of Easter... well, that's not so easy. Even the locale is less concrete, not so simple to visualize or represent. For Christmas, it was a manger, a feed trough. Here at Easter, we have an absence instead, looking through the open door, a stone rolled away, a place where something should've been but wasn't. Emptied, a Kenosis.

So it's harder to say that it's beginning to look a lot like Easter, because this isn't so quickly captured. This festival of resurrection can't truly be equated in a crocus poking out of the frost or the returned robin singing exuberantly, if off-key. Even in the extravagance of our lives, fed on the joys of hams and the richness of many jelly beans

Sulia's been eating and spirit-filled glasses of wine, it all becomes too regular to account for the peculiarity, the irregularity of Easter.

Yet we try to hold it with metaphors. We feast today, to acknowledge that everything else is fast by comparison, is lacking. We sing Alleluia again today to contrast with the dirge not just of Lent but of life. And against the stench of death, or maybe just the unremarkable odors that fail typically to excite our nostrils, that's why we have the almost overwhelming sweetness of lilies today.

It's also trying to be represented by this paschal candle. In ancient words, used by the church for 1500 years or so, the Easter proclamation exults: "the light of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ [is] reflected in the burning of this candle. We sing the glories of this pillar of fire," continues the old song unrestrainedly, "the brightness of which is not diminished, even when its light it divided and borrowed"—all good notions of risen life in Jesus, and then this: "for it is fed by the melting wax which the bees, your servants, have made for the substance of this candle." I'd place that among the most remarkably faithful language in the history of Christianity.

Still, as a symbol for Easter, that's a lot of praise for a candle, something I recycled from old candles in a beat up pot on my stove, making a sticky mess of my kitchen, and which is burning imperfectly and making more sticky mess here now. But if the paschal candle is too highly praised, would Easter be better envisaged in a laser, or the innovation of LED bulbs, or the kilowatt candlepowers of a Batman searchlight, or—indeed—by the rising sun?

Again, we often look for analogies or glimpses. We use the surprise of the green blade rising from buried grain. Besides the turning of seasons and sprouting of new life from plants and barren trees starting to bud, we also look to all kinds of new beginnings and fresh starts in our lives. We attribute guesses of God's work and the hints of blessing when sorrows pass, or serendipity smiles on us, or when illnesses give way to restored health. Or for this community's still-recent beginning, you've got new pastors. I'm pleased for this fresh moment together and all that it will mean for us. But changing pastors is a pretty pale imitation of resurrection. I'm a different face, not a risen Lord (as if I even need to say it).

So I'm in favor of the analogies. I like all these things. I celebrate and delight in them and rejoice. But the cycle of seasons or the restoration of health is not what we have here today. This isn't an example of rejuvenation or resuscitation. This doesn't ask for our old logic, for rationalizing and explaining. This isn't a rebirth or reincarnation or for our spiritual awakening. This isn't looking for signs of life amid death. Indeed, Mary doesn't stroll around the gardens spying for what's germinating to infer signs of what remains and endures, as if that would assuage her weeping enough. She is looking, searching, begging after one thing only: Jesus. We probably shouldn't dumb down this extraordinary proclamation with ordinary yet false equivalencies. The strange, peculiar, unusual message I proclaim to you today and which we share isn't of those categories or symbolisms. This is not continuity, but radical disruption, life from the dead, resurrection. We

share the weirdest Word: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The poet John Updike was a Lutheran who described his faith as "angst besmoggled." With us in that way, here is part of his "Seven Stanzas at Easter":

*Let us not mock God with metaphor, | analogy,
sidestepping, transcendence; | making of the event a
parable, a sign painted in the | faded credulity of earlier
ages: let us walk through the door. | The stone is rolled
back, not papier-mâché, | not a stone in a story, | but the
vast rock of materiality (Just as Natalie said)...*

*Let us not seek to make [Easter] less monstrous, | for our
own convenience, our own sense of beauty, | lest,
awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are | embarrassed
by the miracle*

No mere parable, but an embarrassing miracle.

With a Word so oddly enormous, it seems we would almost prefer to give in to slight dashes of spiritual leaven, trying to catch only a breath of new life rather than this filling of dead lungs, as if a hint of hope would be somehow more real than the strangeness of a stranger poking around the garden, out from his tomb, up to get his fingers dirty tending to the mess of our lives.

We do need a little Easter, right this very minute. We need this God on the loose, invading our imaginations and staking out our sufferings, not kept at bay by our senses of propriety and what's sensible. We need not a hatchling spring chicken, but the full-fledged miracle of the dove's peace, olive branch in its beak telling us the storm is over. Even when we pretend we just want to verify our proof—that they have moved the body, in Mary's questioning, and when we locate it we'll be able to put our finger on the answer—instead of our

pretense, the angelic proclamation shows up, the intangible good news of "don't hold on to me," the weeping-be-gone of Jesus himself, real and somehow in the flesh.

We need a little Easter, since bad news is inescapable and troubles linger and lurk even in the readings of this good news and new life day. Besides Mary's tears of loss, when Peter proclaims that "truly, God shows no partiality," it is a noteworthy statement exactly because we know partiality all-too-terribly, among people as well as nations. Also in the reading are doubts, "most of all to be pitied." We're confronted by "the last enemy," trying to confine us in our graves.

We need a little Easter now, and then we need more and more. We need a whole new creation worth of the stuff: for fragile lives that wait on the tenuous edge of intensive care. For those we love and those we depend on yet can never be sufficient. For insatiable longings. For maddening politicians who don't seem to understand reality as it actually exists (is resurrection of the dead really so far-fetched compared to what they're peddling?). For terrorists and attacks, shocking for still being shocking, where it infests and diseases us with each photo, with every last flash of news, with all our worries. We need new life. With a changing climate, leaving everything we thought we knew questionable and at risk. We need a new creation, can manage with nothing less. For this, we need Easter. We need not the diversion for a bit of joy and spring beauty and brunch. We need not just a hunkered-down gathering of loved ones or the distraction of basketball scores and celebrity gossip. Self-

assurance and self-security won't do. Mild surprises collapse. The kindly sense that we're trying to help and throwing a bone of charity don't cut it. The knick-knacks of relief just leave hungry dogs. And old men still don't understand and young women go on weeping...

Until...

Until this. This inexplicable mystery. This proclamation of newness. Death has been undone. This is why so many of our shared stories are the blind seeing and deaf ears unstopped and troubled sinners forgiven and outcasts welcomed and doubting hearts grasping to believe. This isn't incremental adjustment or surgical improvement. Our faith doesn't take baby steps. This is God's yes over all that would say no, a reverberating, echoing, surprising yes that won't be stifled or shut up.

Life not only bursts the bonds of the tomb but bursts into our own hearts and ruptures the oldness of our lives. Again, Peter's proclamation, through the power of this living Word, becomes the shape of our existence: God has anointed you "with the Holy Spirit and with power;" [he declares again, "to go] about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil!" The good news charges ahead, taking on flesh in us. Let loose your "Alleluias!" and proclaim that none of those fears and terrors, no weeping or abandonment, no divisions and injustices, not even death itself will have the last word. We are living in Christ Jesus and will not be stopped. Alleluia! Christ is risen!