

Easter 2010
Is 65:17-25; Ps 118:1-2, 14-21
Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12

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“They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” (Is 65:25)

On Christmas Eve, 1914, the British soldiers shivering in their trenches awoke to an unusual silence. Where the sound of guns ravaged daily, now there was only a German voice, singing: *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*, Silent Night, Holy Night. The British troops watched, amazed, as the Germans in their trenches erected a Christmas tree and began to sing around it. While the officers fulminated and fumed and ordered their troops to kill, the enlisted men on all sides crawled out of the trenches toward their enemies, taking, not guns, but biscuit tins, and began to share with one another cookies and cakes and wine. The men began to sing hymns together in their different languages, and even to dance.

All around them, the vast machinery of death lay silent. The guns, the tanks, the barbed wire lay discarded -- for a full day, no one paid them any heed. One soldier recalls, “It was all so strange; it was like being in another world, to which he had come through a nightmare; a world finer than the one he had left behind, except for beautiful things like music, and springtime on his bicycle in the country.”¹ For one day, the soldiers gave their souls, not to the things of this world, but to their God and to one another. They created there, upon the blood-soaked fields, a place where death was no more, where mourning and dying and pain were no more: they refused to hurt or destroy on all that holy place, and, for one day, they defeated Death himself.

In a real sense, that day was an outbreak of Easter, not of Christmas, for Easter is the day on which death lies vanquished -- not by the power of the sword, but by the verdant life of a God who refuses to let death destroy his creatures forever. God and death engaged that day in mortal combat, and when it was done, death lay as powerless an empty tomb filled with angels. “Why seek ye the living among the dead?” they ask -- but there were no dead there. What was dead had life again; he had risen. (Luke 23:5)

At some level, we humans have always suspected that death was a paper tiger. When anthropologists seek the origins of our species, they find the bones of ancient *homo sapiens* and Neanderthals buried in ritual order, surrounded by personal items they would need in the next life. As early as we existed, it seems, we refused to believe that death was final.² That seed of faith -- call it hope, call it love -- was planted in us with the image of God, to prepare us to receive the good news of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. On this day, Christ has broken “death’s strong bands”; “its sting is lost forever.”³ No longer do we live as those without hope; even at the grave, this is our song: *Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

But death comes in more than one form, and the death of the spirit can be as great a burden as the death of the body. The great good news of Easter is not only that life will transcend death in our future: life will also transcend death now, today. When Christ rose from the tomb, he gave us tangible hope to free us from fear, from degradation, from bondage to the worst and most helpless thing which inhabits our souls and prevents us from reaching for new life. St. Paul writes, “if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Col 3:1-3) We who have been baptized into Christ’s

¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night*, pp. 22-23.

² John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, p.40.

³ Martin Luther, hymn text.

death already share in his resurrection; it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. (Gal 2:20) All the power of Christ's resurrection is in us to raise us to new life even this day.

What does it look like when new life rises from the dead? It looks like linen tomb wrappings coiled empty on the ground. It makes no sense; it overturns what we expect to see. It looks like children in Haiti skipping and playing even without their missing limbs, like joy breaking out in places we had not thought to see it. It looks like my friend Emily walking toward the altar to receive Communion, she who had been told she would never walk again -- like strength reviving in people in whom we had not thought to see it. It looks like a twelve-step meeting, a therapist's chair, a classroom -- like any place where people struggle free of their shackles and reach for fullness of life. It looks like refugees building lives in a new home far away from the place of their torment, like starving prisoners released from the camps, like our own hungry hearts finally being fed the bread of hope. The bread which endures to eternal life.

Martin, who died on this date forty-two years ago, had that spirit when he stood in his pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church and challenged his congregation to embody the truth of resurrection life: "Somehow," he said, in words which could have come from the lips of Christ on the cross, "we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. ...But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.'"⁴ It looks like people all over this country and many countries trying to live into that double victory -- the one which converts our enemies into friends.

And, perhaps, it looks like one scene, not included in today's Gospel reading, not usually heard on Easter Day. At the very end of the Gospel of John, the disciples are fishing and they see Jesus standing on the shore. And they return to him, and he feeds them fish that he has grilled; then he turns to Peter and says, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:15, 16, 17) Three times he asks Peter, and three times Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" -- once for each time that Peter had denied him. In this way did Christ forgive the disciple who was to lead his church.

But what if Jesus, too, needed to hear the words? Here is man who has been betrayed, abandoned, tortured, and killed, subjected to all the means by which his spirit could be broken or his dignity taken away. He knows that we find it hard to forgive our victims, hard to see again the humanity of those from whom we have once stripped it away. And so, when he rises from the dead, he asks: *Do you love me? Even as I am? You, who have seen me reduced to carrion, to nothing -- can you love me even so? Can you see in me the person I have been, the person whom I hope I am again?* What if he and Peter were forgiving one another: Christ forgiving Peter his denials, and Peter forgiving Christ his failure to be what Peter had wanted him to be? Would this mutual giving of grace be the very bone and shape of new life?

I think that it might be. For in every act of salvation, forgiveness runs two ways. We bring to God our failures, our losses, our malice, our shame, the times we have deliberately injured one

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Christmas Day, 1967

another, the times we have refused to trust, and God speaks over them a healing word: "Peace be with you. Your sins have been forgiven." But it is also true, I think, that when we make our profession of faith, what we are really doing is forgiving God as well. Forgiving God for the pain we see in the world around us, forgiving God for the injuries he has not prevented us from receiving, forgiving God for his gift of freedom, which we have used to injure one another. Forgiving God for the pain of the cross, which he and we have borne together.

Perhaps, resurrection looks like what happened at Communion one day in my friend's church in downtown Birmingham. There was in that church a woman who had been estranged from her father for many years. Each Sunday, the two of them came to church, separately, seated themselves, separately, and then returned to their separate homes. But one Sunday, the father's heart was touched and he rose from his seat and he went to his daughter and knelt before her and he said, "Sweetie, I am so sorry. For all the times I hurt you, for all the times I failed you, for all the times I could not be what you needed me to be." And the daughter looked at him and tears rained down her face, and she took him by the hand and raised him up and embraced him, there in the pews, in the middle of the service. And they stood there in one another's arms, weeping, while the worship unfolded around them: *The Body of Christ, given for you. O Daddy! O Daddy! The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation. I love you, Daddy. I love you honey. The Body of Christ. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. The blood of Christ. I love you. I love you. I love you.*