

In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Our lives seem to be like a novel. Perhaps we are in the early chapters still developing the plot, but the preface has been penned. Or, perchance we are closing in on the concluding paragraphs still uncertain about what flourish to give the finale. Regardless, the story is unfolding with all the twists and turns that are part and parcel to being human at times full and satisfying and at others fearful and uncertain. But, what if there is a ghost writer—a skilled, creative, and amazing author, who while respecting our freedom as individuals, also has created a conclusion that far outstrips our greatest hopes?! What if the ultimate episode in our story has been put in place and no challenge, success, or tragedy can ever be more powerful? How might knowing that affect our moments? What if the biographer knows not only the tragedy of existence but also can put unrivaled comedy in place instead?

We have been brought to the seminal, final event in history we call Easter or the great Pascha. The church’s concluding chapter of our story is also its’ beginning. “He is Risen” may well have been the first words uttered by the infant community, and those words, and the reality they proclaim, echo as the deepest laughter and song in all creation. In the simplest of sentences they tell all who will hear that God has the last laugh. It is The Divine Comedy, and the ending is the last thing anyone would have expected, especially a group of women at the tomb and all who live with that shadow.

Let me take you back with me to dual Easter’s years ago. They hold the tensions of death and playful laughter. The first occurred while on sabbatical in England during Holy Week. Jo and I took time to travel in the countryside with a day spent here and another day visiting there. We found our way to the small town of Cheltenham near the Cotswolds, northwest of Oxford, and on the first morning visited the ruins of a beautiful church near the center of the city. Out in the churchyard there was a cemetery, still well-kept and trimmed neatly. Wandering around and looking at the headstones we read numerous unusual epithets, but then gathered at one in particular, and took in the inscription. It simply read: “As you are, I once was. As I am now, you will be”. We fell silent as the message sank into awareness and spoke with a tone of fatalism and finality. It brought quite suddenly a very real sense of just how finite we are, but in a brooding tone.

The other Easter provides a contrast. It embodies an irony of the first order. The parish was a large one with many families and children. Like so many the morning was filled with an early mass and then activities, snacks, and of course, the all-pervading Easter egg hunt. Only this day was different. Due to circumstances the egg hunt had to be re-located, and the only place to have it was in the parish cemetery! Imagine, if you can muster the picture, 40 children running around the headstones, giggling, laughing, celebrating, and loving the moment!! In the midst of that solemn place of rest those children became singers of life. What an ironic statement. And ask yourself this: which of these two captures more fully what today is really about...?

The authors of the Gospels, each with unique nuances and voicing, make it clear that the 1<sup>st</sup> century was little different from our own time on at least one count. They knew the power of death and the fear it instilled in the human spirit.

The women went to the tomb of Jesus early on the first day and by all rights they expected to be met by death. Each of Synoptic Gospels has them ask one another the question of confrontation; “Who will roll away the stone from the sepulcher FOR us”? ‘For us’ is the recognition of the impenetrable reality of death. It is not merely a question about mechanics or the physical weight of the seal on the tomb. Why would they have started such a journey without thinking about this in the first place? It is an anguished inquiry. It is both a question and a statement about the insurmountable roadblock that death poses for all of us. Death hits us at the most visceral level by raising the question of our meaning and value both in the present and future. There is no other event which so clearly and unbendingly takes control away from us, while at the same time there is no other more universally shared experience.

There is a story from the Middle East of a servant who was sent by his master to the marketplace to purchase goods for their stock. The servant did as he was instructed, but while there looking through the crowd spotted a figure. He thought it was a woman, but upon closer inspection recognized it as death. The figure turned and held up a hand to him. In fear he fled back home and told his master he needed to borrow a horse in order to ride to the town of Samsarra in order to avoid this fearful figure. After leaving, his master went to the market and found the figure and confronted it asking why it had accosted his servant. Death responded that there had been no intention to frighten the servant, but the wave was merely a gesture of recognition. “You see, death said, I have an appointment with him tonight in Samsarra, and I did to want to arrive unrecognized.” We too, face that mystery. Like Holy Week, which we have just walked with Jesus, there is a shadow that stands in the background. When we have lost those closest to our own hearts; people who occupy a place literally within us; we ask how the empty places left in us ‘what does this mean now’? The Gospel today says the women were ‘amazed, terrified, and frightened’. We understand their plight. Like the epitaph in Cheltenham death presents a mystery. It is part of the novel.

Understand this: no society or community can be sustained unless it comes to terms with the power of the final enemy. Avoidance is not possible, and pretending is a poor addition to the plot. Morticians’ makeup does not erase loss, and the current attempts to rationalize death by saying ‘It’s simply a part of life’ do not work. Death, according to the Faith is an intruder.

This is why today is such a beautiful script waiting to be heard. Like the children playing in the parish graveyard, oblivious to any threat, Easter simply tells us the outcome of our lives has already been written. Christ Anesti-Christ is Risen. Please notice there is no attempt on the part of Mark to offer explanations or musings about what happened, because that is not possible and does not ultimately matter. Mysteries are not undone by explanations; they are lived through authentic love. The earliest Church simply came to see that God is greater than all things including the mystery of death, and he has put his seal on the story of his peoples’ lives in Christ. God uses death to achieve its defeat, and in a very real sense laughs at the beauty of the outcome. Easter is the Divine Comedy because it has the most remarkable ending and punchline.

In 15th-century Bavaria, a peculiar Easter custom developed and became established. In order to brandish the joy of Christ’s victory over sin and death, homilists would include elaborate jokes in their Easter preaching. The tradition, which is known as the *Risus paschalis*, the Easter laugh—captures something of the euphoria which is part and parcel to the Easter feast. Christ conquered death. The whole of the Church should roll in laughter at the news!

One of my favorite authors was a naturalist by the name of Loren Eiseley. He spent his adult life studying the world around him, and wrote wonderfully of what he saw. He was fascinated by birds of prey and went to the forest one day to watch hawks. He set a trap to capture a pair, but in the scuffle one of birds nailed him with her talons and escaped, while the other was trapped. He took the bird home to study and make notes of its behavior. After several hours he said he knew what he had to do, and so early the next morning he returned to the sight of the capture to release it. He opened the cage and for a moment they watched one another, and then in a flash the bird flew off into the rising sun. Eiseley described its ascent, but then something happened that dramatically impacted him. He said, “As I looked up I spotted the other hawk circling. She must have been there all night waiting. They flew off together in silence, and then from far up there came a cry, not from the hawk I had released but from its mate. It was a cry of such unutterable joy that now 40 years later as I write, still rattles the coffee cups on my breakfast table”!! My dear friends the Gospel rattles far more than our coffee cups. It shakes the foundation of our lives, because it is the laughter of God Who promises us that God’s waiting love is more potent than anything that threatens us, including death. Christ has the last laugh. We are reminded today that the worst is not the last thing to be encountered. The last thing encountered is the best—it is the ending of our story in God, who has the last laugh of all. Amen+