

April 4, 2010: GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH!
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
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This might sound sacrilegious, but I love Holy Week. We're supposed to be resurrection people, and I know that for most people, the last they hear before Easter is Palm Sunday. There was a time when preachers held forth, "Without Good Friday, there is no Easter!" That isn't why I love Holy Week. It's not because Holy Week means Lent is almost over (good news for the hard-working pastor). What I love is the story. On Palm Sunday, I love how Springwater goes from the parade to the cross. During the week, I love reading stories of the religious big wigs trying to outsmart Jesus, and he just telling parables in answer. I am swamped with gratitude that Jesus went nose-to-nose, even when the consequence of his actions was inevitable. I am overcome by hearing the profound love he had for his disciples. I love that Springwater gathers on Thursday evening to remember the Passover dinner at which Jesus is betrayed. I keep the Good Friday vigil, re-reading the story of the religious trial and the civil trial, loving even that, grateful to tears over Jesus' humiliations, awed by the recounting of his death.

I hope it's not sacrilegious to say that I love Holy Week, because its conclusion is so central to who we are as Christians. Jesus as the full expression of what it means to be human. Resurrection as the full expression of God's irrevocable statement that we are bodies within a soul. The passion of Jesus as proof that God loves us so much, nothing is held back, not even life itself. Unless you think about it this way, Easter makes no sense—the guy who was dead is now alive. That's not rational. Even taking into account the raising of Lazarus, nothing suggested that Jesus *would* come to life after that brutal, de-humanizing death on the cross. Even our technologically-powered medical advances could not have made Jesus alive, once he was dead.

Try to set aside 2,000 years of this story repeated. When the women showed up at the tomb Easter morning, they weren't bringing Jesus fresh clothes for when he emerged from the grave. This was not a faithful vigil, keeping watch until God could get around to acting. Their arms weren't anticipating a "welcome home, Jesus" hug. Their arms were filled with embalming spices for what they knew was an already-stinking body. This was one last act of devotion for the man who had wakened their hopes. An empty tomb was the final insult to them. No, wait. The final insult was telling the disciples Jesus was *alive*, that they'd seen *angels* who told them so, then reminded them Jesus had been saying this all along only they'd just forgotten it. The final insult was being told by the men in charge, "This is idle girl-talk." Jesus' resurrection was met universally with denial, fear, perplexity, confusion, amazement.

So what's with all the flowers and alleluias today? We've come a long way!

There's a group of churches in Portland that walks the boundary of their ZIP code area every Palm Sunday, singing hymns and waving palm branches. One of my friends tells me they pick up litter, too. Last year, an elderly Russian immigrant woman walking with them did the strangest thing. Every time she stooped to pick up a cigarette butt she said, "Alleluia." The whole afternoon it was, stoop, pick up butt, "Alleluia," stand up. Stoop, pick up butt, "Alleluia," stand up. My friend finally figured out that what she was doing was theological.

Writer Anne Lamott's take on things is that we're an Easter people in a Good Friday World.¹ There are a lot of good, religious people (and denominations) that believe that Christianity's call is to

¹ *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott.

respond to the suffering of the world. Take up an offering, make an appeal, collect blankets, make health kits, try to alleviate misery. Hence, how dare we sing while others suffer? Is this what God wants?² Theologically, I think Easter means God meant us for music, destined us for joy. Maybe our good deeds are not the end of the story. One writer suggests that this “Good Friday” mindset might be “what you get when anthropology overtakes Christology—it’s always Good Friday. What’s dead stays that way.” I say, go ahead and pick up the cigarette butts, but don’t forget the “Alleluia.”

On Easter of all days, we might recognize the difference between anticipation and impatience. “Anticipation” believes that God will act decisively, in God’s own good time and judgment. “Impatience” takes the authority to decide and to act away from God, judging God as slow, uncaring, evil.³ The best news about Easter means we aren’t in charge. No amount of well-meaning and pious acts are going to save the world. No amount of shows of strength will make “right” prevail. Easter means God has the last word. Over politics, over our messed up relationships, over our prospects for employment, over acts of terror. Because Easter means God has the last word over death. And that’s the whole thing: in life *and in death* we belong to God. God has the last word over death for all creation, and Jesus proves it by leaving the tomb.

We can react to that news like the disciples did. We can dismiss this as an idle tale—frivolous girl-talk. We can tune it out as the story we hear every year. We can reduce it to something that happened 2,000 years ago so that we can go to heaven when we die. Or we can actually experience the surprise and wonder and perplexity of it all. Friends, this was not a natural occurrence! It is utterly mad and delirious. If the dead don’t stay dead, what can you count on? (Anna Carter Florence)

That elderly Russian lady had it right. Stoop, pick up, “Alleluia.” *God* stooped. *God* picked us up. Alleluia. That “Alleluia” doesn’t mean all is right and the world is fixed. Alleluia means we’re not alone, there’s no place we can go where Jesus will not be able to find us. Alleluia means the Isaiah text is more than a story, that when God created a new thing, we were given the eyes of faith to see it even when the world cannot.

What if the story is true? Once the disciples figured out that what those silly women had to say was true, once they *experienced* the risen Christ, their first response was to rejoice. Stoop, pick up, “Alleluia!” Rejoice, people of God. Death doesn’t have the final word. God does. “The God who could have been sovereign chose rather to be love.”⁴

² William Willimon (*Christian Century*) 3/23/10.

³ “Reflections on the lectionary,” by Jin S. Kim, *Christian Century*, 3/23/10.

⁴ William Willimon, *ibid.*

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