

April 17, 2022
Easter Sunday, Year C
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Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
John 20:1-18

Have you ever wondered what Jesus did between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, between the crucifixion and the resurrection?

The four canonical gospels say nothing about that. But I know of at least one non-canonical gospel that does, the Gospel of Nicodemus. This gospel is named after Nicodemus the Pharisee, a minor character from the canonical Gospel of John. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Nicodemus visits Jesus for a little chat under cover of night. At the end of John, bringing a hundred pounds of spices, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare and entomb Jesus' body.

The Gospel of Nicodemus is a drama in two parts: part one is the story of Jesus' passion; part two is the story of his descent into the underworld. The Christian tradition has assigned a name to what happens in part two; it's called *the Harrowing of Hell*. In the Apostles' Creed, we say that, after his burial, Jesus "descended into hell." The Gospel of Nicodemus tells us that Jesus didn't just hang out or take a nap down there—he was *busy*. The word *harrow*, in archaic usage, and in the sense used here, means *to pillage* or *to plunder*.¹ The gist of the Harrowing of Hell is that Jesus raids the underworld, defeating Satan and rescuing those held captive since the time of Adam. As some describe it, Jesus thereby throws open the doors of hell for all eternity.

There is a Greek Orthodox icon that depicts the Harrowing of Hell. As you may remember, in Greek Orthodox iconography, a particular person or event is depicted in a fairly prescribed way, with particular visual elements employed to help to tell a story. In icons of the Harrowing of Hell, Jesus is shown at center, his body inside a mandorla, which is an almond-shaped aureole that indicates the light of holiness. He is reaching down to, and clasping hands with, Adam on his right and Eve on his left; Adam and Eve are kneeling in caskets and reaching up; Jesus is pulling them up. Behind them are other human figures, often including Solomon and David and various prophets. It's subtle, but if you look closely, you can see that the feet of Jesus rest on the fallen gates of hell. Beneath the gates is a dark area, sometimes shown with a scattering of bones and, among those bones, a bound figure representing death or Satan.²

For the last two years, we have all been trapped in the world of death, metaphorically and sometimes literally. It has been hard, and it is not over. The last couple of weeks, I've talked to a number of people who tell me they feel exceptionally weary. It seems that, while the pandemic got better, the weariness got worse. I'm weary, too, and I don't think that I'm simply projecting my own weariness onto others.

Several times, when others mentioned weariness to me, the following words came out of my mouth: “It will get better after Easter.” Each time I said it, I felt a little bit of surprise. If you me, you know that such a reply is unlike me. I don’t remember ever before saying such a thing, not even as we approached the last two Easters. For the most part, I’m careful not to offer platitudes and not to claim easy cure-alls, even one that happens to be the most important day on the Christian calendar. But there it was, sitting there: It will get better after Easter.

Eventually it occurred to me to ponder where that was coming from. The only explanation I could come up with is this: one could say that a central tenet of Christianity is that it really *does* get better after Easter. Maybe, when we are incapable of any other words, what’s left is this simple declaration of faith. And, maybe, it resides in us more deeply than we realize. We really are living through a moment of global suffering. It will get better after Easter? Such a response needn’t be just a dodge or a denial. It’s not about Easter as magic. It’s about Easter as an ongoing day-to-day way of life.

We just heard in John’s gospel that Jesus appeared first to the one who was *weeping*. Mary Magdalene, having run back and forth, is standing there outside the tomb. She is so distraught that Jesus has to *work* to get her attention, so that she finally turns and recognizes that it is him.

Let’s be clear here: it’s not that Mary will go on to lead a life that is without travail. Those first disciples will have to make sacrifices that will never be required of any of us. Still, through it all, Mary will forever know that Jesus fulfilled the promise that he made of resurrection life; *because* it was fulfilled for *him*, it was *also* fulfilled for *her*. For Mary, on every day to follow, the darkness will yield to the light.

So much of what we do together during worship and beyond is *remembering*. Especially on Easter Sunday and the weeks following, we remember that something miraculous happened that first Easter, and we remember that we are beneficiaries of its continuing grace.

I sometimes get up well before sunrise to start working. I like to *be* up early in the morning, but I don’t like to *get* up early in the morning. But when I do drag myself out of bed, I remember that the real reward isn’t getting more work done. Instead, it’s being treated to my favorite time of day. I always raise the blinds, so I can see the sky as it lightens and then colors and then color-shifts. This time of year, I also open the windows, so I can hear the birds. They are especially vocal in the morning in the spring. Birders call this phenomenon the “dawn chorus,” but it begins well before dawn. Here, this time of year, the dawn chorus starts at about 4:30, when it is still completely dark.

There is a particular bird that is often the first one I hear. Even among any other bird chatter, this song stands out, distinctive and clear and beautiful: three long notes, with a little trill to end the last one. This bird starts singing well before dawn, and continues for a little while after; its song brackets the sunrise. I’ve never heard it at any other time of day.

I had so enjoyed that bird, without knowing what it is. One morning this week, I finally decided to investigate. I had awakened at about 4, not on purpose to start working, but because of a poorly-timed hot flash. Lying there in the dark, with a window cracked open, I heard that bird calling. I listened for a while, realized I was not going to get back to sleep, and decided to start Googling. It wasn't easy—I think I was Googling for about an hour—but I think I finally figured it out: it's the white-throated sparrow. Apparently you all needed to know that. It's a little tricky, because the call of the white-throated sparrow varies over its range pretty significantly. But I finally found a recording from New York State that is very similar to the one I have been hearing.³ And now you have to listen to it, too. [PLAY THE RECORDING]

In true church tradition I insisted on giving you a triple triple—three threes. I'm 60 years old, but I am still noticing things and still learning things and still figuring out what unleashes my curiosity. I'm 60 years old, and I first noticed that bird call during the pandemic. Once I started working from home most of the time, I started noticing a lot of things that had been happening just outside my windows. I don't know how I had missed it for so long, how I had slept, or metaphorically sleepwalked, through so much beauty. But I'm glad it finally woke me up.

All this got me to thinking about what the dawn chorus was like on the morning of the resurrection. I imagined an early birdy riser with a fine voice, heralding the dawn on resurrection morning, calling Jesus out of the tomb. I can just see Jesus rolling back the rock that had sealed him in, and being greeted not only with a shaft of light, but also with a bar of birdsong from the very first witness to the resurrection.

If, on the way to that first Easter, Jesus harrowed hell, maybe he harrows our hells, too. In the darkness of our underworld, he removes whatever binds us, and pulls us from our graves and into the light of God. And he does this every single dawn of our lives.

They say that it's darkest just before the dawn. I don't know if that's true. But I do know that's exactly when the white-throated sparrow starts singing. Even in our darkest nights, even in our deepest depths, we are not alone. Our risen God is with us. Happy Easter!

Notes

¹ "harrow," Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/harrow> (accessed April 17, 2022).

² I cannot verify that it is reliable, but a translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus is posted on the *Early Christian Writings* website, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelnicodemus.html> (accessed April 17, 2022).

³ "White-throated Sparrow," recorded by Sean O'Brien in Santa Clara, New York, on July 2, 2011, contained in the Macaulay Library, the media archive of The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, and available on line at https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/136579?_hstc=75100365.1172a89cfc36cbe18ccb390b9ee6f3ca.1650117019947.1650191289577.1650381540760.3&_hssc=75100365.2.1650381540760&_hsfp=3003300401&_gl=1*16svzxf*_ga*MjAyMzE1MjI3MS4xNjUwMTE3MDE5*_ga_QR4NVXZ8BM*MTY1MDM4MTUzOS4zLjEuMTY1MDM4MTc0OS42MA..#_ga=2.62612772.942746242.1650381539-2023152271.1650117019&_gac=1.61191262.1650117019.Cj0KCOjw0umSBhDrARIsAH7FCoccsA7pfWaAswgk9Lg6rgYSHfjVdkjwd7hasThtD4rTU4XI2hqhEmMaAlZ5EALw_wcB (accessed April 17, 2022).