***EMPTY HOPES***

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Texts: Ephesians 5:18b-20 and John 20:1-20

This Easter day is full of symbols that are practically visual alleluias! Brightly-colored butterflies, brilliant sunrises, colorful eggs, and lily-white lilies call to mind the good news of the resurrection. Each in its own way testifies to some aspect of the joy of Easter – butterflies illustrate brilliant life arising from a seemingly lifeless cocoon; sunrises shatter the darkness with light; colorful eggs offer bright surprises in a shell from which life (at least before the hard-boiling) might burst; and lilies are – well, they are white like the angels’ robes or fragrant like the perfume the women didn’t use to anoint Jesus’ body or shaped like trumpets blaring alleluias or precious like the story. Truth be known, while lilies have long been associated with Easter – hence the term Easter lily – it is less than clear what makes that flower an enduring symbol of resurrection. In the poem “Hope Weed” Barrie Shepherd offers an alternative:

*Our Christian symbols seem, at times, not quite*

*appropriate to the meaning that they bear.*

*For instance, take the Easter lily, white*

*and fragile sign of resurrection. Rare,*

*its graceful silent trumpet greets the light*

*of March or April only under glare*

*of florists’ lamps, unnaturally bright.*

*You never find them in the open air*

*before July. A better flower for Easter day*

*would be, as every angry gardener knows,*

*the dandelion, seeded by the gay*

*abandoned wind that, as it listeth, blows.*

*No matter how we weed out every stray,*

*digging as deep, the root still deeper goes.*

*And when, at last, we quit and go away*

*the rain falls, and a host of fresh bright foes*

*stand resurrected, and the garden glows.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

I like his suggestion – the dandelion as a symbol of resurrection. This is not just an excuse to allow my yellow-flecked yard to become a sea of yellow as my newly-identified “resurrection garden”. As a symbol for the resurrection of One who ministered among the weeds in society – the poor, the outcast, prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, the demon-possessed, and all kinds of sinners – the dandelion seems appropriate. As an enduring image of One who was himself regarded by the religious authorities and Romans as a noxious weed who needed to be uprooted and cast aside but proved hard to kill, the dandelion seems fitting. As an omnipresent icon that flourishes in all kinds of spaces, the dandelion fits the promise of resurrection for all people in all places and times. As a flower that blooms where it wills without dependence on the tender care of human hands, the dandelion reminds us that God and God alone chooses the time and place for God’s incarnation and act of salvation. Set aside the fragile lilies and bring out the golden dandelions as brilliant signs of resurrection!

There will be those who say that the dandelion is too common and ordinary to evoke thoughts of the holy event of resurrection. But the incarnation is all about God’s presence in the common, ordinary places in our lives. Jesus is born, not in a palace but in a stable, the son not of a princess but of a peasant girl. He lives and serves among common folk and chooses as his followers, not scholars and saints, but fishermen, a tax collector and an assortment of everyday people. He dies, not in the glory of battle, but in the shame of the cross, put to death as a common criminal for all the world to see. As Paul writes to the Philippians:

*Christ Jesus…emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross*.

Easter is all about emptiness and fulfillment, about Jesus emptying himself and fulfilling God’s promises, about empty hopes being filled, about an empty promise fulfilled in a risen Lord who left behind an empty tomb.

There is a story from the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. Elijah arrives in town and asks the widow for a drink of water and a little bread to eat. She tells him that she has no bread; her cupboard is bare except for a handful of meal in a jar and a splash of oil in a jug. She has resolved that she will go home, make a small cake for herself and her son with what little is left, and then they will die of hunger. Her hopes are as empty as the jug and jar in her cupboard. Not so, says Elijah. Go and make a little cake for me with what is left, and neither your jar of meal nor your jug of oil will be emptied until the rains have returned and the earth is replenished. And so it was!

Easter is a day like that day, a day in which life is rescued from certain death, a day when the impossible becomes real, a day in which empty hopes and hearts are filled to overflowing! The story of Easter begins with emptiness:

a world empty of light as Mary makes her way to the tomb in the dark,

disciples empty of hope with the death of Jesus who they thought might be the messiah,

a crucified Christ empty of life and laid to rest in a tomb,

a tomb empty of the body which it was supposed to hold.

Into that empty void created by Jesus’ crucifixion crept sorrow, fear and doubt. Even after Mary, Peter and John had found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty of all but the burial cloths, the emptiness remained. No one thought of resurrection. No one remembered Jesus’ forecast of what the third day might bring. No one began to hope that something momentous had taken place, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead,” writes John. They didn’t think of resurrection; they thought only of death, disappointment and doubt, for they did not understand what had been foretold nor what had happened nor what God had done nor what the empty tomb meant for them and for all creation.

Twenty centuries later there is still a lot that we don’t understand about that day and about what God did, but we do understand that the empty tomb meant a lot more than just a missing body. It was a sign of resurrection! We don’t understand a lot about resurrection, but there is a lot we believe about it. Belief is more than understanding, for it claims as true things we cannot fully comprehend. We believe because we have heard from those who not only saw the empty tomb but also saw the risen Lord. The Easter story did not end at the tomb with the disciples heading home scratching their heads and Mary grieving at the graveside. Had that been the end of the story, their hopes would have been empty like the tomb – and so would ours! But the story continues and as it does, the emptiness is filled with alleluias!

It continues because Mary stayed at the tomb, stayed to grieve the death of her Lord. Perhaps the empty tomb was the last straw for her. After the whirlwind of Jesus’ arrest, trial, execution and burial, after the interminable silence of Holy Saturday, perhaps the stealing of his body was the final injustice that brought forth a flood of tears that could not be stemmed. One might wonder why Peter or John did not stay to comfort her instead of leaving her alone at the tomb. Perhaps they were dazed or mourning in their own way, or perhaps they went to ponder what to do next, or perhaps they were just crusty old fishermen who had no idea what to do for a weeping woman. God only knows, but Mary was left alone at the tomb. Through a veil of tears she looked into the tomb and saw two angels in white who posed an odd question to her, “*Why are you weeping*?” Then she met a man she supposed to be the gardener who posed the same question, “*Why are you weeping?*” and then asked, “*Whom do you seek?*” It was the same question Jesus asked of the first disciples who followed him, the same question Jesus posed to the soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane that Maundy Thursday. Perhaps it is the question Jesus poses to us through the pen of John: *Whom do you seek?*

Whom do you seek in this place this Easter morning? Who are you looking for amid the alleluias? Whom do you seek in the midst of whatever sorrow or pain or struggles have followed you through the door? Whom do you seek to make things right when so much is going wrong in the world? Whom do you seek to fill the empty places in your life? Easter begins with empty hopes, empty hearts and empty promises, but by nightfall the empty spaces are filled with hope and joy and alleluias! For, the one who asked, “*Whom do you seek?*” is the one who knew Mary by name, the one whose body she had grieved over, the one who was crucified as “King of the Jews” but is now the risen Lord! Jesus was not dead among the dead but alive among the living! Resurrection is about life triumphing over death, love conquering hate, hope rising above hopelessness, peace prevailing amid anguish. For, life, love, hope, peace and resurrection begin and end with God!

That same night the disciples who were hidden behind locked doors in fear for their lives suddenly stood face to face with the risen Jesus, saw his wounded hands and side, and heard him say, “Peace be with you!” Then they believed. Then they rejoiced. For, then they had seen for themselves the reality of resurrection in the risen Lord. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe! Easter begins with grief and doubt and the reality of death at the tomb in the dark of night, but before the sun has set that Easter day is filled with light and life, faith and fresh hope in the reality of Jesus’ resurrection!

Brothers and sisters, the cross is empty; a symbol of suffering has been emptied of its power and transformed into a symbol of faith. The tomb is empty and is now a sign of the risen Lord. And empty too is the power of sin and death, for God has filled the emptiness with good things – with hope, with life, with forgiveness, with resurrection, with alleluias – and with dandelions! Amen

1. Cited by J. Barrie Shepherd, *Whatever Happened to Delight*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006, p.92 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)