

A series of short reflections for Easter

~from Theos : the Christian Think Tank ~

Waiting in the Garden



Lucy Colman is Head of Development at Theos

Maundy Thursday is a profound and solemn day in the Christian calendar, when billions of Christians around the world remember the moments Jesus spent in the garden of Gethsemane, hours before his arrest and crucifixion. Here we see the man Jesus 'overwhelmed with sorrow' (the Greek word used here is *tarasso*, a word used for when

someone is anxious or very surprised by danger). Jesus weeps, prays, even sweats blood (Luke 22:44) as he wrestles with the terrifying reality of what is about to happen to him.

Today, in the midst of this pandemic, we find echoes of this scene. Anxiety and fear abound as we look into the unknown, and this biblical vignette reads even more powerfully. This is the God of the universe, fully aware of the chaos and torture that he's about to endure, desperately looking for a way out of the terror, praying that if there's any way he can avoid this experience, it would be taken away from him.

Anxiety in the face of death and suffering is a universal human experience. And the unusual and intriguing bit of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation is the idea that God knows what that is like. As relational beings, there is something helpful about knowing that we are not alone when we are feeling overwhelmed, anxious or frightened. For Christians, the vulnerability of Jesus in these moments before his death is therefore a deep comfort. In this time when sickness and death feel much nearer to all of us than ever before, any reminder that others have felt the same — even that Jesus, Son of God, has walked a similar road, is welcome consolation.

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Emergency Foliage



Lizzie Stanley is Head of Communications at Theos

“Green shoots” are starting to show.

This was the memorable pronouncement from NHS England’s medical director at a daily press conference a week or so ago. In the following Q&A, journalists pressed for clarity on what seemed a prematurely hopeful statement. Caveats and conditions were added. We are ‘not out of the woods’. Indeed, there’s a good chance we’re not even fully in the woods yet.

The metaphor reminded me that just 12 weeks ago, a very different crisis was unfolding on my newsfeed. ‘Black summer’ saw bushfires rip through Australia on an

unprecedented scale in the worst blazes seen for at least a decade. I used to live in Australia, and many of my friends and family there experienced thick black smoke descend and strange day long twilights. The crisis of this moment feels altogether different.

As newsreaders remind us, we are living in 'unprecedented times', and the Holy Week of 2020 may be unlike any other in our lifetimes. Pulled into remembrance of the Easter story at a time when themes of life, death and sacrifice are in full colour and at the forefront of our minds, what does this story mean in the midst of our pandemic?

The days and months ahead will be strange and deeply painful but the story of resurrection offers a hope that life will, somehow, always come from the ashes.

The 2019/20 wildfires leave much of Australia's forests scorched and silent but amongst these blackened branches what ecologists refer to as "emergency foliage" can already be seen, growing from hollowed trunks, providing a boost of photosynthesis until canopy leaves can grow.

It may well be too early for our own green shoots but new life emerges from the darkest places. Good Friday and Holy Saturday may endure longer in our hearts than many of us might imagine, but Easter Sunday will come.

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Too early to tell



Paul Bickley is Research Fellow at Theos

There is a story that in 1972 Chinese premier Zhou Enlai was asked if he thought the French Revolution was a success: “Too early to tell”, he was said to have replied.

Of course, it’s not true. Actually, Zhou Enlai was asked if the French student protests of 1968 were a success. Chas Freeman, a US diplomat who overheard the comment, said in his memoirs that the misunderstanding was “too delicious to correct”, and so it is. And whenever we need reminding that we must take the long view, this quote serves better than any other.

I think the followers of Jesus would have understood. It is impossible to understand the meaning of the moment from the inside. There is irony, even humour, in Jesus' encounter with two sad disciples on the road to Emmaus:

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

As if he didn't know.

Jesus seems to think they should have known what was really going on too, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" As I read it, he's saying that with a twinkle in his eye. How could they anticipate that the most tragic failure and defeat — their nadir — would in the future be celebrated by billions as the peak of history itself, and a paradigm-shifting prospect that a moment of weakness and vulnerability can be a victory, and that it could only be celebrated as such because it truly did plumb the depths of human misery.

I don't mean to be callous. Few of the individual tragedies unfolding right now will be subsequently understood as moments of special meaning or growth. There is hope though — an Easter hope — that we might meet someone on the journey who knows what's happening better than we do.

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The Great Sabbath



Hannah Rich is a researcher at Theos.

Holy Saturday, it can sometimes seem, is a day of nothingness. It has none of the doom-laden ritual of the days leading up to it nor the glory of the Sunday that comes — — after it, just silence, an empty cross and a closed grave. It's the pause at the top of a deep breath. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is known as the Great Sabbath, because it is the day when Jesus rested in the tomb.

The scenario we find ourselves in right now feels a bit like one long Holy Saturday. None of the routine we used to know and only a scant expectation of how good life might be again afterwards. There will be joy to come in the morning when this is over, mingled with the grief of what

has been lost. We don't know for sure though when the waiting will end, apart from the hope that lockdown won't last longer than three months. Similarly, although Jesus had repeatedly hinted that he would rise in three days, Saturday held none of that certainty for the disciples left behind.

And yet, Saturday wasn't wasted. The resurrection is what it is not only because of the fact of the crucifixion, but because of the time Jesus lay dead. Life emerging from the waiting. As the whole world presses pause and finds itself in an enforced and extended Great Sabbath, life is being saved through our waiting too.

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Good Friday. Easter Day. Every Day.



Madeleine Pennington is Head of Research at Theos

I am a Quaker, and am therefore part of a denomination that does not historically celebrate Easter at all — or, more accurately, encourages the celebration of Easter every day, because eternal truths are equally true every day. All seasons are holy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had it right: 'Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God'.

Most of the time, this is too difficult to maintain. There's something deeply human — deeply natural — about ritual and rhythm. We can't feel ecstatic every day, and most modern Quakers now observe Easter in some form along with everyone else. So if I'm being entirely honest, I've

often rolled my eyes at the Quaker model, and often skip Quaker Meeting altogether to find a local church in Holy Week.

But this year, I find myself unexpectedly appreciating its emotional sense anew. For the same principle extends to other festivals too: today is also Good Friday, Christmas, Lent and Pentecost in the Quaker calendar. So we consider the realities of Good Friday and Easter alongside one another. We can affirm hope even while recognising the deep pain of the current situation. And in the midst of a pandemic, when many people are experiencing the agony of grief all too closely on Easter Sunday, how true it is that life and death come together.

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Uncovering the hidden



Anna Wheeler is Operations and Events Manager at Theos

Even though a new disease, Covid-19 is no blip. Neither were crucifixions. Both are agonizing when they're happening — it is hard to breathe and both leave their marks; the latter uglier and bloodier on the body itself. In Christ's day, crucifixions were common. You might stop to watch but they weren't unusual.

In 2020, unless you are a health worker in the life consuming-midst of the Golgotha that is the virus, you have probably slowed down and watched, because this *is* unusual. And, we are made to think about living beings and issues we have a tendency to usually ignore.

The legendary songwriter Ralph McTell recently spoke of the new verse he has added to the classic 1969 hit song 'Streets of London'. Its familiar phrasing now scans:

'Remember what you're seeing barely hides a human being,

We're all in this together, brother, sister, you and I.'

Perhaps we see Christ hanging from a wooden cross in new light — an opportunity to recognise the very vivid desolation of the people we often ignore in our world. They were never hidden; we instead chose not to see — something grotesque that is bigger than all of us, has now exposed all of us. The virus is worldwide and universal, as are the issues it uncovers that we'd prefer to hide away from.

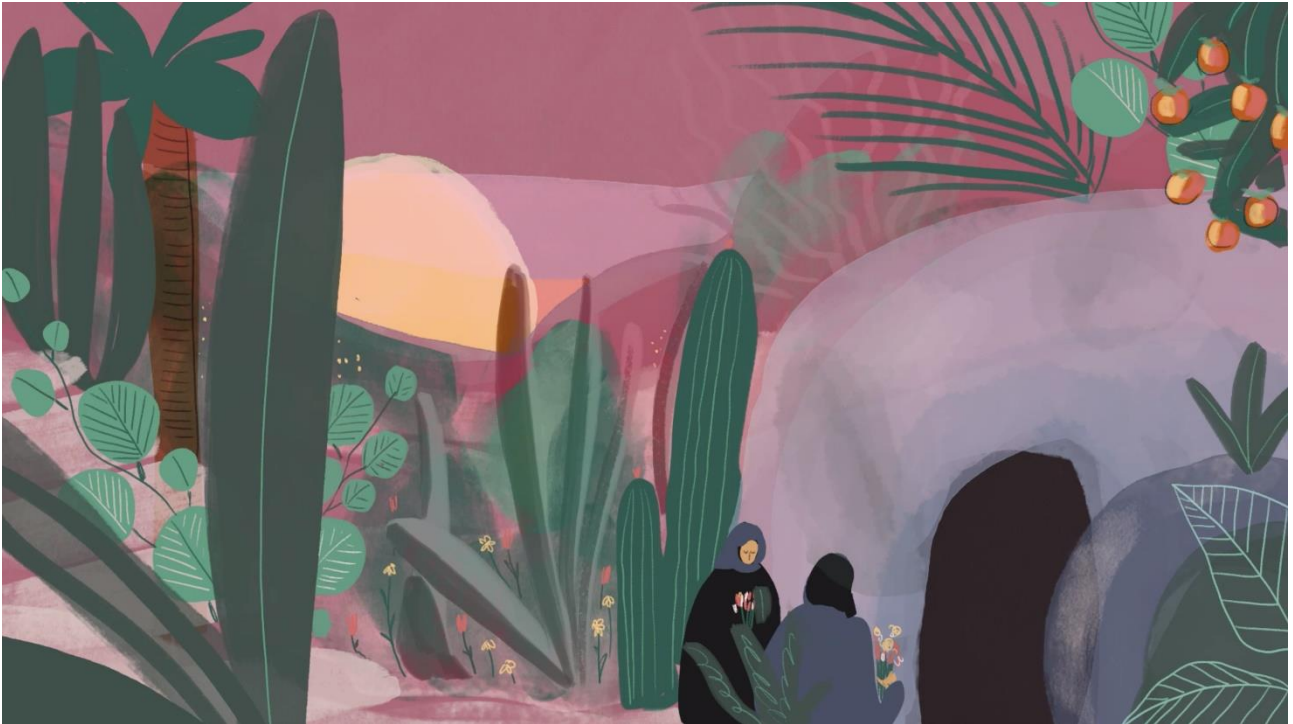
Pre Covid-19, we shirked and rushed on from what should be a normal human instinct — kindness.

And [McTell](#) reminds us we can all offer this.

We are all unhidden in the shadow of the cross and I'd like to give the last line to Barbara Kingsolver from her book *Animal Dreams* — *'the very least you can do...is to figure out what you hope for...The most that you can do is to live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance...'*

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The resurrection in a word



Nick Spencer is Senior Fellow at Theos

The best writers can pack a universe of emotion into a single word. So it is with John's account of the resurrection. The dark-light of dawn. The garbled, panicked account of an empty tomb, a stolen corpse. The energy and competition to discover the truth, and the failure to do so. And then just a solitary figure, remaining despite the failure, alone, crying, confused, asking the wrong people the wrong questions.

"Mary."

There is something in Jesus' answer that flicks the switch for her. It's not the message. There is no factual content here. No new information. No proposition about the world. He's not even answering her question.

Is the word inflected? Does it rise towards the end in the form of question? Or fall slightly, intoned, like a reassuring arm?

Or is it simply being known, being called by your name by someone you love, by someone you miss.

Whatever it is, it sparks back another single word, electric with feeling.

“Rabboni!”

It means ‘teacher’, John helpfully reminds us. But, of course, here, it doesn’t just mean teacher.

It means ‘It’s you’. Or perhaps “Is it really you?” And it quakes with uncertainty, incredulity, joy, the pain of a loss that may not, it seems, in the end, be lost.

Resurrections are not simple. They are not about who won when the whistle finally blew. They are not even Victory, as we use that word. They pack a lifetime of pain and love into a single, unfathomable moment that John, miraculously, captures in single words, so dense with emotion they draw in the reader like black holes draw in light.

This Easter weekend will be heavy with pain and love for too many people. There is no answer to this. Just the hope that one day we too will be called by name.