

# AN EVERLASTING LOVE

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***JEREMIAH 31:1-6; MATTHEW 28:1-10***

***LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH***

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Earlier this week I was hunting around for some music to listen to while preparing my sermon. It was Holy week, so I thought I should try to find something a bit more inspirational than my usual fare.

Perhaps some classical music. I don't typically listen to classical music and know next to nothing about it. But, as I said, it was Holy Week. Mumford and Sons or U2 didn't really seem up to the task. Also, I thought that listening to classical music would make me seem a bit more culturally sophisticated than I in fact am.

So, I went to CBC Music's website and surveyed my options. I was presented with two Easter choices for Holy Week. How delightful!

I read the description of each:

1. Classical Easter: Music for Reflection — "Enhance your spiritual journey, reflect on life, meditate with a peaceful mind. Let some of history's greatest classical works sooth you"
2. Easter Classical: Music for Celebration — Fill your heart with a joyous aural celebration. The musical expression of sun breaking through clouds, flowers arriving in spring, and fireworks lighting up the night

I started to experience a few cynical rumblings in my soul.

I halfheartedly clicked on the first one. I listened for about four minutes before, I must confess, I gave up, my spiritual journey not feeling particularly enhanced. I am,

apparently, not cut out for classical music.

But it wasn't just my lack of cultural sophistication that led to my lukewarm appreciation of the musical fare.

It was those descriptions. I couldn't get past those descriptions.

It seemed to me that these descriptions are an accurate barometer for how many people in our culture think about Easter.

Outside the church, this is obviously true. We live in a secular age that at times seems to retain only the wispiest strands of Christian residue.

But I think it's true inside the church, too. There are many Christians who approach Easter thinking roughly in these terms.

It's a pleasant enhancement to our spiritual journey. Or an opportunity to meditate. It gives us peace of mind. It's a nice metaphor for new life and flowers and sunshine and the warmth of the possibilities of springtime (or for an welcome dusting of snow, in our case this Easter ☺).

We often hear poetic language about how Jesus was raised "in the hearts of his disciples" but we really shouldn't take these things so literally.

The resurrection has become part of the furniture of religion, something we either reduce to an inoffensive springtime metaphor or consign to the dusty attic of our faith, tucked away, no longer able to astonish us as it ought to.

Now, I have nothing against springtime or peace of mind or meditation or flowers. I *like* flowers! I can even (barely) tolerate language about "enhancing our spiritual journey."

But these things are manifestly *not* what Easter is about. Or not what it *ought* to be about.

Easter is about the jaw dropping, reality altering, terrifying, bewildering, disrupting, disorienting, shattering shock of the resurrection of the crucified Son of God.

There is very little that is peaceful or soothing about the story of this week, whether the events that led up to Easter or the story of the resurrection itself!

This has been driven home for me again as I have gone through the events of this Holy Week.

At our Maundy Thursday service, we read through the old story of the washing of feet and the sharing of a meal, of betrayal and inevitable violence. We extinguished candles and watched as the light of the world was gradually snuffed out. We took bread and juice and reminded ourselves of the price of peace.

We located our “spiritual journeys” in a story of betrayal and confusion and dismay.

On Good Friday, I worshiped with our sisters and brothers at St. Augustine’s Anglican church.

At one point in the service, we were going through the gospel of John’s narration of Jesus’ “trial” and crucifixion. There was a narrator; there was Jesus; there was Pilate.

And then there was a role for the congregation to play, as well.

We were instructed to stand up and assume the part of the “people” in the story. And so we would periodically have to yell out things like, “Away with him!” and “We have no king but Caesar!” and “We have a law and according to our law he must die!” and, of course, “Crucify him!”

I have to say, it was painful to say these things out loud. I felt a heavy sadness as the words came from my lips.

It was supposed to be painful and it was supposed to be sad. We were reminded that it wasn’t just “those people back then” that nailed Jesus to the cross but us.

Then we heard the famous reading from Isaiah 53, which described the “servant of God” in terms that at times made me feel like weeping.

- We were appalled at him
- His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being

- He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him
- He was despised and rejected...  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces
- He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth
- he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is  
silent, so he did not open his mouth.
- he was cut off from the land of the living though he had done no violence, nor  
was any deceit in his mouth
- it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer

I left the service feeling anything but soothed or enhanced. I felt kind of numb.

As human beings, we threw our absolute worst at God, and God took it.

And responded with Easter.

And today, Easter Sunday, we have Matthew's account of the surprise of resurrection. There is nothing particularly tranquil or spiritually enhancing or flowery about this text either!

If we read things at face value, it's a violently disruptive and disorienting scene!

In Matthew's account of Jesus' death and resurrection (and his alone), there are earthquakes both when Jesus dies and when the stone is rolled away revealing an empty tomb.

I'm not sure how carefully you listened to the song we heard earlier during the flowering of the cross...

*Did the grass sing?*

*Did the earth rejoice to feel you again?*

*Over and over like a trumpet underground*

*Did the earth seem to pound he is risen?*

Matthew's gospel offers a resounding, "yes!" The earth *did* pound, he is risen.

The cross and empty tomb *did* shake the foundations of the world. It was like worlds were colliding.

Law... and grace.

Justice... and mercy.

Betrayal... and forgiveness.

Humanity... and God.

Evil... and good.

Violence... and peace.

Misplaced expectations... and the shocking fulfillment of God's promises.

Despair... and hope.

Sorrow... and joy.

Death... and life.

It was like tectonic plates were shifting and colliding when Jesus breathed his last and gave up his spirit on a Roman cross, and when, three days later, the two Marys encountered an empty tomb.

Fear, confusion, convulsion, dislocation, disorientation, shock, surprise, and, of course, unexpected and outrageous and uncontainable joy!

This is what Easter is about.

And if we zero down to the human level of Matthew's story, we don't see a lot of soothing tranquility there either.

The guards shook and became "like dead men" at the sight of the angel at the tomb.

Two times, the angel says: “do not be afraid”—the implication being that fear is probably the most natural response to the idea that the man whose body you had witnessed wracked with pain, nails ripped through his flesh, heaving and groaning on a Roman cross three days prior was now alive!

It wasn’t a “spiritual journey” but a very physical one that had the first witnesses terrified and confused!

And even after hearing the glorious news that Jesus was alive, it says that the two Marys left the empty tomb with “fear and great joy.”

Jesus himself says to them: Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.

Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid... But they couldn’t help it! Resurrection is a fearfully joyous and joyfully fearful thing.

So, from the confused expectations of Palm Sunday to the betrayal and injustice of Maundy Thursday to the anguish and horror of Good Friday to the stunned, fearful surprise of Easter Sunday, we must acknowledge that as Christians, the story we tell is a thoroughly jarring one, at every turn.

I have said before that the church of Jesus Christ was literally shocked into existence. And it was.

Easter was the utterly unexpected finale to a week of violence and horror.

Easter was God’s vindication of the one upon whom we could barely stand to look, the one who had no beauty that should attract us to him, the one that was ground under the wheels of religious zeal and political expediency, the one that we preferred to crucify rather than follow.

Everything about who Jesus was—what he taught, how he healed and forgave and judged and restored, every false path and temptation to violence that he refused, and of course the way he suffered unto death—all of this receives a loud and decisive and holy “amen” on Easter Sunday.

We are a long, *long* way from Easter being about metaphors for the organic life of spring and peace and tranquility and soothing sounds and enhanced spiritual journeys.

Easter Sunday should be the culmination of a story where we have been shocked into silence at how horribly earth received her King, and stunned into joyful worship at the lengths God has gone to reconcile us to himself.

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And so the question that I want to leave us with at the end of it all is a very simple one: Why?

What could account for all of the horror and beauty and surprise and shock and disruption and fear and joy and against-all-odds explosion of life that comes together in this holiest week of the year?

What could account for a God who would allow us to throw our appalling worst at him and yet respond with wounded hands and open arms and the gift of life?

Love, of course.

The events of Easter, the response of those first disciples, and the existence of the church itself is *only* because of love.

The title of my sermon this morning is taken from a text that was written about six centuries before the first Easter. It's a text that shows up in the Easter Sunday readings every three years, but one that I have never reflected much upon.

The prophet Jeremiah, speaking to exiles, promises a restoration that defies their present experience:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.

I spent some time this week meditating on these two marvellous sentences.

*I have loved you with an everlasting love...*

I have loved you as a people. Israel, the church. And I have loved you personally. With an everlasting love.

*I have drawn you with unfailing kindness...*

The Hebrew word for “drawn” is *mashak*, which means to draw, drag, seize, to lift out, drag along, lead along...

I love this image of God’s kindness seizing us, dragging us along to newness of life.

God’s love is, of course, why the tomb was empty.

And yet it can sound so trite to say this. “Love” is a word so easily reduced to less than what Easter demands of the word.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the one on the cross, the one from whom we hid our faces, the one whose punishment brought us peace, the one who did not open his mouth when he could have, the one who did not defend himself when he could have, the one who was crushed for our iniquity.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the one who was betrayed by his friends and went to his death alone.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the well-known words from 1 Corinthians 13:

[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.  
Love never ends.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the question of the angels in Luke’s account of the resurrection: Why do you look for the living among the dead?

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of an instrument of torture that has come to be a sign of love and adoration and beauty—something that we wear around our necks and decorate with flowers—because of who God is and what God has done.

The empty tomb proclaims that everlasting love and unfailing kindness are God’s disposition to you and to me.



The last words we heard as we left the church on Thursday evening were these:

Go into the world and love  
in the name of the One who loved you until the end.

In Christ, God has loved us to the end. But the end wasn't Thursday evening. It wasn't Friday on that god-awful cross, even though it sure as hell looked like it (and I use that expression very deliberately, given what Christ endured for our sakes).

This morning is the end that God loves us to. And the end turned out to be not an end at all but a beginning.

The end turned out to be new life.

In saying that he loved us to the *end*, to *his* end, to *our* end, even to the *world's* end, what Easter Sunday declares is that for those who would believe and follow, we are loved with an everlasting love into everlasting life.

This is good news. This is news that is so much better and deeper and more hopeful than soothing metaphors and spring time and flowers and enhanced spiritual journeys.

This is the very best news.

*You and I are loved with an everlasting love.*

I close with the words of John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople at the great Church of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia), taken from an Easter sermon spoken in the fourth century. Apparently, many Orthodox churches around the world read this sermon every Easter Sunday:

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!  
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!  
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!  
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!  
Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!

