

Column

I can't remember the year, but the service on Easter Day was glorious. The congregation was attentive. The Holy Spirit was clearly among us. A spirit of celebration was in the air.

A few days later, though, I found myself telling a friend: "I don't remember a single thing the preacher said in his sermon (I was the preacher!), but I do remember the anthem. It was George Frideric Handel's "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" from the third movement of the "Messiah". The text is entirely based on Scripture: Job 19:25-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:20.

Have you ever had a tune in your head that wouldn't go away? Whether driving or walking or shopping, it was there? When you lay down to sleep it continues to pulsate? Such was the case with this anthem sung during the offertory. Moreover, it was not just the tune that kept coming back, but the words. The medium and the message were blissfully joined. This unity is a characteristic of good church music. Its purpose is not merely to entertain and excite but to instruct and inspire . . . to lift the worshiper in mind and heart to the heavenly dimension and to bring about obedient faith.

If you think about it, knowing that the Redeemer lives is the essence of both the Easter and Christian story. Had Jesus of Nazareth been merely a teacher of timeless truths or a first century wandering guru, a man who went on to die like all men, some no doubt would have benefited from His wisdom. Nevertheless, the world would be the same old miserable place. People would still be filing through the door of death with no one coming out. Hope, if present at all, would be speculative.

But, with the resurrection of Jesus speculation was replaced with certainty. One had, at last, come out of the tomb, with many more to

follow. On Easter morning history turned a corner. Because of what happened that day the world is a different place.

New creation began, Jesus' resurrected body being the first specimen of it. The supreme weapon of tyrants, both ancient and modern, was snatched from their hands. The terror of the tomb was replaced with a certainty circumstance can not destroy.

More than that, what happened took place in real time and on the ground. In other words, Jesus' followers had more than a mystic moment of illumination, an ethereal encounter with a disembodied spirit. No, Jesus' body was one of transformed physicality. It could be touched and handled. More than that, on one occasion He ate fish with His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-13).

Such accounts give depth and reality to the songs we hear in church, not the least being "I know my redeemer lives." May we hear their words, hum their tunes, believe their message and live them out in our lives.

If you can't remember the spoken word -- what the preacher said - - take with you the sung word. The latter may well stay with you longer.

ALMIGHTY God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee that, as by thy special grace preventing [going before] us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. Amen. [Collect for Easter Day, Book of Common Prayer)

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