

Easter at Hope Church

From *Incorporation: A Novel* by Will Willimon¹

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The Senior Managing Pastor entered the narthex, smiling broadly to the milling choir. A gaggle of sopranos made way. He planted a kiss on the cheek of an aging alto and then gave a pat to a soprano.

“Hey, happy Easter to you!” snorted an older man in the narthex. Attired in an incongruous bright green vest, he spoke at a volume usually reserved for taverns. The organ gave way to the Hope Brass. Crucifer, clergy, and choir formed a line for the processional hymn. Preservice chaos bowed to liturgical order. Dear old Herbert Cohellen, retired pastor who had settled at Hope, had been invited to march in the procession and to make the announcements, his chief liturgical sinecure. The pimple-faced crucifer continued to lean upon his cross—stolid, bored, as if to say to all, “I’m not really here.” (His expression, not unlike a few in the choir.) The Hope Brass smothered all polite conversation in the narthex once the ushers opened the doors to the sanctuary.

“Tenors! Tenors!” shouted Gerald the choirmaster. “For God’s sake put yourselves in line. I need all of you if we’re going to pull this off! Charles, all you basses look at me on that stanza when the anthem picks up steam! Look at me! Scott! That’s you!”

“Has anyone seen my Harold?” asked a confused older woman in lavender. “I wonder if he has already taken a seat? Harold?”

“Let’s do this thing, good people,” said the pastor jovially to the choir.

“Joe, give the high sign to Grimballs,” ordered Gerald. (The choirmaster referred to the organist as “Grimballs” behind his back.) A bass turned around and flipped a small switch. Organist cued, Easter ensued. “Show time,” Gerald said, adding “break a leg”—in a pitch-perfect imitation of the late Orson Welles—the first wave of sopranos flowed into the aisle in the wake of the crucifer. To the last in line, he said, “Move it, honey,” patting her with his chubby, perspiring hand.

Through doors held open by ushers, the procession began moving to the strains of “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” Other ushers stood by with folding metal chairs, ready to sweep in behind the choir with additional seating. The congregation, which on many Sundays was half-hearted in its singing, now with pews packed, bordered on enthusiastic.

Christ the Lord has risen toda-ay, A-a-a-alleluia!
All rejoice and angels sa-ay, A-a-a-alleluia!

“Dum de dum, de dum dee dee,” Gerald stood at the door hammering out the tempo in the air for each successive wave of choristers. “Tenors, it’s all up to you,” his bass threateningly boomed as they moved passed. “Scott!”

With morning light streaming through the windows in a strong blue cast, the soaring arches, the well-ordered choir and noble organ, the brass interludes between the

second and fourth stanzas, and an eager, full house, Hope Church today approached the thrilling. The energy remained high as the service progressed—prayers well formed, elevated language fit for the occasion, a fresh new anthem, “Life! Life! Joy! Joy!” with tympani.

There was a collect, thanking God for life and the sun, the grass, and democracy. Then a selection from *Messiah*, keyed to the day. A Scripture reading. Another hymn—a new one—that annoyed the congregation with its unfamiliarity. A prayer of intercession by Herb in which God was informed of assorted health needs within the congregation and lectured on key current events. An acolyte nearly fumbled an offering plate, but otherwise the production was flawless.

Herb wrestled with the announcements: *Women Aflame Bible Study Fellowship will not meet this week, due to Easter. But the Moving Men...will meet this Wednesday to hear a presentation on “Ten Proofs of the..Resurrection.” This gathering will be held in the Walter Rauschenbusch lounge. Mick McConnell’s famous sausage biscuits will be served...The winners of the Hope Happy Hearts Easter Bonnet contest are Agnes Youlonts and Mary Summers...Or perhaps that’s Mary Connors. Our “Send a Kid to Camp” drive begins next Sunday....Goal: one hundred indigent kids...at camp, that is. And for those of you doing your spring cleaning, the clothes closet is in need of clean, warm winter coats in all children’s sizes....*

From here the service regained its lost momentum and cantered toward the apogee: the sermon by the Managing Pastor. From the moment he rose to speak, ascending the pulpit’s steps, delight played upon the faces of the congregation, pride at the preacher in their employ, light falling upon Simon Lupino’s salt-and-pepper gray hair, his resonant baritone voice like that of a radio announcer.

The preacher began with dismal citations from the recent news about the decline of the economy, an earthquake in Asia, a mass shooting at a mall in Texas, and the failure of a hundred-year-old tire company in Akron, fare that few expected to be served during an Easter sermon. These unpleasantries were a rhetorical ploy, however, poisoning the congregation for a good-hearted shove into the core of his message. Simon paused for effect—a few seconds of silence, then:

Yet my friends, these stories of death, despair, and mayhem are not the only ones to be told. There is yet another word to be said. It is the word that has convened us this glorious Easter day—Life!

Easter stories are charming and beloved—the women coming to a place of death, only to be surprised by life. The stupid disciples dumbfounded by glory. The announcing angel. I plead with you not to trouble yourselves with intellectual concerns about the mere facticity of these ancient texts.

Andante.

I want to reframe, to reassure you that the word that these Bible stories are trying in their own ancient ways to speak is a word more important than any of our misgivings about these primitive witnesses.

Basso profundo.

As a great biblical scholar, recently retired from an endowed chair at a university in Oregon, instructs us...

The preacher had forgotten the man’s name.

...these stories of the empty tomb are metaphor, a primitive way of expressing deeper, useful spiritual truth.

That message is as near to your souls as the word that our choir has sung so well—Life! In the vale of the shadow of death—Life! Immortal, unquenchable life!

His voice now rose to a high-pitched, earnest fortissimo.

Believe not those who tell you that you are a frail creature of constricted vistas and constrained future! Believe not the naysayers and negativists. Believe in Life!

Easter is not about one Near Eastern man's unjust death and grim entombment. Injustice happens, particularly in that benighted part of the world. Easter is more. It is grand, cosmic, eternal, and indeed it is universal, most of all, it is relevant. It is the eternal message we hear whispered in our greatest poetry, set forth in our grandest music, and articulated in our wisest films—Life!

Now a crescendo.

I do not stand before you to argue this but rather to assert —Life!

This glorious day with the sun shining down and the air fresh and clear is an eloquent natural testimonial to our supernatural theme—Life!

Even as ex-President Jimmy Carter, man of malaise, has written, we live in a “culture of death.” The Easter word is a defiant protest against morbidity. And so I boldly speak it to you in the face of all your deadly, paltry “facts”—Life!

Having risked a prophetic reference to Jimmy Carter at the end of the first movement, the preacher modulated his voice into a more restrained conversational tone as he told a story about a woman who had feared that the successful, multimillion-dollar personal care products business she had founded in the basement of her home would fail under pressure from her creditors. A kind, charitable banker (who was Jewish!) had found a way around restrictive government regulations and had saved her with a bridge loan.

Life! Life! he resumed, shouting at the top of his voice in grand, closing *molto* crescendo. *Liiife!*

Exeunt.

By prearrangement with the musicians, these last words of the sermon were immediately followed by a building roll of tympani, the jarring clash of cymbals, and the choir's near shouting of a verse from the old chestnut, “He Lives!”

He lives! He lives! You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!

A thrill ran through the congregation, their collective response to this skilled theatrical coordination between preacher and musicians. More brass, another clash of cymbals, and the organ took up the first verse of “Up From the Grave He Arose” as crucifer and clergy smoothly glided into position and the recessional began. Some in the choir, both women and men, had tears on their cheeks as they walked and sang. Some shouted more than they sang. Despite the full service, the benediction was pronounced by the Senior Managing Pastor, followed by the Sevenfold Amen, at a mere five minutes past noon, testimony to careful liturgical execution. Choirmaster and pastor, looking at their watches, beamed, and nodded congratulations to one another on the punctual conclusion.

“Thanks for another grand service,” more than one congregant was heard to say as the clergy glad-handed nearly everyone who exited, hugging some.

“What an Easter!” one portly, red-faced man in a plaid sport coat exclaimed.

“You got that right!” said an unidentified voice from the dispersing crowd. No one seemed unnerved by a man who was tortured to death and then brought back from the dead.

“Dr. Lupino, you really spoke to me today,” said one woman. “As you know, I lost Mother just a couple of months ago. Bless you for blessing me.”

The person who queried, “Did you mean to criticize or to praise Jimmy Carter? I never was much on Carter,” was smilingly shoved on ahead and out the door.

“Didn’t we have more lilies last Easter? Seemed to me like we had more lilies. Did we have more lilies?”

Note

1 Will Willimon, *Incorporation: A Novel* (Cascade, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012).