

No Longer Sitting on a Rack *Isaiah 25:6-9, Mark 16:1-8*

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Home improvement stores have a certain section that draws me like a magnet. Sometimes hard to find, usually buried within the garden center, off to the side, may be found an aluminum rack with a few shelves holding houseplants that have passed their prime. Perhaps the regional buyer overestimated and purchased too much inventory, or some plants just not that appealing, overlooked in favor of a new hybrid. For whatever reason, these plants end up on a rolling cart, marked half-off or less, one step away from the graveyard. Sometimes a quick assessment can be made noting which ones should have already been discarded, wilted and decaying. However, I have found, if arriving at the right time, hidden jewels waiting to be rescued. Some folks like to rescue animals. I rescue plants! I have found plants discounted due to a loss of vibrancy, bloomed out, or browning leaves, and I have delighted in being able to turn many around.

This happened last year at the beginning of Eastertide when I happened to find Easter lilies, white blossoms with heads bowed down and turning brown—for just \$1.00. I would take a chance. Easter began in mid-April, and we were already in pandemic mode. I started a vegetable garden and thought nothing of digging a hole and placing the pruned Easter lily bulb there for an anticipated appearance in 2021. To my surprise, in a few weeks a green shoot began to pierce the soil reaching for the light of day and rain from the sky and my water hose. In a short time three blossoms emerged and opened, revealing the beautiful flower long associated with new life. The Easter lily bloomed a second time, bringing great joy! And from the metal discount cart of outcast houseplants on its way to the morgue, to the depths of the earth, rejuvenated and showing itself to be down but not out.

We have surpassed a full year of COVID-19. Best practices, guidelines, and restrictions settled. Unprecedented sickness and death, along with stresses among many identified as essential workers has added to a year of dismay. Everyone from the Uber driver to those who stock shelves in grocery stores, to all health care workers and first responders, each has carried the brunt of this load. Pandemic induced unemployment has led to food insecurity and the threat of homelessness and eviction realized by far too many. Early on I identified the impact of this pandemic stirring around as COVID-19 fog—an invisible haze that has taken over and enveloped the entire globe. So much death and sickness and division, more than humanly possible to manage or control. Some still say, “Wake me when it’s over.” Vaccine distributions continue, and a dim light has been spotted up ahead. Nonetheless, there are more months to suffer through.

Although it is Spring, the theme of Advent, a restless waiting, remains saddled to us like a backpack. It only takes a slight stretch of the imagination to tune our ears to words of hope and expectation from the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. Isaiah 25:6-9

We wait for the shroud of pandemic to be destroyed. We wait for a day when food insecurity will be no more. We wait for God to extend a handkerchief to wipe away all the tears that accumulate silently in the night. Many have said the pandemic will change people, change lives, change perspectives, that we would suddenly realize what is profoundly important. I thought “yes” that could be possible, but only if it lasts a long time, long enough for folks to forget a former way of being. Predictably comfortable routines, transactional theology, and a cultural individualism all stand in the way of a God proven to be anything but static and ordinary. Instead of straining like a stretched rubber band fighting to return to its resting place of origin, why not let it break and look forward to God’s call toward something new? The tension of breaking through is uncomfortable but necessary to reach new heights on a holy mountain. Our routines have been disrupted, liturgical rites and sacramental liturgies have been abandoned or changed. Has it been enough? Has it been long enough for one to investigate the image reflected in a mirror and determine if one’s own soul has shifted and perched on higher ground? Only time will tell.

Until then, we hold on to our existential theological realities deeply rooted in soil not bound to a nave, choir stalls, or parish hall. We follow the story of Jesus, from the cradle to the grave. We join “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome” and carry spices to anoint Jesus’ dead body, following tradition as we are supposed to. How surprised were they, like we, when the destination is reached, and the one we sought is not there?

As they enter the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So, they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Mark 16:5-8

Their spices were not needed. No dead body to anoint. The women join us in looking for Jesus in places where we think he should be: in a tomb, in a church, a human-made image painted on a canvas, a stone carving. A Jesus portrayed by an actor, blond hair and blue eyes, emaciated body pinned to a cross. No. Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee, a place where he awaits our arrival. Walking in that direction, we

must first lay down the spices of death carried in our backpacks, spices that say all hope is gone and rigor mortis has settled in. Discarding the unnecessary makes room for the anticipated oils of gladness: hope, peace, joy, and love. The themes of Advent dissolve and change into a balm to heal all wounds of the world as we approach the risen Christ who has overcome the terror of life, a horrible death on a cross, and emerged from the tomb a new creation. John's gospel tells us Mary of Magdala did not recognize the risen Christ at first. Only after he calls her name "Mary!" are her eyes opened to see the unimaginable. Jesus is alive! Life has changed, not ended.

We are no longer like houseplants sitting on a rack wearing labels and waiting to be discarded. Jesus has come and set us apart for good. Be still and listen. You will hear him call your name. Then, do not be afraid to carry the oils of gladness and wade through the Great 50 Days of Easter. 'Tis the season to renew and refresh our faith.

We believe in God, Creator of all:
The two-legged, the four-legged,
the winged ones, and those that crawl upon
the earth and swim in the waters.
We believe in God, One Who Walked with Us:
Our Brother Jesus born in humility,
who lived and died for us and
who will come again to bring us to glory.
We believe in God, Spirit with Us:
Ever present and ever guiding, upholding us and
showing us the principles to live by.
We hear God's voice through the prophets.
Creator, One Who Walked with Us, Spirit with Us,
Holy One:
We are named in the waters of baptism as your own,
all of us related, all of us your children.
We watch for signs of your homecoming
and thank you for this sacred circle of life.¹

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.

Notes

Scripture references, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989.

¹ *Affirmation*, "Daily Prayer for All Seasons" (New York, Church Publishing, 2014), 4.