

An Old Preacher's Prayer

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The long poem that follows is one in a collection of prayers that were never intended to be read by anyone and perhaps not even to be reread by me. It is printed here at the request of my friend (since high school) and colleague (since seminary), Erskine Clarke, editor of this journal. The collection of which this prayer is part grew out of a private *lectio continua* devotional reading of the Gospel of John. The prayers were, quite literally, written in a closet...albeit a rather large closet.

A little over four years ago, because of our age in general and my wife's health in particular, we sold the family farm to which we had retired in the Piedmont of South Carolina and moved to Carolina Village, a retirement community in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Since then, my mantra about living in a retirement community has not wavered. That is, in my view, living with nothing but old people is absolutely, completely, and utterly insane; but, as long as you have to do it, Carolina Village is a dandy place. We're blessed to be able to live here.

Our apartment is a lovely and spacious two-bedroom model. Each of the bedrooms has a large walk-in closet. Since we have no need for two walk-in closets, I have commandeered one of them as a study/man cave/sanctuary in which I have surrounded myself with relics of the preaching life: paintings of churches I have served, framed resolutions, photos, remnants of my library, etc. Almost every day, usually in the very early morning, I retreat to my "sanctuary" for a time of daily devotion. In order to give form and substance to the exercise and remembering my love for and fascination with putting words together on paper, several years ago I began writing my private prayers; and, I hasten to reiterate, the prayers were never intended to be anything other than private. In fact, as the exercise has evolved, some of the prayers are so personal and intense that it would be inappropriate for them to be seen by anyone else. The prayer below was chosen specifically for the Easter issue of *Journal for Preachers*.

Death is, of course, an existential reality for everyone of every age. That said, in a retirement community, death's reality is, shall we say, *pressing*. We live with daily reminders of our mortality. Frequently there are notices on the bulletin board of an "Apartment Content Sale" signaling that someone has either died or moved to the next level of care. Almost every day there are one, two, three, or sometimes more single-rose memorials in the lounge announcing the recent deaths of one, two, three, or more of our neighbors. Walkers like birds on a wire are lined up just outside the dining room at every meal. Against that background, it can be, and often is, difficult to find continued purpose and meaning in living. For that reason, in almost every instance, my morning prayers include petitions for a vision of a call to ministry appropriate for a soon-to-be octogenarian.

All of the prayers in the collection are set in an *inclusio* inspired, if not intended, by the evangelist. That is, the prayers, like John's Gospel, are placed between John's remarkable setting of the gospel narrative in the context of the ordering of the cosmos (1:1-5) at one end of the *inclusion*, and at the other end of the *inclusio*, there are John's

accounts of Jesus' very human post resurrection appearances to disciples. The first is set in a room locked against the intrusion of a cruel world that crucifies (20:19-29). The second is in an appendix where Jesus appears to disciples on a fishing trip (21:1-14). My reasoning goes like this: if it's ok for disciples to see the risen Jesus while cowering in fear and to eat with him while on a fishing trip, it's ok for me to have a very human vision of the Jesus who was present for the creation of everything hanging out with me in my closet sanctuary and listening to my devotional prayers, or, as it were, looking over my shoulder and reading them on my computer screen.

There is no sense in which the following prayer should be seen as a commentary on John's resurrection narrative. It is simply the prayer that grew out of my reading and rereading John 20:1-18 five or six times on the day following a particularly horrifying news cycle. That said, reading John 20:1-18 before reading the prayer would likely be helpful.

John 20:1-18

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
who has no need of calendar, fence, border wall or clock
whose Son appears daily to my aging heart's eyes,
the truth and tale of resurrection
once again begs the Good Friday question:

What *is* it like to be dead?
How *does* one come to believe dead is not forever?
How does one not?
How did I?

On last evening's PBS NewsHour,
there was a picture of Valeria Ramiraz,
one month shy of two years,
tucked inside her father's shirt
with her arm around his neck
both lying face down
in the shallow waters of the Rio Grande.

They died while searching for a place...
a place for them.
Everyone needs a place.
Have you prepared a place for them?

In that sad and lonely picture
the only ones present
so far as I could see
were Valeria,
her dad,
and you make three
even if,

as for Lazarus,
you got there too late.

When did I come to
to be able to see such a vision as that?
I can't at all remember,
the vision was quite clear.

Let's see, there were:

Mary, the woman from seven-demons set free.
Peter, the rock on whose faith the church is built.
The disciple of all others most beloved.
And now:
How many demons have I?
At least seven, I'd say
mostly tamed by you if not altogether cast out.
Holding hands with Simon and a million million others,
my faith is a small pebble in the church's foundation;
I know myself to be beloved by you
if not most at least a lot
all of which puts me
in a perfect believing spot.
But mostly I think
it was a thousand angels,
not many dressed in white,
who loved me and
who told me the stories of you and your love;
pondered with me their meaning; and
lived with me their truth:
parents, grandparents,
teachers, preachers,
church and friends
who set me on the path to believe,
to hear you call my name,
and gave me eyes to see you standing there
at the river's edge
the first to grieve
and, as for Lazarus,
to use that sad truth, what,
to somehow glorify God?
Can you explain to me again
just how that works?

Risen conquering Son
seated at the right hand of God
go quickly now to throw open the windows

and make fresh the place
prepared for Valeria and her dad.
Send also a choir of ten thousand angels
to sing for them a glad welcome.
Then, then, and only then,
go with this tired old preacher man,
and others of my bias, belief, and ilk,
as we struggle to shame principalities and powers
and prepare a place of welcome
right here on this good earth
for Valeria's mom, her sisters and brothers
and for the thousands upon thousands
of her playmates, friends, and cousins.

But, wait, how do we do that?
There must be a good and perfect way.
Else the dance for Resurrection Day
is but a slow-tread dirge
at every border, fence, and wall.

Lord of the Dance,
dressed in Levis, plaid shirt and clogging shoes
and standing at my elbow in this closet cave,
forgive the preaching of my youth
when I thought it was my task and lot
to prove resurrection really happened...

and happens...

or not.

It was an impossible task and exhausting.
An empty tomb proves nothing.
Still, somehow seven-demon Mary and panting disciples
came to believe,
as I...
as we...

as your church and I
have come to believe;
which begs the greater question:

What is it like to live again and now
into the hope and truth
that Valeria and her dad
faces down in the shallows
of the Rio Grande,
like a lonely cross,

is not the story's end?

*Thy Kingdom come on earth
as it is in heaven
dancing Lord
and dancing friend.*

*Do si do your corner.
Do si do your partner.
And promenade home.*

Son of God,
present for the creation of stars, moons, elephants, butterflies, and baboons,
do you think you can teach this tired old preacher man and sometimes cynic
a few new dancing steps?

In my day, I wasn't half bad:

*Whop bop a-luma b-bop alop bam boom
Tutti frutti, aw Rudy.**

Maybe it's not too late to try again.

Can you teach me the latest moves to tested tunes and trusted
like this one I know so well
and, as a preaching poet pastor and erstwhile prophet,
in confident hope so often in full voice, sang
leading processions of your people
down church aisles short and long:

Jesus Christ is risen today!

Step, two, three four.
Step, two, three four.

Our triumphant holy day!

Step, two, three, four.
Step, two, three four.

Who did once upon the cross!

Step, two, three, four.
Step, two, three, four.

Suffer to redeem our loss,

Alleluia!

Step, two, three, four.

Perhaps, Jesus, friend, kind, strong and gentle,
someone should warn Donald J
and all his cousins in kind to Attila the Hun
that a new King is in town and on the way.

Now, put your arm around my shoulder
like the men in Greece dance together
and show me those steps again?
I haven't quite got the moves down pat...
at least ... not yet...

but I'm still trying.

(Did someone think to throw open the windows
of the place prepared for Valeria and her dad?
I'm sure they did.)

Step, two, three, four.
Step, two, three, four.

Ooops!

Did I step on your toe?

Let's try it again.

*Apologies to Little Richard, Elvis, and many others. The exact lyric is hard to find and pin down.