

Easter, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I was lying in bed, with my eyes barely open, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I looked out the window, I would see snow covering everything. I'm not sure if it was the quality of the light coming through the blinds or just the way that the world sounds when it's covered in snow. It doesn't matter. Right when I woke up, I knew there was snow outside, and I was not pleased about it.

This is about two weeks ago. I hauled myself out of the warm bed and put on my boots for the 10 millionth time this winter, got the leash, and headed out into the white morning. My dog seemed unconcerned that there was yet another late spring snowstorm, but I was already thinking about the shoveling I'd have to do at my house and wondering about the sidewalks at the church. The park across the street wasn't shoveled, and the snow was still coming down pretty hard. Even the grinch in me had to admit it was a pretty sight, but one I was very sick of seeing in 2023. Give me some spring.

This late winter snow was made a bit worse by the signs of spring that were clearly emerging all around us. My daffodils were up but not blooming. The tulips were little green spikes in the dark earth. And, more than anything, the birds were back and vocalizing mightily. In particular, in my little corner of the park, about a hundred red-winged blackbirds zoomed from branch to branch, screaming at each other and at me lustily. They are building nests, finding mates, and generally announcing to anyone who will listen that spring is here, pay attention. I look forward to their cacophony every year, and this year was no exception.

What surprised me the most as I walked through the park in six inches of snow, was that the late winter storm left the blackbirds undeterred. In the midst of these huge white flakes, those rascally blackbirds kept at their labors. They were striking to look at—black flurries of wings amid the white flurries of the snow. The blackbirds completely ignored the snow that I was slogging through, and they sang about the springtime anyway. It's almost like they KNEW that we were in the season of spring, all evidence to the contrary. I could feel a little bit of hope rise up in me because I thought to myself that the birds had some special information. They told me that the new life I was hoping for was here, even when I had a hard time believing it.

Christians aren't new to the idea that birds can announce the Resurrection. The famous example, of course, is the phoenix—that fiery bird that dies and rises again out of its own ashes. Less well known is the mother pelican, who Christians have long believed would sacrifice herself during times of drought so that her chicks could live on after her. Our ancestors here at St. Mark's knew about these birds—they placed them both in the Resurrection window at the back of the sanctuary, if you know where to look.

But you don't hear much about the blackbird. Maybe it's too common. Maybe it's too brash and loud. Maybe its spring screams aren't terribly dignified.

But for my money, on this Easter morning, the blackbird has the resurrection message that sings to me. What I like about it is the way that it definitely sang, even when there was snow on the ground. My eyes were telling me that it was winter, but my ears were filled with birdsong announcing Spring. I think this is a deeply Christian way of being. We sing a new Alleluia even when the world seems bleak and cold. Christians proclaim on Easter morning that death is not the final say in God's universe.

Maybe Christians are naive. Maybe we should keep our songs buried in the ground and let ourselves be weighed down by the routine evil in the world—the shootings, the war, the casual cruelty of neighbor against neighbor, the unbridled greed of this technocratic age. But I don't think that's what this Holy Week has been about. I think that Jesus preached life and resurrection, even when he knew that the cruel world would have its say. Just like those rascally blackbirds, Jesus knew that the response to a spring storm is to sing the winter away, to join your voice with your neighbors and to dispel the cold and the snow with hope and life and joy.

St. Mark's, I have seen you sing in the face of difficult times. And I fully expect that you will do so again. I know that the blackbird will never make it onto Easter candy packaging—we are too enamored with our bunnies and little chicks. But, for me, this year, it will be my symbol of Jesus' resurrection, the song of the empty tomb, the defiant sound railing against death on a snowy morning walk.

The whole point of Easter is that this power, this song, is yours now. You get to sing it any way that you see fit. When you fight for peace, when you comfort the neighbor, when you give succor to the poor. These are times when you sing your stubborn song, when you tell the story of an empty tomb. The power of the resurrection is not just a footnote to a dusty bible story. It is your birthright as Christians, and it is what we celebrate today. You and Mary Magdalene, and all the disciples who have followed Jesus through the centuries based on this one impossible truth—that today, death is not the last word. So, sing your resurrection song this morning, and let your Alleluias raise the dead and change the world. Amen.