

SCALE OF DESIRE

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On the Sunday morning two days after Jesus had been crucified by Roman soldiers, three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — took spices to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, as was usual in a proper burial. Along the way, they wondered who would roll away the heavy stone from the entrance to the tomb.

To their surprise, the tomb was already open, and a young man was sitting inside dressed in a white robe — the typical garb of an angel. Sensing their alarm at his presence, he reassured them and explained, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him.”

The verb translated “raised” in this passage is a widely used Greek verb that in the New Testament often means “rise” in a metaphorical sense: “nation shall rise against nation,” for example, or “no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.” It can also mean to get moving in a physical sense: “Get up, let us be going.” On Easter morning, the young man said, speaking of Jesus, “He has been raised; he is not here.”

The young man continued: “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.” Jesus had often told his disciples that he would never leave them, that his presence would always be with them and his spirit would always remain among them.

In response to these words, the gospel of Mark says, the three women “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

That’s the end of the story. In the earliest gospel manuscript, the story ends here. The women fled, for terror and amazement had seized them. They were afraid.

Easter doesn’t begin with the peal of trumpets and a profusion of daffodils. It begins with death and terror.

For the Jews of Jesus’ day, death and terror had become tragically commonplace. Jesus was yet another casualty in the Jewish resistance against an increasingly brutal Roman occupation. By the time Jesus was executed in the year 33 of the Common Era, the Romans had been ruling Palestine for more than 150 years.

Every time the Jews rose up in revolt, the Romans would punish the perpetrators, usually by crucifixion. During the Roman crackdown about the time Jesus was born, about 2,000 Jews were crucified. By the year 70, more than 10,000 crosses ringed the hills around Jerusalem, most of them in regular use. The death toll of Jews during the

Roman occupation exceeded one million — a proportion roughly equal to the Jewish death toll under Hitler.

The story of Easter begins when fear becomes overwhelming, terror becomes all-consuming, and darkness becomes pervasive. What we seek during these dark nights of the soul is a sense of comfort and a source of hope.

Handel begins his famous oratorio about the life and ministry of Jesus, titled *Messiah*, with the word comfort. “Comfort, comfort ye my people, says your God.” While *Messiah* is now traditionally performed during the Christmas holidays, Handel composed it for Holy Week — the week in the Christian calendar that begins with Palm Sunday and culminates on Easter. Handel knew that when people are weary of suffering, whether from their own sins or from the wickedness of others, what they most need is comfort.

Handel knew this most poignantly in his own life. A film titled *Handel’s Last Chance*, which was beloved in our house when Zoe was growing up, tells the story of the making of *Messiah* in a compelling way. While many of the details in the film are fictional, the basic story is true to Handel’s life.

As the film relates, Handel spent much of his career composing music to please his critics, rather than paying attention to the music within his own heart. The result satisfies neither Handel nor his critics. Handel ends up deeply in debt, hounded by creditors. At his wit’s end, Handel accepts an invitation to sail to Dublin and compose a new oratorio to be performed at Dublin’s finest cathedral, St. Patrick’s. It is, by Handel’s own admission, perhaps his last chance to redeem himself musically and financially.

What he finds when he arrives in Dublin is not promising. “Even at this point in my doomed career,” he laments, “I never thought the end of the line could be so desolate.” Part of his despair comes from hearing the cathedral choir, whose sound he likens to a bunch of mewling alley cats. As Handel composes at a furious pace to finish the oratorio on time — he wrote *Messiah* in twenty-four days — he also tries to find some singers who can stay on key. Prospects are not good, however, especially in the alto section.

Handel’s salvation comes from an unlikely source. Jamie O’Flaherty is the ten-year-old son of a washerwoman who works in the boys’ school at the cathedral. Jamie’s father had been a laborer at the local steel mill, but he had died when Jamie was young. Because of his meager circumstances, Jamie spends his days earning a few pennies here and there as a street musician and petty thief. One day, he and a friend steal a chicken to cook for dinner but are caught, and Jamie ends up in jail.

Jamie’s mother, desperate to help her son, pleads with the dean of the cathedral to intercede. Eventually the dean agrees to bail Jamie out and enroll him at the cathedral school. This may or may not be Jamie’s last chance, but it’s clear that his mother thinks it will be his only chance.

Once at school, however, Jamie has difficulty fitting in with the sons of Dublin’s finest families. Toby Binton is the head boy at the school; his father owns the steel mill.

Toby treats Jamie with utter contempt, trying various ploys to get Jamie thrown out or to force him to quit. Toby almost succeeds, but in the meantime Handel discovers that Jamie has a beautiful singing voice, and he wants Jamie to anchor his alto section.

Late one night, after Toby has instigated yet another bout of cruelty, Jamie tells Handel that he is leaving the school and will take the morning boat to London. “I won’t let you quit,” Handel replies. “Your singing voice is not the only voice you have. You have another voice deep inside your heart which tells you what’s right and what’s wrong. It speaks the truth. That’s the voice you must find. That’s the voice to which you must listen most closely. Have faith in that voice deep inside of you, and the future is yours. Whether you are poor or rich does not matter. Just listen to the voice.”

With the help of Handel’s encouragement and example, Jamie finds faith to believe in himself. He stays in school and begins to learn how to read music and write musical notation. For his part, Handel is saved by his own willingness to believe that the music in his heart is more vital than the demands of his detractors. Needless to say, the premiere of *Messiah* is a huge success. There is new life everywhere — in the magic of the music itself, as well as in the soul of the composer who wrote it and the heart of the child who sings it.

The contemporary poet Mark Doty emphasizes this point in his poem about a small-town performance of Handel’s *Messiah* in a little Methodist church near the sea. The members of the Choral Society gather late in the afternoon on the makeshift stage of the church. The poem describes the singers as a ragtag lot — the neighbor who fights operatically with her girlfriend, the friendly bearded clerk from the post office, altos from the A&P, a soprano from the T-shirt shop, and a tenor from the liquor store. No one in the audience is quite certain they’re going to like what they will hear.

Doty writes:

The tenors lack confidence,

and the soloists,
half of them anyway, don't
have the strength to found
the mighty kingdoms

these passages propose

Then the music begins, and doubts about the singers begin to vanish.

Who'd have thought
they'd be so good?...

This music

demonstrates what it claims:
glory shall be revealed. If art's
acceptable evidence,

mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?...

Doty then asks:

Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire?

The poem concludes by pointing out that inside the often mundane and sometimes tragic trappings of our everyday lives lies another, brighter life. There is glory waiting to be revealed – in all of our lives. And there's still time. Still time to change.

I don't know what darkness fills the tomb of your life today. I don't know how you have failed yourself and those you care about. I don't know where your weaknesses have sabotaged you or your fears have thwarted you. I don't know what deep pain, or searing loss, or haunting regret tempts you to give up on your dreams.

But I do know that your story doesn't end here. It's Easter, and there is still time – time to leave what's past and embrace what's possible. We are enlarged by the scale of what we have the courage to desire. The thing to ask yourself on this Easter Sunday morning is what you most deeply long for.

The natural world is casting off the darkness of winter and the husks of what's past. It's time for you to do the same. There's still time to change.