

The Cross Shines (Easter 2019)

The cross was still there.

It made you gasp to see it: the cross, shining through the gloom.

Outside, for hours,

the faithful had knelt and prayed;

they had held hands and sung and sung and sung.

Ave Maria, they sang.

Our lady, be with us, they sang.

And they wept.

Inside, where the fire raged,

hundreds were battling the flames,

and forming human chains to rescue what was most precious,

as scorched timbers fell around them.

And as the night wore on,

the fire mercifully burned down.

And the world began to see the pictures from inside the cathedral.

Inside the cathedral,

the scorched remains of the roof lay in piles,

ancient tree trunks that had fallen from on high.

The air was thick with soot and ash.

But there, visible above the destruction,

shining, impossibly shining,

was the cross, the cross of Notre Dame.

Of all the pictures from Paris on Monday night,

it was that one that took my breath away.

The image of the cross, unscathed,

shining as if it was almost lit from within –

towering over what remained of the once-beautiful sanctuary.

It was an image of hope.
It was an image of -- resurrection.
In the midst of destruction and great sorrow,
the light of hope, the promise of life.

On that first Easter,
early, early in the morning,
a group of women awoke and looked around them
at the wreckage of what had been something beautiful.
They prayed together, holding hands;
they wept for the ending of something glorious;
they grieved for what could never be again.

And then they went out,
they went to the tomb
where their friend, *and all hope*, was buried.
They went to do the needful: to do the rituals of grief.
It was still dark, the story says.
And yes, for them, it was still dark.

But when they got to the tomb,
they found that the light had never stopped shining.
Through the darkness,
through the gloom,
through the ending of what had been,
there was the promise of something new beginning.

“He is not here. He has risen!”
Resurrection.
Inconceivable, impossible, but true.

In Notre Dame cathedral,
the story of resurrection has been told every day for centuries.
Every day for centuries,
Christians have gathered in Notre Dame to hear the story,
the story of life overtaking death,
the story of love stronger than all evil,
the story of an ending that turned out to be a beginning.
Every day for centuries.

And now in the lives of those who have worshiped there,
the story becomes very real.
All those worshipers in Paris,
who gathered around Notre Dame on Monday night,
kneeling and praying and singing hymns for their church,
for them, *now* comes the story of resurrection.
Now comes the reminder that our faith is built
on bringing life out of desolation,
on bringing hope out of sorrow.
Resurrection will become very real
for the faithful of Notre Dame,
and for all us who pray alongside them.

The truth is, we worship a God who makes resurrection very real
all the time.

We don't celebrate Easter because of some amazing event that happened
long ago.

We celebrate Easter because of amazing things that happen now, and still,
and forever.

If it was only on that one particular morning long ago
that God reached in with power and chased away death,
if it was only once that resurrection happened,
well then, this story would be interesting,

but it wouldn't mean much anymore.
We'd be marking a moment in history,
but not a moment for us.

But it keeps happening.
Resurrection keeps happening again and again.
Here's the thing:
God actually has a habit of doing this.
Resurrection is what God does all day long.
Again and again and again,
God goes into the darkness and shines a holy light.
God goes into the ashes and rebuilds.
God raises up, again and again.
Resurrection is what God does all day long.

It's what God does in *our* lives.
Whenever laughter returns after unbearable sorrow,
whenever you live through disappointment into hope again,
that's resurrection power.
That's God doing what God does, day in and day out.

A little while back,
David and I got a phone call from India.
There was a woman on the other end of the phone,
a woman we've known for ages.
Priyanka is her name.
Years and years ago, Priyanka had been top of her class,
a brilliant mind, a shining star.
She had dreams, oh boy did she have dreams –
university, then graduate school, then a doctor.
And she had the intellect to do it, and the drive.

Then her parents married her off.
And that was the end of her studies, and the end of her dreams, and her ambition.
And we grieved with her for the end of possibility,
we grieved for her sorrow, her desolation.

That was 19 years ago.
And when Priyanka called us after all these years, it was to tell us this:
that she had just finished helping her daughter move into a dorm at university,
at the university where she, Priyanka's daughter, would be studying to be a doctor.

I called to share my joy with you, said Priyanka.
I called to tell you that my dream *didn't* die, she said.
It is alive in my daughter.
All that I *couldn't* be, she now *will* be.
My dream is alive in my daughter, she said.

I cried to hear her story,
I cried with joy at the power of God to raise up life and hope.
Because her story -- that's a resurrection story.
That's God at work, doing what God does.

Each one of us knows a story that we, or someone we love, has lived,
a resurrection story.
Each one of us can point to a time
when light overtook the shadows,
when hope returned.
Those are resurrections.
When the light of the cross can be seen again through the ashes.
Those are resurrections – and they happen every day.

In the darkness, in the quiet, in the valleys, in the shadows,
God is at work in laughter and love
to raise us up, to raise us up again and again.

The tomb is empty.
The cross shines in the cathedral.
God is at work.
Alleluia! Amen.