

What was I thinking?

April 4, 2021



Telling tales on Easter

Not long ago, in the midst of our chaotic time, it occurred to me that I had neglected to observe one of my annual traditions this year, something I've probably done every year since the early 1990s. No one sang *A Winter Carol*. The text is a poem by Samuel Longfellow that paints a picture of a cold, bleak winter, but it goes on to say that God is still present through our wintry days, literally and symbolically. It's become a joke, because it seems every time I've scheduled the anthem, in January or February, even in the those brutal Indiana winters, on the Sunday the choir sang it, we usually had an unseasonably warm and sunny day. When we're longing for a break from winter, all I have to do is put that anthem on the schedule and we'll have a beautiful warm day. Sorry about that. I'll remember to do it next winter, and we'll be doing it will full choirs then!

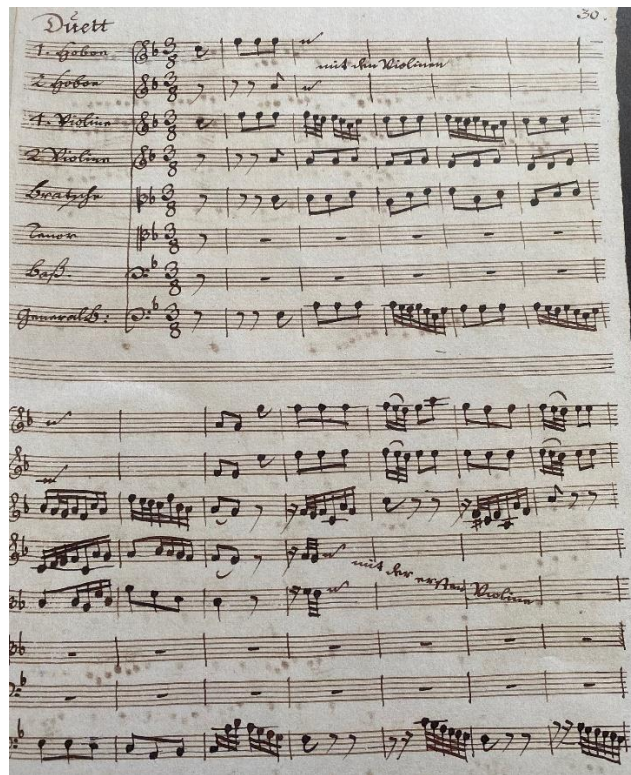
The text of that anthem, like one of our favorite Christmas hymns, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, is symbolic. We go through times in our lives when things are bleak, dreary, and hopeless, but God brings us light, hope, and warmth. If you've watched the movie version of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, or read the books, even though it's fiction, it's no secret there is quite a bit of Christian symbolism. When the children discover the land of Narnia, it's winter. That makes them think of Christmas, but they are soon told it's been winter in Narnia for a long time, but never Christmas. As the story unfolds, and good gradually overcomes evil, the snow starts to melt, things begin to turn green, and flowers begin to bloom. Spring brings new life.

If there's ever been a long, bleak, winter-like time in our lives, what we've been going through for over a year would be it. We're waiting for new life, for spring to come.

When John Tsao and I were rehearsing music for Easter, we were working on one of my favorite pieces, *Awake, O Wintry Earth*, set to music by Bach. The text is not what Bach wrote the music for, it's an English text put to Bach's music later. The text is a poetic telling of the Easter story. "Awake, O wintry earth, fling off your frozen sadness." Later, it has the line "Once more we sing the tale; through darkness, sunlight spread to warm the winter's pale; and tell that death is dead." The phrase "telling a tale" sometimes means someone is lying, but the definition of tale is a true or fictitious narrative story, especially one told imaginatively. Even if the story is not literally true, it can contain symbolic truths. Jesus taught using parables to make certain points. Whether the stories are literally true or not doesn't really matter, there is truth to be found in them.

Another favorite of mine is the Easter carol *This Joyful Eastertide*. We're doing a new arrangement of it this Easter by a contemporary English church musician, Vernon Hoyle. The carol includes the line "Death's flood hath lost its chill, since Jesus crossed the river." Another poetic description of the resurrection. If you're struggling with the idea of poetic story telling in church, go back and look at our Christmas carols. Many of them contain embellishment that's been added over time. The Bible says nothing about it snowing when Jesus was born.

Yet another "new" piece this year (at least I've never played it before) is one we heard at Montreat a couple of years ago. It's an arrangement for organ and two trumpets of a duet from Bach's Cantata 146, which was written for the third Sunday after Easter, called Jubilate. The text of the cantata starts with sorrow and suffering, not Christ's, but humanity's. The cantata begins with text from the book of Acts: "We must enter the Kingdom of God through much sorrow." Part of the text of the cantata is a paraphrase of Psalm 126: 5-20, including "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." There is a lengthy depiction of sorrow and suffering. Then comes the duet, which musically is a dance. The text is this: "How I will rejoice, how I will delight, when all mortal sorrows are over! Then I will shine like a star and glow like the sun, then the divine, blessed joy will be destroyed by no sorrow, moan, or shriek." The cantata continues with rejoicing over Christ calling us out of our valley of sorrows.



Duet from Cantata 146

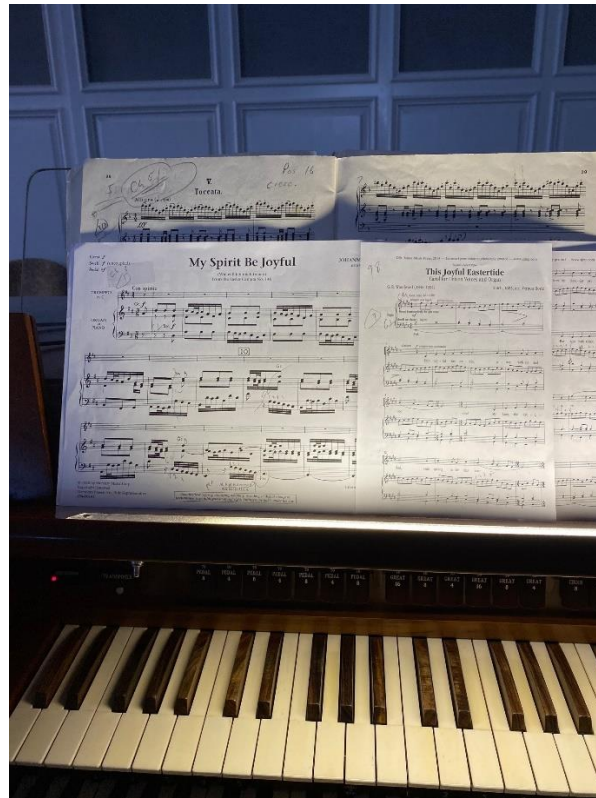
When I read about all of this sorrow, tears, and suffering, it reminds me of my mother near the end of her life. There was plenty of anxiety, suffering, and tears in the last years. Sadly, too many suffer near the end of their lives.

Why am I writing about suffering? It's Easter, we're supposed to be thinking about Easter eggs, chocolate candy, flowers, fancy Easter clothes, beautiful music, etc. Christ has risen, so why do we want to talk about sorrow? Because that's one reason Jesus came to this earth to be one of us, to share our joys and our sorrows, and to give us hope of something better beyond this life. I think of my mother when I read the words of suffering, but I also know that my mother knew her suffering would end when her earthly life ended. She would find joy. What does that mean? What does that look like, exactly? We don't know. It doesn't matter whether we tell the story in literal terms or through poetry. I just believe it's true.

Once more we sing the tale; through darkness, sunlight spread
to warm the winter's pale; and tell that death is dead.

The anniversary of my mother's death is almost here, and that's hard. She died on April 4 last year. That date happens to be Easter this year. That, I think, is appropriate.

Of course, if it's Easter, we'll have to have Widor's *Toccata* from his *Symphony V*. After all these years, I still don't know why, but somehow it became "the Easter postlude" in many churches. I have been told more than once (and not just in this church) if I want to keep my job, I'll play Widor's *Toccata* on Easter, so I will. We'll have old favorites on Easter, and also some new music.



One hymn will be particularly appropriate considering our current struggles over race. I once read in a devotional book a story about a little girl whose father taught her about Jesus and then later about Martin Luther King, Jr. and how they had both preached about peace. After hearing about King, the little girl asked, "Did they kill him too?"

The Easter hymn *Christ Is Alive!* was written by Brian Wren, who was born in England, but later in his career taught at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, so many people around here know who he is. In 1968, Easter was just ten days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Wren was trying to prepare for Easter services and realized most of our Easter hymns are about an event that happened a long time ago. He wanted a hymn text that spoke of the resurrection's relevance today.

Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine,
But saving, healing, here and now, and touching every place and time.

The message of the text seems as appropriate now as it was in 1968:

In every insult, rift, and war, where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more, and lives, where even hope has died.

The final stanza tells us of that hope:

Christ is alive, and comes to bring good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring with joy, with justice, love, and praise.

Christ Is Alive! 108
TRURO LM
Brian Wren, 1968; rev. Thomas Williams, 1789
Harm. Lowell Mason (1792-1872)

1. Christ is a - live! Let Chris - tians sing. The cross stands
2. Christ is a - live! No long - er bound To dis - tant
3. Not throned a - far, re - mote - ly high, Un - touched, un -
4. In ev - ery in - sult, rift, and war, Where col - or,
emp - ty to the sky. Let streets and homes with
years in Pal - es - tine, But sav - ing, heal - ing,
moved by hu - man pains, But dai - ly, in the
scorn, or wealth di - vide, Christ suf - fers still, yet
prais - es ring. Love, drowned in death, shall nev - er die.
here and now, And touch - ing ev - ery place and time.
midst of life, Our Sav - ior in the God - head reigns.
loves the more, And lives, where ev - en hope has died.

There is still suffering, and we still have work to do, but there is always hope.
Easter is not just about something that happened a long time ago. We have to
keep on rising.

Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

God be with you till we meet again.

John