

Anticipating Easter. A Rerun.

Colleagues,

I get together every three weeks or so with a group of pastors, some active, some retired, to explore the texts for forthcoming Sundays. We're due to meet next Monday to get a jump on Easter. I volunteered to tackle the Easter Festival texts. Earlier today I rummaged through my files and unearthed some work I did in 2004 for the Pentecost edition of the Crossings newsletter. Todd Murken was the editor at the time. He chopped and trimmed what I sent him, as editors must. I ground my teeth a bit over unused prose, as writers must. The file I dug up today was the uncut original, entitled "Seven Spins on Easter, with a Pentecost P.S." I dispatched it to my study group colleagues without bothering to refresh it for the world of 2018, and even though it was written for a year when Luke was the prevailing Gospel. This year it's Mark. Still Easter is Easter, the world is the world, and I took it for granted that the colleagues receiving it would read and translate accordingly. After that it crossed my mind to send it to you too. Perhaps it will spark a thought or two for some germinating Easter sermons. Or should you find yourself (God forbid!) in a church on Easter Sunday where the proclamation is underdone, perhaps there's something here your own grinding teeth can chew on as an alternative.

A couple of quick notes on what you'll read. First, some of it reprises ideas I sent your way last year, though here the thoughts are sharper and the prose more polished, for whatever that's worth. Second, the piece is organized as an acrostic on the word "Crossings." That was standard practice in Crossings newsletters until a few years ago, when Marcus Felde took over as editor and did some refreshing. Our current editor, Bruce Modahl, has been happy to follow where Marcus left off. I don't

blame him. It eases the labor of composition.

Finally, the editor I wrote for in 2004 now sleeps with the saints, awaiting his own Easter. Todd was killed some years ago in a cycling accident. He was younger than I am. As you read, please join me in thanking God for the promise that holds him in its grip this very day, and not only him but every other person dear or distant, known or unknown, for whom our Eastered Christ once died.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Seven Spins on Easter, with a Pentecost P.S.

From 2004

Preface

“Write,” said the editor, “on a topic of your choosing. Any topic.” Invitations like that are hard to pass up even when the editor hangs on, as he must, to his right to yea or nay the topic you pick. The choice in any case was easy. After all, it’s Easter. I mean Easter as in the Church’s Easter, not merely a day nor even a week but a week of weeks, 49 risings of the sun and settings of the same in which to sing our joy that Christ is risen indeed. And on the great Day 50 that follows? Ah, then the fire and wind of mettlesome Easter consequence, wondrous to behold, more wondrous by far to be swept away in. Who in a right mind—or more to the Easter point, who in a right-ed mind—could pass on a topic like this?

Who indeed? So intimates Easter’s Lord, at any rate, as he

spends those 40 days post-resurrection (Acts 1:3) righting the minds and hearts of a batch of followers who had given him up for dead. Glance again at the critical texts, Acts 1:6-8 and Matthew 28:16-20. Notice how blithely Jesus assigns his Easter as the all-consuming topic of those followers' lives from this point on. "Make disciples of *all* nations," he says. Again, "you will be my witnesses...*to the ends of the earth.*" The very scope of the project assumes a degree of preoccupation and commitment that would give a drill sergeant pause. Oddly, the persons picked for the job are still altogether like the raw recruit who stands there, fresh off the bus, looking furtively for the nearest hole in the fence against that day and hour when the urge to go AWOL overwhelms. "Some doubted," says Matthew of these first apostles (28:16). Luke spots them asking an old dumb question, one that gives them away as the clueless novices they continue to be, the risen Lord's labors with them notwithstanding (Acts 1:3, 6). Clearly the righting of heart and mind is a work in progress. Luke in particular will make this plain as he unfolds the tale of their acts and adventures. (See, for example, the aftermath of the episode with Cornelius, Acts 11). What Luke also reveals, of course, are the grounds of Jesus' strange confidence in entrusting his Easter to them anyway, though Matthew for his part has already tipped us off to this through the exhilarating promise of his gospel's last sentence. "Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age." From Luke comes our clarity about the form this promise takes: "word and sacrament" in the argot of some; more explicitly, the Gospel of Easter preached (Acts 2 and incessantly thereafter), the undergirding scriptures searched and studied (e.g. Lk. 24:27, 45ff.), the tide of baptism that floats the Easter era (Acts 2:41, 8:38, etc. etc.), the breaking of bread by which the Lord and life of Easter gets revealed and conveyed (Lk. 24:30f., Acts 2:46). Where such things happen there Jesus' own Spirit keeps freshening minds, encouraging hearts, and in general

equipping his emissaries to tackle their Easter assignment with the verve and acuity of the true believer truly informed. More succinctly, he gets us to get it—and to spend our lives accordingly. To write accordingly, I might add.

Here goes, then, with a series of short spins on the resurrection of Jesus, seven of them, one each for Easter's seven weeks with an eighth tacked on for that Easter P.S. called Pentecost. My aim is to lay the text of Scripture over the script of daily life as we presently know it, and, where these intersect—where they cross, if you prefer—to dig for some signals as to what Easter means and portends and why it's worth trusting and talking about. The Scripture texts are mostly the two Gospel-readings of Easter's first day, this year's April 11 as the world counts time. Preachers had the choice that morning of treating their hearers to either one or the other, Luke 24:1-12 or John 20:1-18. Here we dig around in both, commending all signals unearthed to the service of the Holy Spirit to whom alone falls the power and privilege of pulling off the Great Crossing, the one that moves a sin-befuddled wretch from death to life, from misery to joy, from shuffling doubt to charging faith, from ultimate futility to worth and purpose everlasting. For this Christ died; for this Christ is risen; for this Christ comes again. To God—none other—the glory. Alleluia! Amen!

Doxologies aside, here's something practical you may want to do with this: tuck it away against your own day and hour of the raw recruit. It's certain to come, the world Christ sends us into being as it is, the kind where “even as we live each day death our life embraces” (Luther: Lutheran Book of Worship, Hymn 350). In such a day and hour, perhaps you dig this out for a quick dose, God willing, of Easter spunk. Pastor's prescription: one spin per day for a week and a day, preferably taken at morning or evening devotions in the company of at least one baptized other who struggles with you to keep the faith that Christ

crucified is risen indeed. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Jesus: Mt. 18:20). That too is Easter promise, Easter consequence, and the grounds of our Lord's blithe-as-ever confidence in the Easter envoys he has chosen us to be.

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Day 1

C is for **Creation** as in brand spanking new and all over again, the bursting into something of nothing the world has seen before, not even in that time before time when Eve and Adam walked tall and naked in their garden. That something this wondrous, so (strictly speaking) fantastic is suddenly afoot in the world gets signaled by the words that both Luke and John use to open their Easter reports. "On the first day of the week..." they write. Who, attuned to Scripture, will not think quickly of Genesis 1, especially when John takes pains to add "...while it was still dark."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1), indeed the very God who, beholding the darkness that covered the face of the deep said "Let there be light" and—Yes!—"there was light" (Gen. 1:3).

Later the darkness swelled and billowed and thumped its chest. It does so still. It both entices and coerces our service. Then it swallows its servants. People hate it, they embrace it, they simultaneously love and loathe it, they fear it, they try desperately to make their peace with it. In America we commonly lie about it. The lie serves, we foolishly think, to protect us from the horror at its heart, an excruciating paradox. Consider: the very darkness that lays waste to God's creation and snuffs its light does so at best by God's sufferance, at worst by God's command. Hannah knew this (or, if you will, the composer of

Hannah's Song: "The Lord kills.... He brings down to Sheol...." 1 Sam. 2:6) Israel's prophets knew it too, as did the unchurched Lincoln (see the Second Inaugural Address). Lincoln's descendents, Christians at their forefront, rage shrilly against the very notion of it—and wind up missing the astonishing grace that meets the truth head on and actually does something about it.

Paradox against paradox: the Word made flesh really meant it when he screamed, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the Light of the world sinking into the darkness that kills us all. At God's sufferance and by God's command the darkness killed him.

Then God addressed the darkness: "Let there be light" And Yes!—all over again—there was Light. But a new light, of a kind that Eve and Adam did not see, a Light inextinguishable that the darkness cannot overcome. It was evening that Easter and it was morning, the new first day. It still is. See below.

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Day 2

R is for the **Rags**, dead-last least of all the many witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus and therefore—of course—the first in line for the privilege of making their testimony. John tells us about them, that little heap of linen wrappings that Peter and the beloved disciple found in the tomb (Jn. 20:6-9). They lay there mute, inert; and in their uselessness they preached the Easter Gospel so well that the beloved disciple heard it, and believed (v. 8).

Is it much too cheeky, by the way, to call them Lutheran linens? Before they turned to God's Gospel they preached God's law in just the same way that the law gets preached by their uppity

American kin, those best suits and dresses that cover the corpses so nicely laid out in the funeral homes we visit. "You need us," they say. "There's an ugliness here that you can't abide, a depth of shame that we have to conceal." Is there somewhere in cyberspace a pornographer who specializes in naked corpses? So vile a cretin will be a pariah even to other pornographers. The suits and dresses speak silently of a nudity so obscene that none dare expose it, least of all to our nearest and dearest, the very few we trusted so deeply that we let them see our prior nakedness. To perish in such obscenity is our final shame, the last consequence of our sin. The rags tell us that the Lamb of God who bore the sin fell victim to the shame. In the end no one could bear to behold him as he was.

And on the third day the shame was gone. What had to be hidden was suddenly no more. Death was dead, the dead one lived—and the rags lay in that heap, singing the joy of their newfound futility.

To trust the witness of the rags is, among other things, to make like Paul who consigns his moral finery to their company on the grounds that in Christ he needs it no longer (Phil. 3:4-9). In this age of sin and shame our good deeds serve necessarily as fig leaves. Our better deeds, the ones we do in keeping with God's law, are the skins, those sturdier coverings that God in his mercy replaced the fig leaves with (Gen. 3:21). Whether good or better, the coverings accuse us. They announce the presence, behind them, of something to be concealed. Whether good or better, in the end they fail us. Shuck them, says Paul, in favor of the best deeds, the ones Jesus did for you. Sufficient for our nakedness is the righteousness of Christ. It will, like lesser dressings, signal our present shame. Unlike all others, it also sings the glory of a day to come when we stand wholly unwrapped, altogether unblushing, before God the Nearest and Dearest. Already he sees us in Christ as at last we shall be,

created anew, and in the best and truest sense, shameless.

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Day 3

O is for the “**O No**” that old Chuza must have bellowed when wife Joanna came home on Easter Sunday morning. Joanna, says Luke, was a member of the burying team (Lk. 24:10), a devout follower who had taken up with Jesus early on, surely to the teeth-gnashing chagrin of her high-placed husband, Herod’s steward (Lk. 8:3). It cannot be that Chuza was a mild and pleasant mate. One doesn’t work for a boss like his without aping the man’s spirit.

This too is a safe guess, that Chuza, happiest of all the husbands in Jerusalem on Friday night, had just spent the Sabbath rubbing in his gloat. Who knows? Maybe he added a wallop or two. Brutes are like that. Deep pleasure there was in pointing out her error, in pounding her down to her former lower place. Intrinsic to the pleasure was the satisfaction of knowing himself to be right all along; still better, of hearing her say so, bitterly.

At the end of their eruptions bullies throw bones. It lets them feel noble. It serves also to remind the dogs of their dependency. Chuza’s bone, perhaps, was to tell his wife that yes, she could haul her sorry tail to that grave tomorrow morning and put an end to this Jesus nonsense once and for all.

She does so—and comes home a resurrected woman, again terrible in her dignity only more so, again gently yet fiercely defiant in her insistence that Christ, not Chuza, is Lord and Master. By the way, of Christ she says this gladly, without fear or shame. Such a one, she suddenly sees, is a lord to die for, he having died for her. Now she also knows what once she had only guessed,

that his is a mastery of genuine service by which the lowly, so masterfully served, are lifted up as mistress and lady of a worth that beggars the likes of wee silly Herod.

We speak here, of course, of a worth before God. Here too Easter offers something brand new, a brilliant light puncturing the darkness and impervious to it. The day before, her Jesus dead, Joanna was measuring her value by the quality of the spouse God had stuck her with. Today she measures it by the quality of the Christ God raised for her.

Will she grovel now to Chuza? I don't think so. Though I also suspect that she spends her days loving and serving her Lord by loving and serving the brute. He too, after all, is someone Jesus died for. It may be that "O no!" is all her husband ever says about Jesus' resurrection. If so, it won't be for want of her own patient trying.

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Day 4

SS is for the **Shadow** of one's-**Self**, a concept that Easter throws into hard reverse to the wonderment of anyone who dares to grasp it afresh. She, looking in the mirror, finds gray hair and crows' feet dimming beauty that was, and she grieves. A sportswriter in my town notes how the local major league shortstop, a master of the art, has made an early bunch of errors this season. He hopes sadly that the man will quit before the shadows stretch into a risible parody of the magician that used to be.

Easter asks both-writer and woman-to quit being silly and to start dreaming big. For real shadows let the woman look not in the mirror but at her high-school graduation picture. What she'll find there is the palest imitation of a beauty that

awaits. As for the writer, let him dig out the ten year old video and understand that precisely there is the stick-figure cartoon of the shortstopping marvel-to-be who will one day dazzle in the ball parks of New Jerusalem.

In passing, note: I did not say "the ball parks of heaven." That was deliberate. Heaven in the American mind is a pale, feeble thing, the construct of people who, dwelling in darkness and mired in decay, muse dimly on something they call "the afterlife." What is this? Who can want it? Easter shouts "Life!" It markets afterlife no more than it peddles afterbirth; and if this last comparison is too gross to contemplate, so be it. It's time we gave the Revelation its due: "I looked, and lo, [not just the same old heaven but] a new heaven and a new earth" Let those who can't imagine what that portends get help from C. S. Lewis. (See especially the final chapters of *The Last Battle*, seventh and last of *The Chronicles of Narnia*).

As for where such wild dreams arise, see the persistent motif in the Easter accounts of Jesus Unrecognized. John tells of Mary Magdalene, Luke of the Emmaus Two, both of those apostles-on-the-verge huddled in their Jerusalem hideaway. To all Jesus appears. Until he gives himself away, none are able to connect the figure before them with the man they knew. Why? Because one is the shadow of the other, but which? Apart from Jesus' own testimony that he isn't a ghost (Lk. 24:39) the answer becomes plain the moment we remember that the woman's new wrinkles and the shortstop's failing skills—this shadowing of a better self that was—is a sign of God's grim judgment: "Earth to earth, dust to dust." That judgment died with Jesus. A new one took its place in the first midnight hour of the first new day. Say this carefully, gingerly: what bursts from the tomb is a better, livelier Jesus, a vastly brighter Jesus. Good Friday's three o'clock shadows—our sin, his death—have fallen away. No wonder he defies recognition. But then so will we, we who dare to trust

that God's final judgment in him is God's last word on us.

In that day we will wonder how the people we are could possibly have sprung from the shadows we were; and in our wonder we will sing the glory of the Lamb.

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Day 5

I is for **Imperat**, final word of an old Easter chant. "Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat"—Christ conquers, rules, commands. Imperat is what an emperor did, or, in the plural, the imperatores, the Eisenhowers and MacArthurs of the old Roman legions; though at day's end the ultimate emperor was Caesar himself as, in our own moment, is George W. Bush

Or so they liked to think, and still do. In truth even the highest of human honchos find themselves hemmed and bound by greater commanders, faceless, nameless, impossible to control or override. St. Paul calls them "powers and principalities." In everyday speech we speak vaguely of The Market, The Special Interests, The Government, The Forces of Nature. Lately we hear of The Arab Street, newest permutation of old Caesar's worst nightmare, The Mob. Not knowing who's issuing orders or pulling strings, we often fall back on a helpless They. "They're raising gas prices." "They're polluting our culture." "They're limiting our rights." "They're corrupting the Church."

Nameless They stirs a nameless dread. Of this I'm convinced, that They don't know who I am and They don't give a fig, any more than Their slave Nero gave a fig for the grunts on his empire's far frontier. "They" is a cruel god, cold and heartless.

"They have taken my Lord away. I do not know where They have

laid him" (Jn. 20:13). On Easter morning Mary offered They the tribute of her tears and despair. Who will blame her? The gracious One who commanded the obedience of wind, waves, and demons (her own seven among them) is now dead. They killed him. So is God not They? Or is They not God? Regardless, who else but They shall she worship?

She turns and sees Jesus. He stands there newly unshadowed and therefore unsettling, almost terrifying (see Rev. 1:13ff). A minion of They, she thinks (Jn. 20:15b). Again, who will blame her?

"Mary," said Jesus. And—Yes!—there was light. Then lightness of mind and heart, with joy in the present and delight in the future. What else could there be? Christus imperat. They didn't. They don't. They never will.

This too is Easter's good news: the all time Commander in Chief knows my name—and treasures it.

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Day 6

N is for **New** Tricks done by Old Dogs, one of the persistent signals in present time that new creation is indeed afoot with the shadows reversing and Christ the Commander calling the shots. Bear in mind that the old proverb is on the money. You and I can't teach the old dog anything, not least because the old dog has long since sniffed out the folly of puppydom's eagerness to please the master. Old dogs have Ecclesiastes down pat. In this fading world all is vanity, and a chasing after wind.

Yet chasing is exactly what old dogs start doing in the days and years after Easter. At first they roil Jerusalem. Roiler-in-

chief is one Peter who, with his brash tale of Jesus of Nazareth crucified and raised (Acts 2), does a very new trick indeed. Had he not lately denied knowing the man? Had he not then skedaddled for old haunts and habits as a Galilean fisherman (Jn. 21)? A day will come when this same Peter does a last new trick, upside down and crucified for love of his Lord. He will do it in Rome, at once center of the earth and its remotest end (if remoteness be measured by self-asserted distance from the authority of Christ.) Thus far has Peter chased—not after the wind, he'll say, but before it, God's breath having blown him along every step of the way.

Peter's counterpart, of course, is Saul-turned-Paul, an equal marvel. The two stand on the leading edge of Easter's new age, prototypes of a phenomenon that will recur incessantly as the centuries unfold. Augustine the wastrel does a trick called Doctor of the Church. Francis the fop does Friend of Beggars. John Newton, slave seller, does Amazingly Graced Abolitionist. In our own day Chuck "Hatchet Man" Colson does Prison Evangelist. That's four names plucked randomly from a hat packed with millions (more women's names than men's, I'll bet). Behind those millions stand vast millions more, their names long lost to all but God. Old dogs all and they all did tricks of light and love that jaded old dogs simply can't do and won't. They're doing them still. I've seen it. So have you.

N.T. Wright is the latest to push the argument—he does it oh so well—that you can't account for the passions of Paul and Peter were Jesus not risen indeed to spark them. I would argue the same for the Christ-centered deeds of today's saints. This much is beyond argument: those deeds well up from a driving conviction that Jesus owns the future, a prospect so enticing that it necessarily turns weary old dogs into eager zealous pups. Watch quietly, delightedly, as they do their saintly tricks, somehow accomplished amid the still deep shadows of

their lingering sin. What you're seeing is Paul's fantastic assertion continually underscored in the tangible flesh and blood of real persons, real stuff: "If anyone is in Christ—Yes!—new creation, and again, not merely new but brand spanking new, all over again." (2 Cor. 5:17). The Word took flesh and died for the right to command this into being. How is it being, I ask, if that same Word, once crucified, is not alive and ruling the world to make it so?

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Day 7

G is for **Go** as in Let Go, I Go, You Go. That (more or less) is what Jesus told Mary on Easter morning when—Yes!—there was light and she saw who he was (Jn. 20:17).

"Don't cling to me," says Jesus. Yet again, who of us will blame her for wanting to? Daughter of the same dying world we inhabit, Mary takes it for granted—as do I, as do you—that all good things inevitably must end, whether suddenly or in that long, sad slide from better to worse, from livelier to deader. In such a world you grab for the gusto as it shoots by, because gusto gone is gone for good—and that's very bad. (How oddly we creatures of the dark use words.).

Back to Mary, in whose mind is the memory, still fresh, of life at its best. This was life with Jesus in those heady pre-crucifixion days when he drove out the devils of fear and loneliness and bitter self-loathing; when, to replace them, he blessed her with first-ever inklings of what hope and love and joy are really like. Torn from her, he was. And if, by one of those freak glitches in the inexorable grinding of fate she should find her lost joy momentarily restored—well, thinks she, I'm going to hang on to it for all I'm worth.

“Let go,” Jesus says. “By far the best is yet to come; and even the best of the joys you’ve known with me is a pale shadow of the Joy to come. I go to the Father to make it so.” Suddenly, another signal of things turned inside out and on their heads by the resurrection of Christ. That the Good One is gone for Good is—in stunning Easter fact—very good.

How much more does this same Lord Jesus invite and command us to let go of the lesser joys—in some cases the tawdry and selfish pleasures—we cling to; instead to give our hearts to him, to the future he promises, to the hope he excites: and in that giving to spend our lives freely on the spreading of that hope.

Go, says he. Tell the siblings where I’ve gone: to my God and your God, my Father and your Father. That God in Christ be Father: this is hope not just to go for. It’s hope to die for.

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Day 8

Mary went. Soon the apostolic siblings went too. Then others, and others after them, and others more, all through the centuries. They’re going still, letting go of comfort, security, ease of lifestyle, decent pay, the chance for social standing and all the other rag-like accoutrements that hide the shame of pointless existence in a dying world. Then they head for that world’s shadowy corners both to serve their Lord and to serve him up to the people they find there. As they go they bounce and scurry on their brand-new puppy legs.

What makes them go is the great Easter P.S., where **S** is for the **Spirit** that God-in-Christ sent into the world one long ago Pentecost with the express purpose of bringing his Easter project to present flower and final being.

Even as I write this I'm watching Mary go. I saw her yesterday. She's going, I gather, with a cancer in her liver. Some say the thing is taking her. I beg to differ. Sure, that breath of first being, squeezed by the cancer, has gotten very shallow. By contrast her new breath is stronger than ever. I've sensed it there for the ten years I've been her pastor. Not so long ago it blew me away. I was dumbstruck by the calm, confident way in which she told me about the certain death inside her. Then I grasped that the spirit of her report was the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of our Lord and of his resurrection bearing witness through her that Christ Jesus is alive and well and calling the cosmic shots "for us and for our salvation." Since then she has reached eagerly, again and again, to touch her Lord in the blessed sacrament. Each time his Spirit has gently wafted her on her way to stiffen yet another backbone with the joy of Christian hope, true and profound.

I wrote at the beginning of mettlesome Easter consequence. Mary too is a splendid example right now of what this looks like.

Yesterday I read her that wondrous bit from Paul about "this slight momentary affliction preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" (2 Cor. 4:17). Her eyes danced, and it dawned on me that I was hearing Luther's hymn sung inside out: "Even as we die each day, Life our death embraces." The shadows are reversing—so the Spirit is driving her to testify, she in unison with all the saints of every time and every place.

Christ is risen indeed! Thank you, Mary, for reminding me. All praise to you, most Holy Spirit, for sending her my way. As you've done with her, do also with me. For Jesus' sake. For the sake of others Jesus died for. Amen.