

Oh Lord, The Singing

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(Week of the Resurrection of Our Lord)]

P: He is risen!

All: He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

During my sabbatical last quarter I very much missed this community. I had thought that what I would miss most was the classroom. And no doubt that was sorely missed, as were the conversations in the office and the Refectory, at Jimmy's, down-in Free-B's. But frankly, good friends, that is not where you are at your best. Where you are at your very best and where I missed you most is in this room, at worship. How at home you can be in this cramped and stuffy catacomb under the bleachers, surrounded by these crude homemade benches and ambo and altar, belting out the liturgy. How you do do the liturgy. That is what I missed most.

Oh Lord, the singing. You sing as if you did not feel the least bit confined by this tomb-like enclosure, as if this sepulchral closeness were itself a challenge to raise the roof. You sing as if for you the very bonds of death had been broken, even though I know some of you have been going through hell or feeling "just dead" or burned out. Yet for all that hell and dying here you are, you young know-it-alls, seeming to know better — better than your more cautious elders. Here you are singing your hearts out as if you were planning to live forever.

Is it the anti-authoritarianism of youth? Yet it can't be that, either. For your exuberance seems to have rubbed off on your elders as well, including me. As I mentioned, I know for a fact that many of you, young and old, have been tangling with the Terminator, some more directly than others. Still, in the face of that struggle you have the audacity to stand up and sing -- as you did a moment ago in that old pot-boiler by Martin Luther — "that

death is swallowed up by death," "the reign of death is ended." One would swear you had already been Eastered. All I can say is, that kind of cockiness is bound to get you in trouble along the way. Big-trouble.

Well, no, that's not quite all I can say. What I should add is that nowadays there is a serious shortage of latter-day witnesses to the resurrection. So it's especially cheering having you around. What I mean is: He is risen, isn't he?

All: He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

George Bernard Shaw said that youth is too important to leave to the young. (He must have said that in his later years.) Similarly we might say that resurrection is too important to leave to the living. For who could use resurrection more, who could better appreciate it than the dead and the dying? "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," says Paul, "we are of all humankind most to be pitied." By the same token it is among the dead and the dying that we find some of the most eloquent, feisty, latter-day witnesses to the resurrection. They may not be able to stand up anymore except with the help of their walkers. There may not even be enough breath left for a decent doxology. But what they do have left to say, even in a whisper, is enough to shake death and hell to the foundations. Those of you who someday will be pastors and chaplains can look forward to logging a good many hours of your ministry in nursing homes and hospitals, and a good many of your most rewarding hours, not only witnessing to the resurrection but having it witnessed to you.

Pastor Roger Dahlen tells of a nursing home visit he made to an elderly parishioner. Let us call her Hattie. Not only was Hattie dying, she was taking an agonizingly long time doing it, all in excruciating pain. Pastor Dahlen asked her about the pain. "Yes," Hattie sighed, "it does hurt. But then," she added, "I think about Jesus. He hurt badly. And look at him now: he is up and around again and doing quite well." That is the most sophisticated, concise witness to the resurrection I can imagine.

Did you hear Hattie? "He is risen."

All: He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

It was back in graduate school days here in Chicago. Thelda and I, like many of you now, were young marrieds living on a shoestring. But one Sunday afternoon we splurged and went to Orchestra Hall to hear the Robert Shaw Chorale do Bach's B Minor Mass. We must not have been afraid of heights in those days, or of nosebleeds, considering we sat way up in the last row of the cheap seats, roughly on the same level with the Tribune Tower. The Chorale down below was barely visible, but wondrously audible.

Came that part of the Mass, in the Creed, where the choir exults "and I look for the resurrection of the dead" (*et expecto resurrectionem.*) At that point old Johann virtually lifts into orbit. So did the singers. By the time they got to *et vitam venturi saeculi* ("and the life of the world to come"), kettle-drums and tenor trumpets and all, the listeners had simply had all they could take. Even though, until then, they had minded their manners and had treated the Mass as what it is, not a concert but a divine service, they abruptly rose to their feet as one body, applauding and shouting and whistling. It was awe-full.

The applause came in two waves, the way you laugh at a Joke: first, because it's over, and then because you get the point. But that wasn't all. Before long the members of the Chorale themselves joined in the tumult. My first thought was, they were applauding Conductor Shaw. He must have known better, because he too began to applaud. For whom? For Bach? Are you kidding? For all we knew, Bach was cheering too—probably just slightly above where Thelda and I were standing.

About the applause: in the end it was really all we had left to give. Eventually even the voices, the choir's and the crowd's, gave out due to a bad case of choked-up throats. Husbands and wives didn't dare look at each other. But do you think that kept that rabble of sinners from raising the roof? With their bare hands yet. The moral is, when you hear

the Raiser of the dead coming singing, resort to whatever noise-making organs you've got left. Raise a roof!

Ah, but will we, even we in the cheap seats, ever live to see him? *Expecto!*