

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

A meditation by Galen Guengerich
All Souls NYC – at Home
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Peggy Noonan begins her most recent column in the Wall Street Journal by wondering what we have learned from the coronavirus epidemic. She says, “As a nation we’ve learned that as a corporate entity of 330 million diverse souls we could quickly absorb, adapt and adjust to widespread disruption. I’m not sure we knew that. Crazy cowboy nation cooperated with the authorities. America has comported itself as exactly what you thought it was or hoped it was but weren’t sure: compassionate, empathetic, committed, hard-working, creative and, as a friend said, funny as hell. Under great and immediate stress there’s been broad peacefulness and civility. So far we done ourselves proud.”

Noonan adds, quoting a line from the French novelist André Malraux, “You did not come back from hell with empty hands.”

These are indeed hellish days, in which we find ourselves surrounded with suffering and death of almost unimaginable proportions. But the fires of coronavirus hell will not have the final word. We will not come back from hell with empty hands.

After all, Easter is about what emerges from the fires of hell. The story of Easter testifies that sometimes what emerges isn’t just durable, but beautiful.

The most famous poem ever written about Easter stems from a brutally devastating cascade of events in Ireland. During Easter week of 1916, about a thousand Irish Republicans, who wanted to secede from Great Britain and establish an independent Ireland, mounted an insurrection. At the time, most Irish people would have been content to remain part of Great Britain.

But the British put down the Easter insurrection with such ruthlessness, executing many of its leaders within a week, that public sentiment began to turn against the British. Six years later, in 1922, the territory that later became the Republic of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom.

In his poem titled “Easter, 1916,” William Butler Yeats symbolically links the insurrection of 1916, which came to be known in Ireland as the Easter Rising, to the Christian commemoration of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Just as the horror of the crucifixion made way for the hope of resurrection, Yeats suggests, so the execution of the Republican insurgents made way for the hope of Irish independence. Yeats marks this transformation by a refrain that recurs throughout his poem: “All changed, changed utterly,” he says. “A terrible beauty is born.”

The story of Easter doesn’t begin on Sunday morning, when three women went to Jesus’ tomb and discovered that his story hadn’t ended after all. It begins in darkness

and despair on Friday afternoon, when Jesus is dying and all hope seems lost. It begins not with what's possible, but with what's terrible.

In this sense, we are badly in need of Easter. Lots of terrible things are going on these days, both in our nation and around the world. We see the pictures every day — pictures of hospital beds stuffed into makeshift tents, healthcare workers wearing makeshift protective gear, frightened patients waiting in line to get tested, hungry neighbors waiting in line to get a meal, refrigerated trucks lined up to hold the dead, and trenches on Hart Island stacked full of wooden coffins.

But we've seen beautiful things as well. I know a cardiologist who volunteered to run a COVID-19 ward at Mount Sinai. His wife and daughter have left town to protect themselves. I know an IT technician at Bellevue who is working around the clock for days on end, sequestered from his wife in New Jersey. I know a pulmonologist at NYU Langone who is going the extra mile, taking extra risks, in order to keep her patients' families and their loved ones informed. I know volunteers who are crisscrossing the city to hand out meals to hungry people in need of nourishment.

These are a few of the beautiful things that have been created by members and friends of this congregation. This same spirit of compassion and commitment is replicating itself all over our city and our nation.

Make no mistake: Easter isn't an invitation to welcome what's terrible just so good things can happen as a result. The point of Easter is that what's terrible doesn't have the final word. As long as we remain alive, something always happens next. If we hope for it and work for it, the something that happens next can be beautiful.

In her book *Hope in the Dark*, the writer Rebecca Solnit surveys the disheartening developments of the past century: climate change, growing income inequality, the dehumanizing influence of automation, and so on. "Hope doesn't mean denying these realities," she says. "It means facing them and addressing them."

She goes on to say, "It's important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction." The hope I'm interested in, she says, doesn't insist that everything is getting better, but hope does counter the insistence that everything is getting worse. Hope takes account of the complexities and uncertainties of the present, but leaves an opening for a better future to emerge.

Solnit says, "When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others." Solnit invokes James Baldwin's famous saying that "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." She adds, "It's important to emphasize that hope is only a beginning; it's not a substitute for action, only a basis for it."

According to the Gospel accounts of Easter morning, the young man at the tomb told the three women who had arrived to anoint Jesus' body that he was no longer there, because he had been raised up — as though his body had been taken elsewhere. Then

the young man said to the women, “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.

Go, the young man said. Tell Peter, and tell the disciples. Let everyone know that the work will continue. In that moment, everything changed — changed utterly. A terrible beauty was born. What seemed like the end wasn’t the end after all. Something terrible had given rise to the hope that something else might be possible.

When terrible things come our way in life, we need to face them and call them what they are: terrible. We need to grieve whatever we have lost, cry out in protest against whoever or whatever has harmed us, perhaps even repent whatever we have done wrong.

Then we need to look for the opening, the possibility of a better future, the chance to act. Along the way, we need to keep a picture in our minds of what hope might look like — a picture of what beautiful might look like.

Here’s a place to start. There’s a quote making the rounds of social media attributed to Bill Gates, but it may have originated in a video produced by the Upper Springfield COVID-19 community response team in West Belfast, Northern Ireland. Whatever the original source, it’s a quote worth re-quoting. It reads:

When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don't say to yourself, “My God, it looks like the end of the world.” What you're seeing is love in action.

What you're seeing, in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, for our immuno-compromised brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet. People will lose jobs over this. Some will lose their businesses. And some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment, when you're out on your walk, on your way to the store, or just watching the news, to look into the emptiness and marvel at all that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. It isn't the end of the world. It's the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness. It is the reason the world will go on.

In the wake of what’s terrible, look for what’s beautiful. That’s the message of Easter. Will the coronavirus change us as a nation — change us utterly? Will we remain more compassionate toward each other, more connected to each other, more concerned about each other?

Easter invites us to imagine that beautiful possibility — and then to work toward it. We need not come back from hell with empty hands.