

At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33)

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

Christ is risen! *Hristos a înviat!*

With great joy we celebrate this holy and most glorious feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ by greeting one another with "Christ is risen," as if reminding one another of the central truth of our faith: that Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, who was murdered and who lay in a tomb for three days, was raised from the dead and was seen alive by His apostles and disciples. With this greeting, we encourage one another in the hope in which we are saved (Romans 8:24), the hope that we, too, are to be raised from the dead because death, the ancient enemy of the human race, has been conquered once and for all.

Like so many elements of our rich faith and opulent Byzantine liturgical tradition, saying, "Christ is risen!" rather than "Hello" can become mere formalism, a nice habit we have inherited from our ancestors. It may be that the tradition of this greeting is an expression of simple piety, but I have the feeling that it is something more than that—or at least that it started out as something more than that, as beautiful and useful as simple piety is. I think it is a way to encourage one another, to declare to one another not only that the fact of Christ's resurrection *matters*, but that it matters *to us*, that is to say, to you and me, in our encounter with each other.

Have you ever read a great novel or seen a great movie, one in which you found yourself completely engrossed? Did you notice how the world of your everyday experience just seemed to disappear, and instead you found yourself in Middle Earth with J. R. R. Tolkien, in London with Charles Dickens, or 20,000 leagues under the sea with Jules Verne? When a story has us that caught up, once we have arrived at the end of the story we find that we can barely bring ourselves to put the book down or leave the theatre and get back to our own lives, which seem so colorless and banal by comparison. Still, just as every novel has a beginning and a middle, it also has an ending. There are no more pages left. We close the cover and sink back into our own story, our own existence.

Then it occurs to us: *what about my story?* I know my story had a beginning, and that I am living its middle, but doesn't it also have an ending? Doesn't it have a last page too, just like the novel I have finished? Won't I one day turn a page in my life, only to find "**THE END**" written in big, black letters on it—and nothing more?

It is the story of Jesus, and especially of His passion and death, that we live in a particularly intense way throughout the forty days of Lent and during Holy Week. But once we have arrived at this day, the Sunday of Pascha (Easter Sunday), it is as if we have reached the climax of our Lord's great drama, the point of all that had gone

before. We very much want to stay embedded in the story of Jesus, not to have to put the book down and “get on with life,” and to do that we rely on one another’s help. So we say to one another, over and over and over again, “Christ is risen!” And we reply, again and yet again, “Indeed He is risen! He is truly risen!”

But there are days, lots and lots of days, when instead of the light of the resurrection in our hearts, there is “darkness over the whole land,” when we might feel like answering the Easter greeting not with “Indeed He is risen!” but with “Really? You don’t say!” These are the days when we feel more like answering with a cynical “So what else is new?” or an ironic “Sure He is,” or even a dismissive “If you say so.” The darkness upon us seems too heavy to brighten the sunless scene with the artificial light of a manufactured mood. And there are even days when, if we were really being honest with ourselves, we might as well respond to “Christ is risen!” with “No, I don’t think so. Every life has an ending, and every life, great or small, long or short, ends its story with gravel in the face.”

These are the days when we seem unable to escape our own story, unable to enter into anyone else’s story, or even into the great drama that is the human race, redeemed and raised from death by the power of a God who loves us so much. Instead, we just get wound around the axle of our despair, focused exclusively on the darkness in our heart. Often enough we try to narcotize our pain, to escape, through addiction or entertainment, from our own story. We are fortunate if we realize before it is too late that we cannot deaden the pain without deadening the rest of us. What then are we to do?

And where do such days come from? Now, I am not speaking here of methodological doubt, theological reflection or philosophical speculation. What I am talking about are those days in the life of an everyday Christian, of a believer, the days in which his or her faith seems remote, improbable, and impotent. Those days happen and, while I don’t want to generalize too much, my sense is that if they have never happened to you then either you have not given your faith serious reflection or you are blessed indeed. In general, to have faith is to invite a crisis of faith along with it.

One place we might look for the origin of such darkness in us is our own experience of suffering, which has been a part of human existence since the fall of Adam. All of us suffer, one way or another, at various times in our lives. Sometimes the suffering is physical. Other times it is emotional or spiritual, but it all hurts. Indeed, before we ever know anything else about a person, we are able to know beyond all doubt that he or she is suffering *something*, has some burden to bear or some hardship to endure. It is the most universal of human traits.

The word, “suffering,” like the word, “passion” (when “passion” is used, for instance, with reference to the Crucifixion of Christ), are interesting words in English, because the fundamental meaning of both has to do with being *acted upon* rather than *acting*, enduring rather than doing, being an object rather than a subject,

being passive rather than active. Neither word necessarily implies pain, as is clear when we talk about “romantic passion,” for instance, or when we use the cliché “to suffer fools gladly” (which, incidentally, comes from 2 Corinthians 11:19 in the King James Version). It is simply a matter of no longer being the protagonist of one’s own story, at least in certain respects.

However, we can infer from the words’ other meaning that being acted upon rather than acting, and being a subject rather than an object, are generally unpleasant experiences. We would rather “do” than be “done to,” and we almost never choose pain deliberately. Still, the close connection between passivity and pain can give us an insight into what might be happening on our bad days, the days when we seem unable to care whether Christ is risen or not.

We want so much to be masters of our own destiny and the stars of our own show. Whenever we have to put up with anything not to our liking, something in us tends to revolt and we experience it as pain. Some things, like illness or injury, are painful in themselves, but when we can do nothing to relieve this pain, we find we suffer even more, simply because *we are unable to control the situation*.

It may have been such circumstances that inspired the words of the psalm Jesus recites in the midst of His mortal pain upon the cross: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” Psalm 22 (21 LXX) goes on:

*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.* (Ps. 22:1b-2, NRSV)

It is impossible to know what was happening in the mind of Christ as He hung, naked and tortured, upon the cross. The last people He saw were His killers and those bystanders who just had to complete His torture with their mockery. The women who accompanied Him in His ministry were there, together with His weeping Mother, but the Apostles, other than John, had abandoned Him.

It seems completely natural to assume that Jesus felt that God, to whose Kingdom He had devoted His life’s work, had abandoned Him as well, but this assumption would be no more than a projection of our own experience. Scripture scholars regard Jesus’ exclamation (which Mark, in Aramaic, and Matthew, in Hebrew and Aramaic, take pains to present in the language Jesus would have spoken) as less an expression of His own emotional state than as a recitation of Psalm 22, identifying His own suffering with the psalmist’s poetry, praying in the liturgical language of His people.

It is a kind of cruel irony that suffering often carries with it a sense of being abandoned, of being left alone in one’s pain, as if the agony were not enough in itself. What we desperately want to know when we are suffering is that *somebody cares*, but so often it is this experience of another’s care that is wanting. Such psychological

pain, added to one's physical pain, is deeply debilitating and can be the cause of spiritual trauma as well. When our mind, weakened by suffering, grapples with our situation, it may be tempted to conclude that there is no one who cares—or at least, no one who cares enough. This kind of thinking is toxic, especially to the soul.

In our Christian anthropology (unlike classical Greek philosophy or much modern thought), human beings are not considered a composite entity made up of a permanent soul and a throwaway body, but rather a unity of body and soul. Each one of us is not simply an “enfleshed soul” or an “ensouled body,” but one psycho-physical unity, body and soul together—a *person*. Death is the *unnatural* separation of the soul from the body. Pain in our body affects our mind and our spirit; psychological pain has its physical and spiritual symptoms as well. Similarly, spiritual pain will manifest itself in symptoms of mind and body. (Here we must be careful to distinguish the darkness of spiritual pain from the darkness that comes upon us from psychological depression. It is important to know which is the source of pain and which the resulting symptom.)

Spiritual pain can have many causes, but fundamentally it is a lack of, or a loss of, meaning and significance that is at its core. As humans, we find meaning in, among other places, relationship. A relationship that once was and that is no more can be the cause of tremendous spiritual pain: “My life has no meaning without him/her.” Loneliness, in addition to its psychological effects, can have profound spiritual effects: “No one loves me, so I must be unlovable.”

As Jesus continues to pray Psalm 22, He eventually comes to these lines:

*Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights.” (Ps. 22:3-8, emphasis added)*

Here, the psalmist is showing the effect of spiritual pain caused by his suffering. Because he feels he has been abandoned by God and is mocked by the people, the psalmist concludes that he is unlovable: “I am a worm, and not human.” Do you think Jesus’ own experience of abandonment and mockery led Him to conclude that He was a worm, and not human, as well? When you are being bullied and feel alone, do you conclude that you are an unlovable worm, too? Psychological depression, whether because a relationship has ended, or because you feel lonely, or because of

any other external cause, is not only a matter of emotional pain. It can become spiritually deadly if you conclude that there is no God, or that if there is a God, God does not care about you, or that your life is without meaning, or that you are fundamentally unlovable.

Psychologist Viktor Frankl, founder of the Logotherapy School of psychology, noted during his time in a Nazi concentration camp that it was those who were most able to make meaning out of their suffering who seemed to have the best chance of survival (see his famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*). Not everyone was able to do this; those who could not or did not find meaning, or who could not *make* their lives meaningful in the midst of soul-destroying suffering, were the ones most likely to experience rapid decline and death.

For Frankl, the attitude one takes in the face of unavoidable suffering is a means toward finding meaning for oneself. He called the ability to choose one's attitude the "last of the human freedoms," which no one can take away. This choice, this use of freedom, is the critical difference between spiritual life and death.

Imagine Jesus continuing His recitation of Psalm 22 from the cross. How do these verses sound to you, coming from His bloodied lips? Have you ever had the same feelings yourself?

*I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots. (Ps. 22:14-18)*

These sound like the words of defeat, like the cry of one who has given up living. Here the psalmist has done an excellent job of capturing the feelings of someone at the end, if not of life, at least at the end of hope and of patience. In the Gospels' accounts of the soldiers' casting lots to divide up Jesus' clothing, this reflection of Psalm 22 seems to show that Jesus has reached the lowest point of His existence, the pit of His own destruction.

And yet...

“Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

This verse, which is found only in the Gospel of Luke (and not in the earliest manuscripts of this Gospel), describes a turning point. Although Luke does not describe Jesus’ recitation of Psalm 22 as Matthew and Mark do, there is still a connection with that psalm, since it has a similar turning point:

*But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!*

*From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.*

*From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever. (Ps. 22:19-26)*

Though the psalmist has acknowledged his brokenness and his sense that God has abandoned him, he still cries out to God for help. Admitting that, indeed, God *has* rescued him, his words turn from bitter complaint to praise of God and the pledge to announce what God has done: “*I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.*” Moreover, the psalmist’s praise turns to words of encouragement: “*The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord.*”

Imagine Jesus, in His agony, continuing to recite this psalm, turning His own lament into lavish praise, and encouraging “the poor” to eat to their satisfaction, to find the Lord whom they seek, and to “live forever.” He “tells of [God’s] name” when He prays, “*Father, forgive them,*” for God is Love, and His name is “the Father of Mercies.” And He does all this while being crucified.

In these verses, the psalmist turns his vision outward, from his own predicament, to “the great congregation,” the “offspring of Israel,” and to “the poor.” The psalm gives no details about how this turn comes about. Note that Psalm 22 was not composed to give the impression that the psalmist *used* to complain that the Lord had abandoned him, that he *used* to feel “poured out like water,” but now he has been rescued and has changed his tune. No, Psalm 22 all takes place *now*, and there is no indication in the psalm that the writer’s external circumstances have changed. All that has changed is the psalmist’s attitude, his vision, his capacity to take a deeper look at what God is doing in the midst of his pain, and, on that account, he changes his song from one of mourning to that of praise.

In terms of our study of spiritual pain, then, we can say that the author of this psalm chose, despite his pain, to give meaning to his suffering by recognizing in it the saving work of God. As a result, his spiritual pain becomes spiritual joy, a joy he has to share with everyone about him. Not that he takes credit himself for this change of attitude; he says “*From you comes my praise in the great congregation.*”

Rather, he simply acknowledges that God is at work in his suffering, and that God is changing his bitterness into sweetness. All the psalmist does is turn his gaze, the focus of his attention, *outward*, away from himself and toward those around him. He chooses in freedom to change his viewpoint from meaningless to meaningful suffering, for as he does this, he does not avoid seeing the “dogs” and the “company of evildoers” who are right in front of him, playing dice with his life and causing his pain. His words are hardly the words of a naïve Pollyanna playing “the glad game,” avoiding negative perceptions at all costs. He sees evildoers all about him, but his vision simply does not stop with them. He chooses to look further, to let his attention expand, like an ever-widening circle, to encompass his “brothers and sisters,” “the great congregation,” “the offspring of Israel,” and “the poor.” He gives God praise not because God has ended his suffering, but because God is at work in it. Far from abandoning him, God has manifested His presence, His steadfast love, and His mercy.

Jesus too, like the psalmist, turns His gaze outward, toward us, toward those of us who were there at His crucifixion and to those of us who find ourselves on Golgotha only today. Jesus turns His Passion into an act of passionate love, no longer allowing His blood to be drawn from His body by whips and nails, thorns and spears, but giving it away, pouring it forth for the life of the world.

*All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,*

*and I shall live for him.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it. (Ps. 22:27-31)*

Jesus has accomplished His mission of proclaiming the Reign of God over all the nations. He has lived for His Father, and because of His work, His life, and, now, even His death, all people can live. Jesus' life becomes life for all people; a people yet unborn will serve Him and their hearts will live forever.

When we choose to see God at work in our suffering, we can make our suffering meaningful for others in addition to ourselves by replacing self-pity with deeds of love, forgiveness, and mercy. Our suffering, like that of Jesus, can be a source of life for others when we use our pain, as it were, to catalyze mercy.

It is worth noting that when we do this, we become actors in our story once again, and no longer merely the passive victims of pain. This, in and of itself, is a remedy against spiritual death. Ironically, we are most authentically "in control" when we turn control of our lives over to God and actively seek to do God's will, which in every case involves loving as Christ has loved.

A Quaker theologian, Thomas R. Kelly, has remarked:

*The heart is stretched through suffering, and enlarged. But O the agony of this enlarging of the heart, that one may be prepared to enter into the anguish of others!...The cross as dogma is painless speculation; the cross as lived suffering is anguish and glory. Yet God, out of the pattern of his own heart, has planted the cross along the road of holy obedience. And he enacts in the hearts of those he loves the miracle of willingness to welcome suffering and to know it for what it is – the final seal of his gracious love. (Cited in: Johann Christoph Arnold, *Rich in Years: Finding Peace and Purpose in a Long Life*.)*

The willingness to welcome suffering is indeed a miracle, made possible only by the gift of God in raising Jesus, and us with Him, from the dead. Our own willingness to welcome suffering *on behalf of others, even those who are killing us*, is something God plants in us "out of the pattern of his own heart" when we choose in freedom to take up our own cross of suffering love.

Pain and suffering are inevitable elements of life. What is not inevitable is our willingness to find meaning in it, or rather, to put meaning into it by enlarging our attention in order to see what God is accomplishing through it. We have to choose this change of perspective. Without this choice, without the cross, our physical or emotional pain all too easily becomes spiritual pain, leading to spiritual death, unredeemed and unredemptive, the meaningless death of insects, not of human beings.

And this is not something we choose once and for all; rather, we must choose it again and again; we must face this choice over and over, even on, indeed *especially* on, our dark days of hopelessness and despair. It is on those days, not just the days of celebration and Easter joy, that we need to remind one another, “Christ is risen!”

For us Christians, this Easter greeting is like shorthand for the story of Jesus. It is the Gospel in miniature, in a bite-sized, sharable form that makes our encounter with other Christians at once an inspiration to hope and a means of making our meeting holy. Where two or more of us are together, sharing joy and hope heart-to-heart in this way, *Christ is present*.

And wherever Christ is present, our story and His intersect. Unlike a novel, the story of Christ has no ending. When His story becomes our story, we learn that, truly, there is no last page to our story, either. We go on, loving as Christ has loved, being loved as the Son Himself is loved by the Father, for our stories—yours and mine, yours and Christ’s—have become one.

But it is during the times when darkness covers the whole landscape of our existence that, looking behind us, we may find that somewhere along the line we have dropped our cross. We need to pick it up again, with the help and encouragement we receive from one another, from our brother and sister Christians in the Church, the risen Body of Christ. To be sure, to greet someone with “Christ is risen!” is to remind that person that there is a God, that God loves us, and that there is no need of fear. Our survival is guaranteed. Death can no longer touch us with its sting (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:55).

Anxiety and fear are what we know best in this fantastic century of ours. Wars and rumors of wars. From civilization itself to what seemed the most unalterable values of the past, everything is threatened or already in ruins. We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good we cannot hear it.

*But the proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord has risen (Frederick Buechner, cited in *Bread and Wine*, Plough Publishing).*

On our dark days, it is well to keep in mind the day of Christ’s own crucifixion. We can recall His own day of darkness, when the sun hid its face, when Jesus cried out to the God who seemed to be absent, and when, crying out, He gave up His spirit into the hands of the Father of Mercies. We can remember that what happened next

was not glittery sunshine, bunny rabbits and butterflies, as if nothing had changed, as if the world was back to business as usual:

And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:51-53, NABre)

When, in the midst of our suffering, we choose the cross of love, when we turn our gaze upon those who need our love, we put meaning where there seems to be no meaning. Then earthquakes happen, even if the darkness remain. Rocks split. Temple veils are torn in two. Tombs are emptied. The dead rise and enter the Holy City, and we enter along with them.

May the cross, emblem of the victory of suffering love, be ever your companion. May you always trust in the truth of your resurrection, and abandon yourself totally to the One who never abandons us. May the resurrection of Christ our God be the source of meaning, hope, and joy for you on this Easter day and forever.

Adevărat a înviat! He is truly risen!

And so are you.

In Him,

+john michael
a sinner,
bishop