

## THE SONG YOU CAN'T FORGET

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love; and at night His song is with me.”

PSALM 32:08

Once in a while you hear a song you can't forget. It lingers with you; you hum it on the way home or on the way to work or coming out of church. It becomes part of you. It is often uncontrollable; at times you may not even like the tune, but you hum or sing it over and over again, long after it should have drifted off into the wild blue yonder.

Oliver Sacks, the widely read neurologist and author of Awakenings, recently wrote a new book about this phenomenon of a song you can't forget. It is titled Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain (Knopf, 2007). Interesting, indeed. While Dr. Sacks is more concerned with abnormal obsessions, he discusses how a tune lingers on in the mind. The repeated recollection is mysterious. Mostly it seems to be unrelated to our conscious desires and preferences. It comes on involuntarily and stays for as long as it wishes. To some it can even become debilitating; to others it is like a little “brainworm” which holds on. St. Augustine also refers to music of the mind and to the music of the spheres, which remembers the song and anticipates the next words, both at once.

It could be a tune that calls up a special memory. My favorite song is Beautiful Dreamer, a Stephen Collins Foster classic, which my mother used to sing to me when I was a little boy. Or it could be a special song that elicits smiles for everything a song can mean. For Peggy and I, that song is “Moon River.” I had better never miss it if it is played when we are together.

What music would you choose to hear if this were your last day on earth? A country-western ballad about the Keeper of the Stars? Or something by Willie Nelson, pining for the girls he used to know. It could be a song you used to sing when you were a child, or as a teen, or in a majestic concert hall. Maybe a Sousa March reminds you of Homecoming, Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance and the day you marched down the graduation aisle, a Mozart Requiem, Dubois's “Seven Last Words,” or any other song that you can't forget. One woman I know hums the theme song from the television show Jeopardy on into the night.

They often sang songs in the Bible. Creation itself is like a symphony. Jubal, the Biblical founder of music, appears early in Genesis. (Genesis 4:21) Moses wrote songs and sang with the people of Israel when they were released from Egypt in the wilderness: “Lord God Almighty, we are free at last.” “The Lord is my Strength and my Song” the Psalmist sang. Jesus sang hymns and songs with his disciples. Paul and Silas sang them to the Philippian prisoners to ease their fears. David wrote songs for the people to sing and as a child, sang them to the accompaniment of his harp. “Sing to Him a New Song”, the Psalmist chants. In the last book of the Bible, they are still singing. Combine them all into a song of peace, of hope, of harmony and love, a song that works its way into your soul to remind you of what you were and still can be. Music has a magic all its own. The angels, too, know how to sing. After all, the angelic choir sang on the first Christmas eve.

The song you can't forget. You came on Easter because a song was there, deep within your soul. You came because you had to hear it once again. You used to know the notes and words, but then you moved along. You knew it well before you became so involved in other things, before life took over, before you got confused and became lost in the land of money and success. But that song lingers anyway. It remembers, even when you forget. It acknowledges you as one of its favorite singers. This Easter, I want you to sing that

song again: *Jesus Christ is Risen Today!* That should be the song you can't forget.

Today, we could ask the choir to belt out the theme song from Oklahoma, "*Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.*" It was a beautiful morning back then at the Garden tomb, and it is a beautiful echo for us. No one on earth knows exactly what happened there. It is lost in the misty morning of long ago when something startling went on before dawn. We search and search the Scriptures, the only reliable source of evidence we have, and still hesitate to declare that we know all the details.

Matthew is explicit about how many doubted. He tells how some of the guards muttered that the stone had been rolled away while they slept, and that some of the elders offered them a bribe to tell the people that Jesus' disciples came by night and stole him away. "So they took the money and they did as they were directed," Matthew wrote, adding, "And this story has been spread among the people to this day" (Matthew 28:15). If you try to master all the details, you will get so weighed down by the complexity of your own disharmony that you will miss the beat of the music. It is a matter of how you came to believe this – or anything else you think you know. The response is more like a song than an academic lecture.

As I read through the Gospel narratives, I am completely convinced that the story is true, but when I pause to wonder why, I find myself asking unanswerable questions. I ask myself how I could be so certain that the Resurrection actually occurred. Some of you will identify with my quest. Others will scoff at it and say it is a matter of faith, not evidence. "Just believe it, Rev!" Others will wonder why a pastor would ask such a ridiculous question. "Of course it's true. It says so in the Bible." It does, but it is not as simple as it appears.

Unfortunately, the "evidence" from the Gospels is not complete, or at least not as consistent as some believers assume. A couple years ago, one of our children asked me, "How do you know it's true, Dad?"

Have you ever wondered how you know anything for sure? Like, how do you know Brutus was there when Julius Caesar was murdered? I first heard it at a high school play. Cicero mentions Caesar frequently, but Cicero is not the most reliable historian. So, how do you know it's true? . . . They say Brutus was persuaded by Cassius to give up his post and participate in the assassination. Shakespeare believed that. They say Brutus committed suicide some years after. But how can you know except that someone wrote it down, and someone you trusted told you about it. In the mystery of what you do and do not believe, using all the integrity and intellectual powers you can muster, you believed it. Not that it matters all that much whether "Et tu Brute," is made up or real, but the whole idea of how you evaluate information and how you come to believe who said what, when, and why continues to intrigue many of us.

Let's shift to the Aegean. I wonder how much I really know about Socrates and the brilliant things he did and said and believed. He never wrote a word that has survived; he never penned an autobiography that anyone knows of. Some say he was a sculptor; probably he was not. We have heard that he was condemned to death on the charges of corrupting youth with new ideas and of neglecting to worship the gods. They tell us he drank the hemlock willingly and died, seeking to know what was on the other side and guessing that it was favorable. They say he even said that he could die believing that all would be well on the other side. It was better to believe it that way, even if he was wrong. But how do I know that?

Plato and Xenophon wrote about Socrates, but neither of them knew him for more than the last 10 or 12 years of his life. Xenophon admits he was not close to Socrates. Almost everyone agrees that Plato, a loyal

disciple, intentionally made his master appear gracious, a part time hagiographer. And Plato often espoused his own ideas through the words he chose for Socrates in the Dialogues, so who really knows what was true?

Or how do I know that the Scotsman William Wallace came down from Aberdeenshire to lead a Scots rebellion that culminated in the victory of Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn in 1413? Of course you can verify it in the popular movie, "Braveheart," but historical novels and motion pictures can hardly be accepted as truth. Not that it would change my life or salvation if the facts were not as I have been told, but my Scottish blood runs more confidently through my veins since I believe it. I know it by what I have been told, by what I have evaluated and received and what I chose to accept as true.

Pause to think about it in the life and death of Abraham Lincoln. I read once that more has been written about our 16th President than anybody else, save Jesus. Focus on one tiny item. In Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, Team of Rivals, she writes of the assassination at Ford's Theatre and the President's death in a little boarding house across the street where he had been taken for privacy. As he drew his last breath and died Edward Stanton, Lincoln's stalwart Secretary of War, spoke these final words, "Now he belongs to the ages." It is a widely quoted final word, a lovely tribute, and it came true.

But in the May 28, 2007 New Yorker Magazine, historian Adam Gopnik re-examines the evidence, and finds alarming discrepancies in what people said happened that evening. In James L. Swanson's intensive book about the death of Lincoln, Stanton is quoted as having said: "Now he belongs to the angels." Such discrepancies need not detain us now; they simply add to the question we are discussing here. Even with the death of a most public president whose appointed scribe was present, no one can be exactly sure what his final words were.

So, how do I know anything, and how do you? How do you even know that your wife or husband or children love you? Perhaps they send you flowers or gifts or birthday cards. Perhaps they say nice things to you (and of course they are true). Some families end conversations automatically with "I love you" – "I love you, too." But sometimes along the way, it does not turn out that way. What was declared as a love it turns out was not a real love after all.

We are diverging from my original thoughts. What I am trying to say is that almost everywhere you turn when we look at the history of philosophical and scientific ideas, what appears to be true at one time can be declared false at another. Facts that we accept at one time are later shown to be wrong. As I write this, I think of poor little planet Pluto, recently declared NOT to be a planet after all.

My point in this introduction is that in order to believe anything, we have to depend on written and oral evidence and on the private receptor system inside us, perhaps genetically preconditioned, which helps us to select what we come to believe. It takes a leap of faith in a thousand other areas of human activity, not only in theology, to believe what is true and what is not.

This brings me to the subject of Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many of us here accept it as fact without dispute. That's fine. My mother was like that. She often told me not to bother her with new ideas. "I know what I believe, and I don't need my son to mix me up!" she would say. Others think of Easter mainly as an inspirational story, made up by the Disciples to get them through their grief and embarrassment. Those in between drift to and fro. Some affirm a physical resurrection; some a spiritual

one; still others stop at the psychological change in the Disciples brought on by their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

With all that in mind, let me set forth a case for what I believe happened on the first Easter.

First, Jesus of Nazareth died. If you read the records of the Resurrection in the New Testament, four in the Gospels and two beyond, there can be no doubt that following the crucifixion Jesus was dead. Some early Christian scholars later speculated that it only appeared that he had died. The Gnostics could not accept that the Son of God could actually die. Yet the Gospel writers all tell how he breathed his last. The soldiers who came to break his legs to help death along saw that he was already dead, so “not a bone in his body was broken”. When Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body down, Pilate ordered a centurion to verify that Jesus was dead (Mark 15:43). He did. He was. From all evidence we have, Jesus was dead.

Second, the tomb was empty when they arrived. If you read the four Gospels, there can be no doubt that the body of Jesus Christ was gone. The tomb had been sealed, and soldiers were there to guard the place. The authorities were fearful that the Disciples might steal the body. Matthew is the only canonical writer who attempts to tell us how the Resurrection happened. A great earthquake came, he wrote, and an angel came down, rolled away the stone and sat on it. The guards were so shocked, they pretended to be dead. No one saw it happen. The 2nd century theologian Ignatius wrestled with this and concluded that, “Our Lord rose in the silence of God.” The other three Gospel writers would agree.

Some women came to the tomb on Easter morning. The Gospels differ on who they were. That is puzzling, but at least it proves that there was no conspiracy to present a unified story. Peter and John agree that the body was gone. John himself (or more accurately the author of John) writes that when he entered the sepulcher, the body of Jesus was gone. Where was it? Neither his friends nor his foes had taken it.

The third piece of evidence arises out of what happened next to the Disciples, as the Christian church began to grow. If they had fabricated the story, they would hardly have been devoted enough to surrender their lives for a lie. They had nothing to gain in sharing their stories, other than their conviction that it was true. In those early decades, his Disciples lost everything. Dramatically, each was given a chance to change the story. All they would have had to do was make a statement of faith in the Emperor’s gods, even a token affirmation would do, and they would have escaped execution. They refused.

Luke was a literary scholar. He was not an eyewitness. When he heard stories of Jesus, he went and interviewed those who were eyewitnesses. He examined the evidence. We owe him a great debt. He became a companion to St. Paul, following him everywhere and risking his own life. Why? Because of the Resurrection. I Corinthians 15 says, “If Christ is not raised, your faith is futile.”

What persuaded Luke in the end is exactly what could persuade the rest of us. Jesus was a kindly healer. He cared about those in trouble. He taught people how to live a life which is grounded in love. But that was not enough for Luke, as it is not enough for me and you. The German philosopher Ernst Bloch, a critic of the faith, wrote, “Christianity was not in competition for a set of good morals. His followers were not passing on the message that we should try to do better. The competition was for eternal life and how we can receive it and possess it.”

There were critics at the beginning. The Jews in Jerusalem thought it blasphemous that anyone sensible would conclude that a crucified criminal could be the Messiah. To the cultured educated Greeks, the “soul”

alone could be immortal, once it shed its weak and repugnant body. The Gnostics taught that Jesus was an immortal spirit, masquerading around in a pretend body.

And there are critics around us now, as there have always been. One leading Christian New Testament scholar, the German Gerd Ludeman, teaches that the resurrected body was a subjective vision produced by Simon Peter's psyche to overcome his grief and guilt. Others teach that the Risen Christ culminates a series of inter-psychic experiences. An often misguided professor actually teaches that the body of Jesus was stolen by wild beasts, and that only a vision remained.

Fourth and last, there were thousands then, and have been millions ever since, who accept the conclusion that Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead. After examining the evidence and examining their hearts, they know it is true. I am part of that innumerable company who, once having examined the evidence, came down on the side of belief. I will match my wits and arguments and "evidence" with anyone, anywhere, at any time.

As we close, let's return to my original question: How do you know the things you think you know? How do you come to believe the things you believe? Well, you talk with eyewitnesses if you want to know what happened. Not that each would tell the identical story, but usually the stories overlap.

After that, you need to evaluate what you read and "know." Finally you have to work it through your own body, mind and soul. Then, you have to make a choice. The Biblical accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection were written by those who were there. They tell us what they saw and knew and believed.

The rest is up to you. Take it or leave it. Take it, and nothing else will matter more in all your life. Leave it, and you leave everything you need behind. Argue about the details all day long. Test your faith. Be prepared to give an account of the faith that is within you. But for goodness sake, join the victorious company who came to believe what happened on the first Easter morning. If you have a choice between life and death, choose life.

And go away singing the song you can't forget. No matter that the earth itself should be removed, no matter that the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, no matter that the waters roar and be troubled, no matter what else goes wrong, whatever else has happened, is happening, or will happen, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! The "Hallelujah" is a chorus. Let's sing it – now and forevermore.

Amen.