

Incorporation

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WILL WILLIMON



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INCORPORATION

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Hope Church, though a capacious congregation, could not possibly accommodate all of the events and characters in this novel.

Everything herein is a figment of my imagination.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

—1 CORINTHIANS 12:27

Contents

Prelude ix

Good Friday 1

Easter 5

Low Sunday 19

The Third Sunday of Easter 38

The Fourth Sunday of Easter 76

The Fifth Sunday of Easter 118

The Sixth Sunday of Easter 145

Ascension of the Lord 162

The Seventh Sunday of Easter 189

Pentecost 207

Trinity Sunday 231

Sundays in Ordinary Time 243

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Prelude

As he jogged the familiar though risky route from the church office—cheerfully dodging the ever demanding faithful—down the hall to the sanctuary, hymnal in hand, not five minutes before the beginning of the service (he could already hear hints of the portentous prelude), Stephen instinctively gave his cincture a final, reassuring jerk and tugged the button on the neck of his alb. Behind him flapped the ends of his purple stole. Having vested so often for sacred service, he could make such adjustments even while moving hastily, having no need of a mirror.

He smiled as parishioners passed.

“Stephen, please, *please* don’t forget to remind them about the Youth Car Wash for Haiti,” an aqua-pantsuited parishioner said. “Remember, you forgot last Sunday. Next Saturday. It’s important. OK?”

“Sure,” he said, suppressing his resentment with a subtlety gained through years of practice.

“Pastor Steve,” a high-pitched, tiny voice peeped from his back. He stopped and turned to find a little girl just behind him. “Can I ask a question?” she said, her plain face brightening into a smile.

“Sure you can.” He mused at the inopportuneness of questions, even when asked by “the least of these,” to someone in his line of work at this hour, in this place. He knelt down next to her.

“When did you choose to be a preacher?” she asked. “Like in the ministry.”

Her innocence in asking so huge a question momentarily transfixed him.

He looked into her little face and knew that she knew not what she had asked. Memories rose to his mind that would take a long time to tell and, in any case, could not be told to her, despite Jesus’ “for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

Prelude

“Sometime let’s talk,” he said as he gently patted her back, then rose.
“I didn’t choose it; it chose me.”
Seeing she was puzzled, he explained, “It’s kinda complicated.”

Good Friday

Spring sun, and all apple green, budding, fresh and clean, nothing to testify to this day's theological significance—apogee of the bloodiest week of the Christian year. Good Friday sepulchritude was jarring on such a bright spring day, the church once again out of step with the natural world.

Simon wheeled into oak-lined Hope Boulevard. Fifty yards before the church, the branches overhead parted and he relished the unobstructed view. The sight of the tower rising before him, its gray stone glistening in the incongruous, midday Good Friday sunshine, made him smile. Some kid in the church had quipped, "That bell tower looks like a giant." This was true—a Gothic Goliath surveying his ecclesiastical domain, overseeing an asphalt parking lot. Though Simon Lupino did not fancy himself as naturally spiritual, to his credit, his delight in this vista had continued undiminished. Twenty years of cantankerous parishioners, a stolid board, and commonplace fellow clergy—all playing their middling parts against a backdrop of antiquated toilets, overloaded circuitry, and cracked plaster—had not squelched Simon's reverence for this panorama or his delight that it was his. The burden of the building was light compared with the privilege of serving a church so fine as Hope.

Simon's sunny situation was fortuitous—midcareer, Midwest, midlife, midyear, midday—master of an ecclesiastical kingdom that would evoke pulpit envy in any ambitious pastor. Hope was in the top ten percent, maybe the top five of American churches. When he arrived, Hope contributed a measly one grand to benevolence and mission; this year's money for good work was over a million. The majority of clergy are sentenced to obscure, pointless parishes, where they languish unappreciated and barely make ends meet. Simon savored the serenity of knowing that he had twenty of his twenty-eight years under orders living every pastor's dream.

Incorporation

Though his sense of self-satisfaction was hard-earned, Simon was gracious enough to know that he was here—this morning, in this high mood, at this church, with this life—as a recipient of undeserved good fortune. Modestly he attributed his position to “good luck” rather than divine providence.

As a young cleric spiraling upward, all that Simon had asked for was the opportunity to have a church that appreciated his talent and, through his exercise of his personal gifts, to make someone’s sad life happier and the world a bit better. In the day’s cheerful spring sunlight, his ecclesiastical accomplishments arrayed before him, Simon could say with the psalmist, “my lines have fallen in pleasant places.” He was at a golden age, attained by few ecclesiastics, when he could take pleasure in what he had produced. A visionary transformer more than mere manager, an energetic enabler more than cautious caregiver, content and satisfied, his cup overflowed.

Simon’s car was sleek, dark blue, clean, German. (He had leased the car in expectation of a long sought car allowance. Though the perquisite had been slow to materialize, he wouldn’t allow the board’s sluggishness to detract from his enjoyment of the perfect car.) The church lawn fit Simon’s spirit—grand, green, and manicured. He had an Easter sermon in the oven for presentation the day after tomorrow. The new four and a half million mission/education/fellowship/inspiration wing caused him particular pride. True, he had hoped to chip away more progressively on the building’s debt, but with less than two million to go, the church’s indebtedness could not diminish his triumph. What a morning.

The German sedan showed Simon’s adoration—to the point of pre-occupation—for efficiency, whether in cars, coffeemakers, or churches. When interviewed recently by the drab denominational monthly and asked, “What is the key thing you have done to put Hope Church where it is?” Simon responded, “Excellence. I have stressed excellence in all that we do. Too often churches content themselves with second best, average. I’m not much interested in what is traditionally called ‘sin,’ but ‘sin’ in my book is mediocrity. ‘Excellence’ is our management mantra.”

A solitary Unitarian/Universalist-like Saab greeted Simon in the lot, probably someone fussing with Easter flowers. His spirit rose; the Saab was solid evidence of an ever so slight leftward lean of the congregation in recent years, the fruit of his prophetic preaching.

How many pastors of his rank would report for work on a holiday Friday, he wondered, even by noon? Not many, particularly after his leadership of the previous weeks’ exhausting Lenten ecclesiastical lollapaloozas.

Good Friday

He congratulated himself on decisively terminating Good Friday worship rather than allowing the sparsely attended liturgical relic to die a slow death. Now on the verge of Hope's grand Easter crescendo, the depressing forty days of Lent almost at an end, he was spirit-pumped.

As Simon sped up the walk, he was annoyed to see a hunched over old man shuffling toward the office door. No doubt this mendicant hoped for charity amid the Holy Week zeal that was bubbling up from the faithful. What self-respecting church could deny a urine-saturated indigent on Good Friday? Simon begrudgingly admired the determination required by someone in his condition to crawl all the way to Hope, even for an affluent, suburban handout.

"May I help you?" Simon called out politely.

"No," muttered the man, undeterred in his shuffling, forward movement, barely looking over his shoulder.

"Hello? Seeking assistance?"

"Only Jesus can help."

"Unfortunately, this is not the door for such inquiries," said Simon, positioning himself defensively between the inerloper and the church's entrance. Gesturing with his free hand that held his keys, he directed, "Please go right back down this sidewalk. Then take a right, straight to the end, then left. Sign by the door says Hopeful Hands and Hearts. Got that? I'm sure that a volunteer can help you there."

"Jesus?"

The old man's mention of Jesus reminded Simon that because it was Good Friday, every do-gooder at Hopeful Hands and Hearts was on holiday. Still, the man would be off his hands (to say nothing of his heart), wandering in more distant parts of the Hope campus where, providentially, all the doors would be locked.

"Good day," said Simon, approaching the outside door to his suite. "Straight to the end, then left."

Having done his bit for charity, Simon entered a dark, oak-paneled, tomb-like side entrance hall into the administrative suite. Eight portraits greeted him—Hope's dead pastors preserved, some in clericals, others in business suits. Simon acknowledged them with a snort; he had passed by this Sanhedrin-like welcome committee nearly every day for twenty years. Each past pastor posed smugly, looking pious before bookshelves. One held a Bible. All await Simon one day to join them.

The portraits' function—immortality for clergy—had been thwarted by sloppy labeling. Last year one was revealed to be the Reverend Arnold

Incorporation

Toppson, imposter, no more than an assistant (for a scant four years), falsely designated as the Reverend Doctor Eugene Jackson. Only five—the last three and the first two—could be positively identified. The rest hung in obscurity, requiring resurrection by a persevering archivist.

Simon bustled under the bold Gothic letters chiseled above the portraits: “Our Pastors, Always Beloved.”



Unseen and unknown by Simon or anybody on this Friday of Trisagion, eight miles from Hope Church, where the river makes a wide, rainbow arc, a body bobbed aimlessly down the East Fork. The *corpus delicti*, now partially naked except for stripped undershorts and shirt, was that of a male between fifty and sixty years of age. The corpse had been a regular communicant at Hope, no less than a trustee. This would be his first Easter absence, now dunked into the Communion of Saints.

Every now and then the body would snag on a stump or branch in the Styx, then bob for a time until the river, unusually high and swift from ample spring rains, freed it to continue its digression. After more than eight hours in the muddy water, with the sun high and the heat rising, the corpse was swollen.

At one point the body rolled over and floated for a time on its back, stomach distended, arms outstretched, the balding, bloated corpus resembling a gray, dead fish, or a clown on a crucifix, or perhaps a dead pig.

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Easter

He opened groggy eyes, squinting, blinded by bright Sunday morning sunlight flooding the bedroom. Bleary and dizzy, unsure of where he was, he rolled over, looked at his clock, and bolted upright.

“Nearly ten? Damn!” He gave Thea, still sleeping, a shove. “Sugar babe, arise! We overslept! Move it! Get up!”

Stephen staggered toward the bathroom, scratching himself, heavy-headed and dull, wobbling his way past unpacked boxes like a corpse coming to life. Thea tossed the sheets, kicked her left leg over the side of the bed, and rolled, groaning, “I told you that two bottles would be too much. I think I died.”

Then began a wordless, frantic dash—bumping about, jumping around with one leg in and one leg out, the pulling on of clothing, brushing of hair, rapid slurping of juice—in which they were dressed and on their way in less than twenty minutes.

“Happy Easter, Babe,” Stephen finally spoke as they entered Main Street. “My First Sunday as the new and improved version of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther Damn King.” He smiled, flashing the winning grin that enabled him to charm his way into or out of almost anything.

“Whatever,” Thea sighed, patting him on the shoulder, offering her first smile of the morning. “Your big day. Hope that Hope meets your expectations, I hope, I hope, I hope.”

Ten minutes later, they joined a procession of cars moving down Hope Boulevard accompanied by clanging bells, the intimidating Gothic bell tower ascending before them. Thea helped herself out of Stephen’s car. Stephen bounded from the driver’s side, thoughtlessly slamming the

Incorporation

door so quickly that he caught the bottom of his sport coat. Fortunately, he halted in time not to rip the coat—his only quasi-formal clothing.

“Let go of me,” Stephen cursed, fumbling for his keys, suppressing what he would have liked to say to the clutching door since he now stood in the middle of a church parking lot on his first day of ministry. As he took hold of Thea’s hand and led her into the walkway, he realized that for the rest of his life he would be getting out of a car, entering the church on Easter, once again to discuss Jesus raised from the dead, leading the faithful in their biggest day of the year, forever doomed to wear the requisite coat and tie.

He felt a mild pang of regret.

“Charlotte,” said a man nearby who was struggling to extricate a black-cased trombone from the backseat of his Toyota, “you have made us late for my most important engagement of the year. I hope you are happy.”

She sat impassively in the front seat, looking unhappy. This was his sole annual gig, the amateur trombonist having long since been dropped from any gathering of musicians other than the Hope Brass. He scurried alone toward the bowels of the looming building, thrusting in front of him his black case, trombone at the ready.

The pealing bells were deafening. In the parking lot near the tower, early arrivers exiting their cars were forced to shout in order to be heard above the clanging and banging. Whenever the big bass boomed, the world trembled. The bells had been pealing in strident sequence since dawn, much to the chagrin of godless, would-be dead-to-the-world-sleepers-in a mile around.

The lawn, enriched by last week’s rain, was verdant, lush, an Edenic green. The sky was bright, filled by ample April sun—nature now in synch with the church’s liturgical year.

Just beside the trombonist’s Toyota, a couple emerged from a nondescript Dodge van with their three tastefully smocked and frocked children in Easter outfits. In this neighborhood it was a moral achievement not to overdress one’s children.

The Smiths (Ida and Bob), the Franklins, the Gunters, and the Rendles, all of them regulars, assumed their usual berths. A pert twentysomething eased her small blue bubble into the space between two large sedans. Though unacknowledged by anyone, she smiled anyway. A gaggle of three or more persons of indefinite identities followed, one in a Jaguar, all equally unacknowledged. Interlopers were normal on Easter; the regulars considered it bad taste to make much of their presence in

the procession that moved from bright spring sunlight into the darkened interior of Hope.



Twelve minutes' drive from the gradually gathering Easter throng, in a not nearly so nice part of town, a half-dozen sleepy-looking children slouched around a table at the community center, about to be breakfasted by Mary Lupino.

"Eggs! Eggs makes me sick," said the little girl as Mary scooped a spoonful of scrambled eggs and plopped them on a light green plastic plate. "I threw up eggs last time I tried 'em."

"Alright dear," answered Mary cheerfully. "You may enjoy the potatoes and toast. Eggs are an ancient Christian symbol for the resurrection. And these eggs are free range! Let us pray."

Mary bowed her head and put her hands together. None of the children took her cue.

"Thank you God for this Easter day and for the gift of this food. Remind us of the farmers who labored to produce this, as well as all seasonal workers, particularly the ones who are undercompensated. Help us remember those who are not so fortunate as ourselves, especially those who are hungry on this day . . ."

"Get your filthy fingers out of my plate!" growled one urchin to another.

"Equip us, we pray, to change the world for the better," Mary continued, undeterred by the children's poor manners. "Motivate us to do something about the needs of other people, to use our gifts responsibly in your service in the making of a more just world. Use us as your hands reaching out to respond to the pain of others. Amen."

"Where's the bacon?" demanded a feral boy who appeared to be about six or seven. "Can't have no breakfast without no bacon."

Mary chirped sunnily, "We don't have bacon, dear. I'm a vegetarian. I think you'll find that you'll be just fine without bacon. We must be ecologically responsible."

"I thought you was a Christian," said the boy glumly.

"That too. Having better luck with the veganism than the Christianity this morning," she muttered to herself. "Now, everyone eat up. We must leave for church in about fifteen minutes."

"There ain't no cereal? I like Fruit Loops. Never heard of not having no cereal," said another as he kicked the child seated next to him.

Incorporation

“Ow! That hurt!”

Ignoring the exchange, Mary said, “We are going to church for the most special day of the year. Easter!”

“Are we gonna see the Easter Bunny?” asked the littlest of the bunch.

“No, this isn’t about the Easter Bunny, dear,” chirped Mary.

“Ain’t no Easter Bunny no way,” one child declared.

“We are going to church to pray, and to praise God,” Mary instructed.

“Ain’t no Easter Bunny, ain’t no God, no Santa Clause neither,” he continued to lecture the others.

“Shut up!” yelled the oldest girl, an obese child with stringy, blonde hair. “Don’t you blaspheme! There is too an Easter Bunny! Brings people toys and eggs. Brung me a big chocolate bunny last year with yellow eyes. Some blue shoes, too. So there!”

“I hates eggs. Eggs makes me sick,” droned the other little girl.

“Now children, eat up,” said Mary as she bustled about in the kitchen, stashing the pots and pans. “The eggs are organic. Aren’t they wonderful?”

For a moment Mary considered her situation—stuck in a dingy, lino-leumed room that reeked of disinfectant, standing at a sink, her hands submerged in greasy dishwater, confined with cast-off kids while everyone else donned their Easter finery—and she was filled with satisfaction.

“The van will be leaving in five minutes! You will hear some wonderful music. Our church is so large and beautiful. If you are all good, nice Mr. Judd will take you to McDonald’s after service. Won’t that be fun?”

“Mister Bud? That’s his name?” shouted one of the children. Everyone giggled hysterically. “Mister Buuuud!”

Mary felt, for just a second, a tad bit of resentment toward Jesus for saying, “let the little children come to me, for such is the kingdom of Heaven,” then recovered her senses.

“I seen an Easter Bunny at the mall wonst,” testified the eldest girl. “Lady, do you think the Easter Bunny’s real?”

“Get in the van,” Mary explained.



Meanwhile, in the church parking lot, the stage was set for the entrance of Sybil Warrenton Smith Vestal. Though Sybil was usually tastefully late, aware of the crush of the Easter crowd, she was present and accounted for a full half hour before the prelude, jauntily displaying herself (even though the morning was still cool) in her vintage, topless ebony Mercedes. She was adorned in large sunglasses and a lime-green scarf draped over

a green dress that was rather low-cut for ecclesiastical wear, though on more lackluster Sundays Sybil had been even more suggestively attired. She waved eagerly to anyone who glanced her way.

Sybil had married a series of well-heeled men, tripping multiple times across the oceans and, when she tired of them, tossing them aside, jettisoning them like empty champagne bottles. Having acquired a fortune through strategic matrimony and even more skillful divorce, Sybil had, Jabez-like, expanded her holdings. She was a favorite of nearly everyone in the congregation (save a few envious women), managing to unmarry periodically without incurring ill will even among her ex-husbands, her serial failures in marriage offset by her success in divorce.

Next an older couple arrived. As he helped her from their dark blue, unadorned Ford, she straightened her skirt and patted her bluish-gray hair. As Gerald Glumweltner waddled round them, bustling into the building, a large vessel under full sail, the man asked genially, “Just arriving, Gerald?”

“Surely you jest!” (He hated the laity’s “Gerald,” preferring to be called “Dr. Glumweltner” since winning his D. Mus.) “Been here since dawn. Do you think the choir pulls off what we do by miraculous divine intervention? I’m retrieving a piece of music I had worked on at home for the last two weeks!” he said, panting as he pushed his girth past their slow sidewalk procession.

In his bustle back to the building, huffing and puffing, Glumweltner nearly tripped over a child who had broken free of the grip of her mother, Gwen Stone, and was making a run for the front lawn. Glumweltner recalled Gwen’s departure from the altos in humiliation when her husband (chemical salesman, basketball All-American) went out for a gallon of milk one evening—and never returned. That was two years ago. The twenty-yard trek from the parking lot left him winded and also wondering if Gwen might be open to an overture for a date.

A now unbroken line of people was welcomed at the left tower door—formally and perfunctorily—by the Reverend Johnson Quail, Minister of Administration and CFO of Hope Church. Quail had been to seminary, switching careers after a mercifully short stint as manager of an engineering firm in town. He was “Mr. Quail” to some, “Dr. Quail” to those who first met him, just “Quail” to the Senior Pastor when he was annoyed with him, “Johnson” when he wasn’t, and “Pastor” to none.

“Happy Easter, Mr. Quail,” said one of the women upon entering the narthex. “Hasn’t the Lord just blessed us with a beautiful day?”

Incorporation

“Good Morning,” said Quail in return, standing guard on efficiency, crowd flow, and corporate tone, annoyed that Henry Niculous had failed to meet him as they had agreed last Sunday. Lay disrespect for clergy time was widespread, but Quail was troubled that Niculous—one widely respected for his mingling of piety and punctuality—would stand him up like this.

“Meeting someone, Mr. Quail?” asked a random worshipper.

“No, I am not.”

At the end of the line was a well-dressed couple, followed closely by their sullen, scowling teenager, made to appear at church under duress; their uncertainty betrayed them as members of the “Christmas and Easter” class of casual attendees. Three morose youths, dressed defiantly in denim, shuffled in, the Thomases and their stooped, doleful son James. Then a garrulous group brimming with glee over their good fortune at the day’s weather. The sun! The trees!

Two Asian women, holding huge, black, floppy Bibles, incongruously appeared.

Quail rushed to intercept them. “Excuse me. Excuse me. The Korean service is at two this afternoon, not now,” he said in a highly articulated way, as if talking to a couple of kindergartners holding crayons.

The women smiled, bowed cordially.

“Your church meets at two this afternoon. At two. In the Great Hall. Great Hall. Were you not told?” he asked.

“This our church,” one of the women responded.

“No, this not your church. Your church not here. It around back. In Great Hall, and not now. Were you not told? It at two.”

They smiled, bowed, and forged on, impervious to Quail’s pig Latin attempts to deflect them.

Then the Senior Managing Pastor’s wife, Mary Lupino, herding—genially but with difficulty—a band of multicolored, breakfasted children out of a green van (emblazoned with the words “HOPE CARES”). Even the Christmas/Easter irregulars did not need to be told that the children had been gleaned from the community center or that Mary was a clerical wife.

Next came a handsome nineteen- or twenty-year-old, in good spirits, holding a large paperback Bible in his left hand and escorting a young woman in a green blouse. “He is raised!” he was overheard to say to one elderly couple.

“Yes, these days I’m often amazed,” replied the man.

Unremembered by Quail, the youth was Jack Hodges, on a swimming scholarship at the state college. He and his girlfriend, Alexis, had returned home having had a religious experience (so it was rumored) during a Campus Crusade retreat in February. Though both shared a youthful prejudice against mainline Christianity, when you want Easter done right, they had reasoned, go to Hope.

Then Dr. and Mrs. Sydney Kline and their well-groomed and deferential teenagers. A prominent internist, Kline had been quite a rover as a young man but now lived rumor free; he was reputed to have “got religion,” though no one seemed sure of where.

Jane Whetsell and her sister Maryanne. Their long-deceased father, John Whetsell, gave one of the largest gifts to build the first educational wing of the church back in the thirties.

“You must be our new Youth Pastor,” Jane robustly greeted a young African American man just stepping onto the sidewalk with a young woman.

“Why, yes, I am,” Stephen replied, fighting back the devilish temptation to ask the woman, “How did you know?”

“Well, I’m Jane Whetsell,” she said, thrusting at him a menacingly strong hand. “And this is Maryanne, my sister.” Her sister smiled but said nothing.

“I’m Stephen,” he said as Jane vigorously shook his hand. “And this is my girlfriend, Thea.” Thea smiled as Whetsell Number One wordlessly grabbed and jiggled her hand and arm. The sisters Whetsell looked to Thea like characters in some PBS miniseries—hearty, officious, solid, English, Miss Marple sorts in sensible shoes. Jane Whetsell wore tweed, even on Easter, as if it were her standard battle fatigues. Thea simply smiled, noting that these people sure seemed to enjoy grabbing other people’s hands.

“My very first Sunday,” gushed Stephen, attempting to present himself favorably to the older women. “It’s just unbelievable that a place like Hope should be my very first church. What a privilege to work with Dr. Lupino. I heard about him in seminary. A great model. I’m pumped, excited. Unbelievable.”

“Have you yet met our famous pastor?” asked Jane.

“No. He wasn’t involved in my selection process, which may have been good since I might not have gotten hired if he had seen my resume,” said Stephen with a beguiling, toothy grin.

“I presumed that you had not yet had the privilege. Well, you are destined to be a great addition to the life of our congregation. I was on

Incorporation

the Education Committee that recommended augmentation of our youth ministry. You have the honor of being *primus*, our first Associate Pastor for Youth. I examined your resume and thereby learned of your stellar academic record,” said Jane. “*Summa cum laude*. Young man of letters. Do you read Greek?”

Thea at first thought Jane had asked, “Do you reek geek?”

“I’ll count on you to show me the ropes,” said Stephen.

“I try to stay abreast of all things Hope,” said Jane, swelling with pride. Thea, noting Ms. Whetsell’s ample bosom, corseted in stretched tweed, smiled at how funny “abreast” sounded in some contexts.

“And so, Thea, will you also be moving here with our newest cleric, Stephen?” asked Maryanne, simply being nice. Thea explained nervously that no, she was in grad school in cross-cultural anthropology, that she hoped to visit on weekends, that it was only a three-hour drive, that this semester she had a late Friday seminar every week, and that though “the ministry thing” was all his and not hers, she was so glad that Stephen was being given an opportunity like Hope.

“Well, you are more than welcome at our rambling Victorian abode when you need to overnight, should you be visiting Stephen,” chirped Maryanne. “In our father’s house on Elm Street there are many rooms,” she said with a grin. The matriarch’s biblical allusion sailed past the two uncomfortable young people.

Though Stephen was relieved when he and Thea finally joined the press of people entering the narthex, there bidding farewell to the bustling sisters and merging anonymously into the Easter multitude, he also delighted that someone had recognized him.

Now a steady stream of cars quickly filled the lot. Any experienced observer could predict that the service would be especially packed, even for a celebration of the resurrection. Perhaps this attendance spike was economically determined. What the downturned economy taketh in offering receipts, the economy giveth in worried, depressed people packing the pews, at least on Easter, thought Quail as he surveyed the scene and did a quick estimate of the size of the house. He alerted the Chief Usher to be prepared to retrieve extra chairs from the Great Hall. Today’s offering was sure to be more fulsome than an average take.

As the hour approached eleven, the bells pealed more exuberantly. A few choir members in white surplices and red cassocks began clustering in corners of the narthex. A reluctant acolyte—managed officiously by the Tsar of the Altar Guild, nemesis of generations of prepubescent

males whose manipulative mothers had forced the miscreants into acolyte service—was shoved toward the door leading into the sanctuary, pouting at being thrust into duty.

“And put on those gloves,” she ordered. “I don’t give a rip whether you want to or not. Didn’t I tell you, ‘No chewing gum?’”

The Senior Managing Pastor entered the narthex, smiling broadly to the milling choir. A gaggle of sopranos made way for his eminence. He planted a kiss on the cheek of an aging alto and then gave a pat to a soprano.

“Hey, happy Easter to you!” snorted an older man in the narthex. Attired in an incongruous bright green vest, he spoke at a volume usually reserved for taverns.

“Shhhh!” the Tsar scolded, asserting her authority beyond prepubescent acolytes.

The organ gave way to the Hope Brass. Crucifer, clergy, and choir formed a line for the processional hymn. Preservice chaos bowed to liturgical order. Dear old Herbert Cohellen, retired pastor who had settled at Hope, had been invited to march in the procession and to make the announcements, his chief liturgical sinecure. The pimple-faced crucifer continued to lean upon his cross—stolid, bored, as if to say to all, “I’m not really here.” (His expression was not unlike a few in the choir.) The Hope Brass smothered all polite conversation in the narthex once the ushers opened the doors to the sanctuary.

“Tenors! Tenors!” shouted Gerald. “For God’s sake put yourselves in line. I need all of you if we’re going to pull this off! Charles, all you basses look at me on that stanza when the anthem picks up steam! Look at me! Scott! That’s you!”

“Has anyone seen my Harold?” asked a confused older woman in lavender. “I wonder if he has already taken a seat? Harold?”

After politely smiling, everyone turned away.

“Let’s do this thing, good people,” said the pastor jovially to the choir. “You all look wonderful.”

“Joe, give the high sign to Grimballs,” ordered Gerald after confirming the presence of the Senior Managing Pastor. (The choirmaster referred to the organist as “Grimballs” behind his back.) A bass turned around and flipped a small switch. Organist cued, Easter ensued. “Show time,” Gerald said, adding “break a leg”—in a near pitch-perfect imitation of the late Orson Welles—as encouragement to the first wave of sopranos flowing

Incorporation

into the aisle in the wake of the crucifer. To the last in line, he said, “Move it, honey,” patting her rear with his chubby, perspiring hand.

Through doors held open by ushers, the procession began moving to the strains of “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” Other ushers stood by with folding metal chairs, ready to sweep in behind the choir with additional seating. The congregation, which on many Sundays was half-hearted in its singing, now with pews packed, bordered on enthusiastic.

Christ the Lord has risen toda-ay, A-a-a-alleluia!

All rejoice and angels sa-ay, A-a-a-alleluia!

“Dum de dum, de dum dee dee,” Gerald stood at the door hammering out the tempo in the air for each successive wave of choristers. “Tenors, it’s all up to you,” his bass threateningly boomed as they moved passed. “Scott!”

With morning light streaming through the windows in a strong blue cast, the soaring arches, the well-ordered choir and noble organ, the brass interludes between the second and fourth stanzas, and an eager, full house, Hope today approached the thrilling. The energy remained high as the service progressed—prayers well formed, elevated language fit for the occasion, a fresh new anthem, “Life! Life! Joy! Joy!” with tympani.

There was a collect, thanking God for life and the sun, the grass, and democracy. Then a selection from *Messiah*, keyed to the day. A Scripture reading. Another hymn—a new one—that seemed to annoy some in the congregation with its unfamiliarity. A prayer of intercession by Herb in which God was informed of assorted health needs within the congregation and lectured on key current events. An acolyte nearly fumbled an offering plate when it was handed to him by the ushers, but otherwise the production was flawless.

Herb wrestled with the announcements, strategically placed to validate Hope as an on-the-go congregation. Someone really should get the announcements printed in large type if Herb was to be the announcer. *Women Aflame Bible Study Fellowship will not meet this week, due to Easter. But the Moving Men . . . will meet this Wednesday to hear a presentation on “Ten Proofs of the . . . Resurrection.” This gathering will be held in the Walter Rauschenbusch lounge. Mick McConnell’s famous sausage biscuits will be served . . . The winners of the Hope Happy Hearts Easter Bonnet contest are Agnes Youlonts and Mary Summers . . . Or perhaps that’s Mary Connors. Our “Send a Kid to Camp” drive begins next Sunday . . . Goal: one hundred indigent kids . . . at camp, that is. And for those of you doing your*

spring cleaning, the clothes closet is in need of clean, warm winter coats in all children's sizes . . .

From here the service regained its lost momentum and cantered toward the crescendo: the sermon by the Managing Pastor. From the moment he rose to speak, ascending the pulpit's steps, delight played upon the faces of the congregation, pride at the preacher in their employ, light falling upon Simon Lupino's salt-and-pepper gray hair, his resonant baritone voice like that of a radio announcer, his masterful timing, his gestures from the torso. The preacher's bodily presence was the perfect complement to the building and the day.

The beginning of his sermon was (by skillful design) mildly disconcerting; the preacher began with a few dismal citations from the recent news about the decline of the economy, an earthquake in Asia, a mass shooting at a mall in Texas, and the failure of a hundred-year-old tire company in Akron, fare that few expected to be served during an Easter sermon. These unpleasanties were a rhetorical ploy, however, poisoning the congregation for a good-hearted shove into the core of his message. Simon paused for effect—a few seconds of silence, then:

Yet my friends, these stories of death, despair, and mayhem are not the only ones to be told. There is yet another word to be said. It is the word that has convened us this glorious Easter day—Life!

Easter stories are charming and beloved—the women coming to a place of death, only to be surprised by life. The stupid disciples dumbfounded by glory. The announcing angel. I plead with you not to trouble yourselves with intellectual concerns about the mere facticity of these ancient texts, not to long for raw historical data.

Andante.

I want to reframe all that to reassure you that the word that these Bible stories are trying in their own ancient ways to speak is a word more important than any of our misgivings about these primitive witnesses.

Basso profundo.

As a great biblical scholar, recently retired from an endowed chair at a university in Oregon, instructs us . . .

The preacher had forgotten the man's name.

. . . these stories of the empty tomb are metaphor, a primitive way of expressing deeper, useful spiritual truth.

That message is as near to your souls as the word that our choir has sung so well—Life! It is a word you are literally dying to hear. In the vale of the shadow of death—Life! Immortal, unquenchable life!

Incorporation

His voice now rose to a high-pitched, earnest fortissimo.

Believe not those who tell you that you are a frail creature of constricted vistas and constrained future! Believe not the naysayers and negativists. Believe in Life!

Easter is not about one Near Eastern man's unjust death and grim entombment. Injustice happens, particularly in that benighted part of the world. Easter is more. It is grand, cosmic, eternal, and indeed it is universal, most of all, it is relevant. It is the eternal message we hear whispered in our greatest poetry, set forth in our grandest music, and articulated in our wisest films—Life!

Now a crescendo.

I do not stand before you to argue this but rather to assert this—Life!

This glorious day with the sun shining down and the air fresh and clear is an eloquent natural testimonial to our supernatural theme—Life!

Here is the word you cannot fully tell yourself. Even as ex-President Jimmy Carter, man of malaise, has written, we live in a "culture of death." The Easter word is a defiant protest against that morbid world. And so I boldly speak it to you in the face of all your deadly, paltry "facts"—Life!

Having risked a prophetic reference to Jimmy Carter at the end of the first movement, the preacher modulated his voice into a more restrained conversational tone as he told a story about a woman who had feared that the successful, multimillion-dollar personal care products business she had founded in the basement of her home would fail under pressure from her creditors. A kind, charitable banker (who was Jewish!) had found a way around restrictive government regulations and had saved her with a bridge loan.

Life! Life! he resumed, shouting at the top of his voice in grand, closing *molto crescendo*. *Liiife!*

Exeunt.

By prearrangement with the musicians, these last words of the sermon were immediately followed by a building roll of tympani, the jarring clash of cymbals, and the choir's near shouting of a verse from the old favorite, "He Lives!"

He lives! He lives! You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!

A thrill ran through the congregation, their collective response to this skilled theatrical coordination between preacher and musicians. More brass, another clash of cymbals, and the organ took up the first verse of "Up From the Grave He Arose" as crucifer and clergy smoothly glided

into position and the recessional began. Some in the choir, both women and men, had tears on their cheeks as they walked and sang. Some shouted more than they sang. Despite the full service, the benediction was pronounced by the Senior Managing Pastor, followed by the Sevenfold Amen, at a mere five minutes past noon, a testimony to careful liturgical execution. Choirmaster and pastor, looking at their watches, beamed, and nodded congratulations to one another on the punctual conclusion.

“Thanks for another grand service,” more than one congregant was heard to say as the clergy glad-handed nearly everyone who exited, hugging some.

“What an Easter!” one portly, red-faced man in a plaid sport coat exclaimed.

“You got that right!” said an unidentified voice from the dispersing crowd. No one seemed unnerved by the backdrop of a man who was tortured to death and then brought back from the dead.

“Dr. Lupino, you really spoke to me today,” said one woman. “As you know, I lost Mother just a couple of months ago. Your sermon was such a comfort. Bless you for blessing me.”

Jack and Alexis emerged, smiling brightly. Jack lasted the entire service without cracking open his overly large study Bible. Later, they would have a brief evaluation while on their way to lunch with Jack’s parents at the club, agreeing on the demerits of the sermon.

The person who queried, “Did you mean to criticize or to praise Jimmy Carter? I never was much on Carter,” was smilingly shoved on ahead and out the door.

Pastor’s wife, Mary Lupino—without much acknowledgment by her husband standing at the door—handed off her indigent wards to her assistant, Hank Judd, local attorney, public defender, and agitator on behalf of and in servant ministry to the less fortunate. The children flew out the door like birds released from a cage, at last on the way to collect their just desserts at McDonald’s.

“Didn’t we have more lilies last Easter? Seemed to me like we had more lilies. Did we have more lilies?” was randomly overheard in the post-service crush.

“The thing I love about this church is that you really minister to our doubts and concerns,” said one with eyes slightly moistened. “I wish I could have heard your take on Easter when I was full of questions, back in college. I guess it’s never too late to believe.”

Incorporation

Pastor Lupino smiled paternally and, with one arm, embraced the grateful parishioner, then handed her onward.

After tousling the hair of a towheaded young Kline, the pastor leaned his bronzed face close to that of Dr. Kline and said earnestly, “Sydney, I really need to consult with you if you have a moment.”

“Now? Sure, what’s up Simon?” asked Dr. Kline.

“Well, it’s rather personal. Could we step back inside?”

“Sure,” said Kline.

The two stepped just inside the narthex. Simon guided his parishioner to a darkened corner—in such a large church, one could easily find a dark corner when necessary—where he whispered, “Sydney, this morning there was blood in my stool. Not a great amount, mind you, but enough to throw me. It’s all I can think about. I started to call you to see if it was safe for me to preach.”

“Was it good red blood—not black but red?” Kline asked.

“Why yes. Blood. At first I thought it might have been something red that I ate, strawberries or something, but no, it’s blood,” Simon responded. “Blood.”

“Has your rectum been sore? Tender?”

“Well, yes, matter of fact I have experienced some discomfort, itching there. I was particularly aware of it during the pastoral prayer.”

“Congratulations, Preacher. You have hemorrhoids! Not to worry. Typical in a guy your age. Go get some of those over-the-counter suppositories, stuff one or two up your butt, and after a couple of days of greasy suppositories, you’ll probably be fine.”

“Are you sure? I thought it could be cancer. I’m terrified by the thought. You know I have it in my family. My mother . . .”

“Nonsense. This is what you get for the Lord not making you a jumping, running Pentecostal. We mainliners are way too sedentary! You have probably been sitting on your butt too much—or straining during your golf swing,” said the doctor, smacking him on the arm.

“I don’t play golf,” replied Simon.

“Say, our Bible study on Wednesdays has been going great guns,” said Kline. “Half the hospital staff is there. Simon, you ought to come. It’s really just about the best experience I’ve had with God’s word in a long time. From six to seven every Wednesday morning.”

Guiding Kline back toward his waiting family, Simon said through a smile, “No thanks. And happy Easter to you.”