

'The Alleluias are back...'

Donald Grayston

Thus writes Thomas Merton, at the last Easter of his life, 1968.¹ Lent's long shadows have departed, and with Easter and its alleluias have once again come the gifts of the new fire, the new light, and the new life.

In the northern hemisphere, of course, the new-life dimension of Easter is supported by the season. At Easter in 1948, Merton rejoices in the blossoming of the apple trees. 'The willow is full of green.

Things are in bud,' he adds.² In 1965, he strikes the same note, writing from his hermitage:

Peace and beauty of Easter morning: sunrise, deep green grass, soft winds, the woods turning green on the hills across the valley (and here too). I got up and said the old office of Lauds, and there was a wood-thrush singing fourth-tone mysteries in the

deep ringing pine wood...
behind the hermitage.³

The night before he had gone down to the abbey for the Easter Vigil by the light of the moon, and come back, 'also by full moonlight, the woods being perfectly silent, and the moon so strong one could hardly see any stars.'⁴ With grass and trees and birds and moon and stars, as well as with his brothers in the community, and with Christians everywhere, Thomas Merton, one with creation, celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, now to be called Christ.

Easter itself, however, is meaningless, as we know, without Good Friday. Merton holds them together in a journal entry from 1949: 'Good Friday and Easter,' he says, 'the center of everything.'⁵ Curiously, on the afternoon of the Easter Day at the end of his first visit to Gethsemani in 1941 he makes the Stations of the Cross,⁶ which strikes me as strange and out of sequence. But he was at a moment in his life when he was hungry for the active liturgical expression of his developing sense of vocation, which, with the apple trees, was coming into full bloom.

In the years following, the regular sequence is restored; and his celebration of the resurrection is grounded in his engagement with the Cross. He offers himself to be crucified with Jesus, so that he may rise with Jesus. In *A Christian Looks at Zen*, he gives us a very deep

word about this:

...it is essential to remember that for a Christian 'the word of the Cross' is nothing theoretical, but a stark and existential experience of union with Christ in His death in order to share in His resurrection. To fully 'hear' and 'receive' the word of the Cross means much more than simple assent to the dogmatic proposition that Christ died for our sins. It means to be 'nailed to the Cross with Christ,' so that the ego-self is no longer the principle of our deepest actions, which now proceed from Christ living in us. 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.' (Gal. 2:19-20)⁷

At Easter in 1948 he had been in the monastery for seven years, entering all that time into this paschal mystery, which welds Good Friday and Easter into one indivisible reality, the mystery which offers us the template not only for our personal lives but for the life of society, the planet and the cosmos: death and resurrection. Here is what he said at that time:

Easter is like what it will be entering eternity, when you suddenly, peacefully, clearly recognize all your mistakes as well as all that you did well: everything falls into place.⁸

Mistakes and death, all we do well and resurrection, Good Friday and Easter, yes: 'everything falls into place.'

Notes

1. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 7, 1967-68, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) p.81.
2. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 2, 1941-52, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) p.193.
3. *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 5, 1963-

65, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) p.231.

4. *ibid*, p.232.

5. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, p.303.

6. *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 1, 1939-41, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) p.356.

7. In *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p.418.

8. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, p.193.

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