

Every Burning Morning

James E Laurence

*Now the power of Easter has burst upon us with the resurrection of Christ.
Now we find in ourselves a strength which is not our own.*

Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*

'The power of Easter' and 'a strength which is not our own' is something that I need right now, more than ever. Living with long Covid, struggling through a lengthy pandemic, and trying to lead my congregation through these polarizing times has been exhausting. I need strength beyond my own to face these challenges. And I often find this strength, or at least a reminder of it, in Thomas Merton's words. I have been reading and pondering Merton's writings for more than thirty years now, and he never fails to inspire me. But his poetry is a relatively new gift to me. A particular poem of his that is speaking to me as I look toward Easter is 'The Trappist Cemetery - Gethsemani'.

A cemetery might be a strange place to look for 'the power of Easter'. But not to me. It is true that the angel at the tomb on that first Easter morning wondered why anyone would seek the living among the dead. Jesus was not there, after all. He was alive. So why visit his tomb? Why visit any tomb? But I have spent many quiet moments in the cemetery next to the church I once served, seeking the living among the dead. Many who rested there were still alive to me. Their lives, my memories, their faith, my prayers for them and with them, and their dying witness to me, all of this was very alive. It all spoke to me, and continued to speak in the silence of that place. I miss that cemetery, to be honest. I miss spending time there.

Merton's poem is one that I can imagine him writing in the cemetery at his monastery in Kentucky:

Brothers, the curving grasses and their daughters
 Will never print your praises:
 The trees our sisters, in their summer dresses,
 Guard your fame in these green cradles:
 The simple crosses are content to hide your characters.

Thus begins this poem, showing it to be a kind of letter written to the brothers who had gone before him, resting in that quiet place. The tombstones in the cemetery where I used to walk were not all simple crosses, but they did hide some real characters. It wasn't the tombstones that spoke to me, of course, but the people who rested below them, and my memories of them. Lying now in silence, they await the final resurrection, bearing quiet witness to me as I walked among them.

Another Kentucky poet, Wendell Berry, in his poem, 'No, no, there is no going back', teaches me that:

More and more you have become
 those lives and deaths
 that have belonged to you.
 You have become a sort of grave
 containing much that was
 and is no more in time, beloved
 then, now, and always.

Yes. More and more I now contain something of all those characters now resting in their graves, awaiting their Saviour's promised return. Their lives have shaped me, and shape me still.

Merton wrote towards the end of this powerful poem:

Teach us, Cistercian Fathers, how to wear
 Silence, our humble armor.
 Pray us a torrent of the seven spirits
 That are our wine and stamina:
 Because your work is not yet done.

Merton's words have become that torrent that continues to work in me, his words and his life inviting me to wear silence as my humble armor. It is in that silence that I often find the power of Easter. Not the silence of death, but of new life. It is a silence that I often have found while quietly walking in a cemetery.

It is not just silence, of course, that I find there. Merton continued the poem:

But look: the valleys shine with promises,
 And every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ
 Coming to raise and vindicate
 Even our sorry flesh.

Yes, every burning morning is Easter again; every new day is showing us God's faithfulness, the steadfast love that never ceases, the mercy upon mercy upon mercy. Every day the sun rises and joins in the prophecy of Christ, reminding me and all who wait in silence of the one who is coming 'to raise and vindicate even our sorry flesh'.

My sorry flesh needs that reminder these days. And so does my weary spirit. It needs a strength beyond my own. From where will my help come? In the silence of prayer, the psalms teach me. And so does the Cistercian Father who means so very much to me. Wait in the silence that can be found in a cemetery, or in the simple gift of quiet prayer. Wait there, in the silence that is my humble armor, and that opens me to the power of Easter.

Thank you, Father Louis, for your faithful witness. Rest now, even as your words continue to ripple out from where you lay in the quiet. Your work is not yet done, your words still help to light my way. May they continue this holy work until Easter's lasting gift, a promise which offers a strength not my own, and a hope that burns bright as the morning sun.

Notes

The initial quotation by Merton is from the article, 'Easter: The New Life', dated 1959, included in *Seasons of Celebration*.

The poem, 'The Trappist Cemetery - Gethsemani', was first published in *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946). It is included in *The Thomas Merton Reader* and *In the Dark Before Dawn - New selected poems of Thomas Merton*.

The poem, 'No, no, there is no going back' (from 1993), by Wendell Berry is included in his collection *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997*.

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