

Sweet Easter Fortunes

Text: John 21:25

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What a lovely thing that Easter is not only a day but also a season. It's called Eastertide and it stretches on ahead for 50 days until Pentecost giving us lots of time to linger with the life-giving power of Easter. I want to do exactly that this morning by sharing a tender memory and stopping to take a few pauses within it.

The memory is of an Easter when my kids were small. More precisely, it was the day after Easter and we were driving to my parent's house in Vermont, winding up the West River Valley through the village of Newfane where I had my first parish. We didn't ever pass through that enchanting town without making a visit to one of my favorite people.

Elizabeth, LaLa to our kids, was among the saints of that congregation. She knew we were coming and welcomed us in with royal hospitality - hugs and hellos and happy Easters all passed around plentifully. She poured tea for us. And then she placed a beautiful hand-painted cookie-tin on the table.

LaLa nodded to both kids, "Go ahead. You can open it." She explained that the treats inside were Easter Fortune Cookies, a tradition from her German roots. Each one was glazed in colorful chocolate. And then she instructed that we would each take one and share our fortune.

Karen reached for hers first. She broke it open with delight and handed me the fortune to read. "God said that it was good!" Karen responded as she lifted her cookie. "God is good! Good is God!"

That's sounds so simple, I know, but what an Easter fortune for any of us. To receive as an original blessing that God and life are good in the very first instance. Somewhere within we all long to know and experience just exactly that. But of course it's not always easy to remember that when life feels harsh.

This past Thursday was Holocaust Remembrance Day – an incredibly deep time of darkness. It caused me to reach to my shelf for Ety Hillisum's diary, *An Interrupted Life*¹, published 40 years after she died in Auschwitz.

These are only some of those words: "Come what may, what is to be, I still believe in God and that life is good. Despite everything, life is full of beauty and meaning. God give me calm and let me face everything squarely." What an affirmation to make that transcended even the walls of certain death.

Tim went next. He broke off the chocolate edges first to try to get to the fortune without ruining the whole thing. He soon abandoned that noble strategy and broke it clear in half. Here is what he found: "Jesus is not here!"

I'll call that the surprise factor of Easter. Then and now it's still true. That which everyone thought was no longer is, and that which came to be slowly known turned the world upside down.

An interviewer once asked Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel what he believed his greatest gift was. He replied, 'My ability to be surprised.' He was referring, of course, to the human sense of surprise and wonder, and went on to say that without awe, wonder and amazement, no reverence is possible. And if no reverence is possible where does that leave the mystery of faith?²

Now it was Pam's turn. Her fortune brought us fathoms deeper. "I am with you always." That's about the universal hunger to know that we are each inextricably related to the One who is both the source and destiny of life, and that we are never truly lost to that even when we think it so.

Robert Benson once wrote of his own spiritual journey. "This is what I believe. We were with God in the beginning. I do not understand that exactly – what we looked like, what we did all day, how we got along, any of it. Then we were sent here. And I am not all that sure I understand that very well, either. And I believe that we are going home to God someday, and what that will be like is as much a mystery to me as any of the rest of it. But I believe those things are true and that what we have here on earth in between is a longing – for the God that we have known and the God we are going home to."³

My cookie held these words: "Peace be with you." Jesus said that both before and after the resurrection. But here's the thing. He knew it and we do too. This Easter peace of which he speaks is far more demanding than it sounds, and receiving it only is half the deal.

Two weeks ago a half dozen of us stood out front looking up toward the steeple. We were listening to Jeremy Schmitt play "We Shall Overcome" from the carillon in honor of Martin Luther King. And then, the toll of 39 times reminded us of the unmistakable Easter spirit that he lived - as few have ever come to embody.

I shivered as I looked up, remembering how profound the sacrifice of his life for a greater good. And also aware that for any of us to receive the peace of Christ, there is the reciprocal expectation that we actively become sources of peace ourselves. And, more soberly, I thought of how we are not doing so well at bringing the dream of Jesus or Martin to life.

Please: may these Easter fortunes and more abound everywhere! The goodness of God, the surprise of life, the love of God that never leaves us, and the abiding peace of Christ toward which we all aspire.

These are surely not all that Easter is about, but for today, they are good and plenty, and enough! Amen.

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¹ ETTY HILLISUM. [An Interrupted Life](#). Owl Books, 1996, p. 205.

² Peter W. Marty. "Caught By Surprise" in [Christian Century](#), June 7, 2017, p. 3.

³ Robert Benson. [Between the Dreaming and the Coming True](#). Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 4-5.