
Giving Back Glory this Easter Season—Maybe!

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year C**

At last. I've been waiting for two weeks to tell this story. At last! And thank goodness. Thank goodness for the opportunity to tell the story that's been bursting to break out from inside of me. Yes, I've told it privately to a few people. But now I've got you people—you people giving me this opportunity to tell an Easter story; my Easter story for this season. Oh yes, I've got more than one Easter story for this season. But this one belongs to the whole church. It's like today's gospel reading declares: 'Now is the time for our Lord to be glorified.'

Yes, now is the time to tell these kinds of stories out loud and in public; stories of our Easter experiences, where we reclaim for ourselves, and reclaim for the world to hear, that we are Easter people. Now at last we get to show off how an Easter people glorifies God and proclaims whose people we are: people of the Resurrection; people who have one key story to tell—how life bursts forth out of death; new things out of old, found things out of our losses, truth out of falsehoods; God's reality out of our degraded or failed realities.

This is how it happened for me two weeks ago. A beloved friend, for whom I would go to any lengths to give aid and support, telephoned me early one morning, awaking me from sleep, and in a panic explained that she had lost her wallet: credit cards, money, and ID cards. She quickly reminded me of her international flight scheduled for the next day, and wailed to me, 'Thee, what am I going to do? I've checked by bank account, and nothing has been withdrawn yet. But if I have to cancel those cards and get new ones, then I'll need to stay here for the rest of the week and reschedule my flight and pay more money for all that.'

Still groggy from sleep, I immediately went into rescue mode, which is what I do. Yep, I'm that guy! First off, my impulse was to reassure her that we can handle this. 'Be at peace, dear, be at peace. We will do what's necessary. People love you; people love to help you,' I declared. And I may have added at least to myself, 'Let's see what God can do. I'll do my part. Let's see what can happen.' After we got off the phone, I proceeded in the next couple of hours to try to get through to the restaurant where she remembered having opened the wallet to use her card the night before. We hoped, of course, that someone had found the wallet and given it to the restaurant staff for safe keeping. But there was no answer to my telephone calling: no recording, no emergency number to call or way to make further contact.

My next step was going online on the internet. Soon I discovered the bad news that they were not scheduled to open that day or the next. They are one of those businesses that takes two days off and would not reopen until the day after my friend's flight was scheduled to depart. Not to be outdone, I desperately drove there to see if there was anything posted on the building; a desperate strategy indeed, to see if a phone number was affixed there about how to get through to anyone in an emergency. No, nothing there of course! No way to get into an empty, locked building; no one in sight to ask if someone had turned in a missing wallet.

At that point it was time to report back to my friend and update her on my progress. She was much calmer by now, and that's when we had a second conversation that is key for what I want to share with you today. First, I reported the bad news that the restaurant was closed for the next two days. However, I hastened to add, I took the next step to 'work the problem' by driving to the location and checking the building to see if there were an emergency number posted anywhere. No such luck, I told her.

That's when I said to her the phrase that I want you to remember most about this story. It's a kind of current-day proverb that we say in my church circles, and maybe you've heard it before here in the South or around the country. We say it to encourage each other to keep our hopes up; to have faith in God no matter what. And so,

I said to her, 'God is good all the time.' Have you heard it before? 'God is good all the time!' And then, as you may know, we add on to that phrase to make it more emphatic, more specific, more impactful for encouraging our faith: 'God is good all the time *in Atlanta!*,' for example, or 'God is good all the time *in Georgia!*' we might say, or—just to play around with you a little bit, we might say, 'God is good all the time *in Buckhead!*' Yes, 'God is good all the time in my house and yours,' in my neighborhood and yours, in my circumstances and yours; that's our faith declaration.

Well, here is what my friend said in response to me that day. As a sister believer she repeated back to me the phrase, 'God is good all the time,' but then she added one little word: *maybe*. "God is good all the time—maybe." Yep, that's what she said alright. "God is good all the time—maybe." Now I, as a priest and pastor—not to mention being a born-again, Bible-preaching, long-time Charismatic miracle believer—as I say, me being someone who is all that: I did not rise to the bait. I mean I did not try to challenge that add-on word, 'maybe.' Certainly, from one point of view the word, 'maybe,' can be seen as taking away at the end of the phrase the very faith and hope that is affirmed at the beginning of the phrase. When we say, 'God is good *all the time*,' we intend to be saying God is good no matter what the circumstances; without a doubt, no questions asked, you gotta believe, say it like you mean it, etc. etc. And you can hear the contrast if I play around with the tone with a question mark, 'God is good all the time—*maybe?*'

But in fact, church friends and friends of Christ, in fact, what I'm also sharing with you here today is not most of all *my* Easter story. For this is first of all my *friend's* Easter story about what happened that day. And it's an Easter story that highlights a kind of faith provision that I hear the Spirit providing for us here in this Easter season, on this fifth Sunday of Easter in the year of our Lord, 2022. Because it was on the strength of that little word of provisional affirmation, *maybe*, that my friend who is also a believing Christian got into her car and drove to the restaurant herself; drove to the same restaurant where I had already told her there was no evidence of help and arrived there to find that this time there was a delivery truck parked there. That's right: a truck with a driver who had access to the building, and who was able and willing to search for the restaurant lost-and-found, and who then delivered to her the wallet that had been left in that lost-and-found for safekeeping.

And here's the rest of the story: My friend realized that if she had arrived and departed from that restaurant a few minutes before the delivery driver had arrived or a few minutes after he had departed, she would have missed the miracle; the miracle of his being there exactly when she needed someone to be there. Yes, there was her wallet left in safekeeping for her to find, with cards and money intact, and with her plans for her week back on course. In her euphoria, as she told me later, she astonished the driver by asking him, "Can I give you a hug?" Drawn out of herself by her need to give back, she asked him a second time before departing, "Can I give you a hug?"

So maybe this is how faith also works, or how it can work or is working for many of us in this Easter season. Maybe, I say, and did you hear me just now return to that little word, 'maybe?' *Maybe* God makes double provision for faith affirmations. *Maybe* it is provided for some of us to have a robust faith about outcomes and experiences, as in our Collect appointed for today's fifth Sunday of Easter; that collective opening prayer where we beseech God:

Grant us so *perfectly* to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may *steadfastly* follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life;

But *maybe* God also provides, for others of us who are 'maybe people,' also a way to be Easter people. I have in mind especially those of us encountering bitter outcomes and experiences; those of us enduring things that are wretched, terrible, or horrifying. Maybe God provides for such believers too a way to be Easter people if we will simply act on the Spirit's prompting; as my friend did when she drove to that restaurant despite the fact that I told her I had already done that without success.

So it seems there is a spectrum of believers in our faith tradition. On the one hand our epistle from Revelation offers us a completely confident expectation and outcome for human hopes and struggles: not a "Happy Ending Maybe" but a 'happy ending definitely.' For "see," the Book of Revelation declares:

"See, the home of God is with the human race . . .

[God] will dwell with them as their God . . .

[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes . . .

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the old order has passed away."

[And] The One seated on the throne said,
"Behold, I make all things new." Rev. 21:3-5

Similarly our gospel for today envisions a related expectation that we human beings can finally become lovers of one another; that old enmities, and enduring hatred, and all bitterness may ultimately be redeemed and transfigured in a "new heaven and new earth" (Rev. 21:1). For Jesus said:

"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him . . .

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 31, 34-35)

Precisely here, with this final little word, "if," all of us may find an opening for our Easter faith. "If" and "maybe" we can find a way to have love for one another, then even our most bitter outcomes may be experienced as redeemed. Here indeed we may enlist that term, "bittersweet." For sweet companions in 'beloved community' can help one another bear even the most bitter experiences and sufferings, while we await the fulness of divine grace. In that connection the early 20th century Scottish evangelical, Oswald Chambers, said this while comparing sweetness with bitterness in Christian experience:

If God has made your cup sweet, drink it with grace; if [God] has made it bitter, drink it in communion with Him.

Oswald Chambers at <https://utmost.org/classic/the-supreme-climb-classic/>
(Cf. Christ's communion cup, the Holy Grail)

Notice here we are offered a sacramental, Eucharistic exhortation to commune with the Risen Christ even in our most bitter experiences. 'Drink both bitter cup and sweet cup in communion with Him.' But the sacraments of baptism and holy communion are not meant to be individualistic, private forms of piety. Rather, they are fully actualized in community with others. Here then is our invitation to Christian community as communion with Christ while, at the same time, belonging to and laboring to build beloved community with others.

But here also we may enter into an Easter euphoria to give back to God the glory of these great 50 days of resurrection empowerment. For if alongside of other disciples we keep trying to love one another as Christ loved us with self-giving love, then we will also do our part to allow for the miracles that can happen when we show-up to cooperate with divine grace. For as we keep challenging ourselves to care for and support one another with Christlike love, we will find ourselves better primed to venture out when the Spirit summons us to show-up; to show-up for the times when divine grace seems doubtful, or life seems too forbidding or just plain ordinary.

"What if," my friend said to me two weeks ago, "What if I had arrived and departed from that restaurant a few minutes before the delivery driver had arrived or a few minutes after he had departed? I would have missed him!" she acknowledged. But something else came to mind when I also recalled her gratitude to that driver for being there when she needed him: her impulse to give back something in gratitude. I remembered what a spiritual director told me decades ago. That was when I first learned to expect and to prepare for the kind of miracles that accompanied the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Book of Acts. Those were grand Spirit-filled days, like the times that followed the day of Pentecost that we will celebrate at the end these 50 great days of the Easter season.

What I remembered was something my spiritual director said to climax our experience of divine charisms and graces. Indeed, he said I should do this whether or not my experiences with God were bitter or sweet in my Christian walk. He told me, 'Don't forget to give God the glory no matter what. Especially when things go well, don't steal the glory from God and keep it for yourself. Give it back to God and keep giving God the glory the next time and the next time, and even in the bad times.' And so I have done here today with you, church family and friends of Christ, giving back the glory by sharing this story—and by hinting at many more like it.

Together may we do more and more to give back the glory to God for the marvels that occur as we experience—*maybe*—the coming of 'new heavens and a new earth,' and—*maybe*—instances where people love one another with Christlike love. And as Easter people, people of the resurrection, maybe we can do more to give back the glory when we find new things marvelously coming from old things; give back the glory when we find

lost things marvelously returned in safekeeping for us; and especially give back the glory when we find new life rising from things that were formerly dead. Maybe we can continue beyond this Easter season to show-up for, and to declare when they happen, the things that give God glory.

[For] to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-1)

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