

On the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to Jesus' tomb to say goodbye. They brought spices so they could anoint his dead body. Apparently the disciples should have done this macabre task. In fact some sources say that the disciples did anoint Jesus' dead body, but the women came after them to make sure that the job was done right. Some things never change! (I'm still trying to figure out why Christie washes the dishes I've already washed.)

In any case, the women are met by an angel who says "*do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.*" And then a moment later, they meet the risen Jesus, who says "Greetings!" They came to say goodbye, but He's there to say hello.

He has been raised. The women, of course, fully expect Jesus, who was crucified 2 days earlier, to be dead in the tomb. When you are dead you are dead, sealed off, inert, in darkness. After He is crucified, Jesus is a corpse, a cadaver lying in the tomb. In the words of Emily Dickinson, writing about the grave,

*Be its mattress straight, / Be its pillow round;
Let no sunrise' yellow noise / Interrupt this ground.*

The women who come to anoint Jesus expect his corpse to be cold and stiff and straight and dead, uninterrupted by the yellow noise of sunrise, even though they came to the tomb just as the sun was rising on the first day of the week. Anyway, the stone was there to seal the entrance to the tomb in airtight blackness. How they expected to roll away the stone to get to Jesus' corpse is anybody's guess.

But, what actually happened was nobody's guess. That He was raised from the dead was nobody's guess, even though Jesus spoke of His rising on the third day. But they all saw him die a brutal death, and also not an unusual death. Two other men died in the same way on Friday, one on Jesus' right and one his left. Yes, Jesus did some extraordinary things while He was alive, but death won out, obviously, like it always does. Nobody suspected anything different, and why would they? No one escapes the Grim Reaper. It was now time to say goodbye.

It's common knowledge that the two inevitabilities of life are death and taxes. You've just been through the one that happens each year on April 15th, and I sure hope the other is far, far away. Jesus was no different. In fact, did you know that Matthew 17 records an instance of Jesus paying his taxes? Granted, his methods are unusual. When questioned about taxes, Jesus tells Peter, "*go to the sea, and cast a hook. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you will find a large silver coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us.*" Speaking as a fisherman, what could be better? Paying your taxes by going fishing is a dream come true! Nonetheless, if Jesus, who was fully human, succumbs to the one

financial inevitability, why wouldn't he also succumb to the other physical inevitability as well?

It reminds me of my new favorite bumper sticker: "*The wheel stops for no hamster.*" The wheel of death did not stop, even for Jesus. The wheel in the sky keeps on turning. Shakespeare famously paraphrases this hamster bumper sticker (as well as the Journey song) in a little play called Macbeth:

*To -morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
/ To the last syllable of recorded time; / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!*

The wheel that stops for no hamster also seems to me an apt description of the way life works. I'm sure there are days when you feel very much like a hamster on a wheel: working, doing, paying your bills, paying your taxes, worrying, waking up in the night, trying to keep it all under control, and even drop 10 pounds in the process.

The wheel runs according to the wisdom of the world: an eye for an eye, you get what you pay for, this much in = this much out. And the thing about a hamster wheel is that no matter how hard you run, you always end in the same place. And the wheel, which is based on retributive justice, shows you no mercy. How do you match up against the wheel? Woe to the bad hamster who falls off the wheel. And which of us, from time to time, is not a bad hamster?

One of my little pet peeves, and therefore places of unctuous self-righteousness, is cross walks. I walk downtown quite a bit and get really irritated with cars that do not yield to the pedestrian (the pedestrian being me) while in the cross walk. It's the law in fact, as you will notice on the sign in the middle of most cross walks that says "Oncoming traffic must yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk – It's the Law!!!"

So this past Thursday in Holy Week I was driving to the hospital to see someone and I was worrying about this Easter sermon, when I came upon a man with 3 little children at the corner of High Street waiting to cross at a cross walk. I noticed that one of the little boys had a skeleton costume on, so I obviously registered that they were there, ready to walk across the street on the legally sanctioned cross walk.

Well, what did my unctuous self do? I just drove right on through that cross walk, a few feet away from that man and those little children standing on the corner. As my exhaust covered the children, the man yelled, "You're breaking the law, you know!!!" Indeed, I did know, and I do know. I am a bad hamster and the wheel will not stop until it spins me into my grave. I suspect I am not the only bad hamster here on Easter morning.

On Good Friday the wheel spun Jesus into his grave. The wheel did not stop for Jesus. As we said on Good Friday, Jesus was a fully human man, hanging on the cross,

bleeding, suffocating, despairing, dying. I imagine that even He wondered about His own promise to rise from the dead in three days. Jesus was not Superman, after all.

In fact, Superman is the perfect illustration of what Jesus is not. He is not from another planet. He is born in a barn on this one. Although He is fully God, He is also fully human. As one commentator says, He is not *“immune to our debilities or limitations; not hunger, not thirst, not exhaustion, not exasperation, certainly not speeding locomotives.... Above all he is born among us as Clark Kent; he lives among us as Clark Kent, he dies as Clark Kent....”*

So in Jesus Christ, you have someone who fully identifies with you when you are overcome by the wheel of life, anxious about the wheel of death, and on the wrong side of life's retributive justice. When you feel like your life is all sealed up in darkness, with no sunrise to interrupt, the bible says that Jesus Christ was there right in that same place.

And then something unthinkable happened: He was raised! As the angels tell the women who come to say goodbye to a corpse, *“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.”*

He *“has been raised”* is the grammar of the gospel. Jesus was the object of God's gracious, victorious activity. God is the subject. When all hope was gone, God came in and acted. When the wheel kept grinding and grinding and grinding, God came in and stopped the wheel. Jesus lay inert. He could not summon superhero powers to subdue the villain death. But God acted and raised Jesus Christ from the dead, dismantling the wheel once and for all. And in the process gave forgiveness and life to every hamster on every wheel, both the good and the bad.

And that is the Easter message for us today. The God who raised His Son from the grave on the first Easter Day, is the same God who moves in your life. You are His object! He acts upon you in your own inertness and death and badness. He rescues you once and for all from the inevitability of death. You still, as far as I can tell, have to pay your taxes, although Jesus did pay Peter's tax for him. But as for death and all it's creepy cousins – despair, and suffering, and sadness – they are now only the occasions for God's saving action. There is a tomb, but it's empty!

Don't be afraid, the angel says. In the tombs of your life, there is nothing to fear. In fact, in the tomb is where you meet Jesus! In a simple sentence, the message of Easter is this: where you go to say “goodbye” is where God comes to say “hello”. *“You say goodbye, but I say hello.”* Who knew the Beatles were singing a gospel song! The women go to the tomb to say goodbye to a corpse. Instead, they find a very much alive Jesus, bathed in the morning sun. The one they had come to say goodbye to says hello. *Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!”* – the first recorded syllables of the Light and Life that have no end. Amen.

