

WHAT IS ABOVE

Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

Well, it may be, as written in the Book of Acts, that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God,” but this doesn’t mean that God doesn’t think that Johann Sebastian Bach is the best composer of music the world has ever known. This is not a matter of partiality. This is an objective fact, and God knows it. Nor is it only God who knows this but just about every reputable music critic and musicologist thinks so too. Bach’s music is the music of a great soul. Only a great soul could write such music and so much of it. Did I mention, by the way, that Bach was Lutheran?

Both of Bach’s parents died when he was nine years old. Ten of his own children died young. Bach knew death and the fragility of life and possessed what one musicologist has called a “consciousness of catastrophe” and the way that tragedy can suddenly descend upon us. Bach was essentially a church composer, and among his many, many compositions are 200 cantatas written for the Sundays of the Church Year, their texts often suggesting that our lives in the world hang by a thread, that sickness and misery are all around us and that we are all of us in need of grace: God’s grace and the grace of human kindness. As much as anything else, Bach’s greatest music is a prayer, a call to God in the midst of human helplessness. The pivotal moment in the Church Year on Easter Sunday comes when the mournful chants of “Christ lay in the bonds of death” give way to brassy shouts of “The heavens laugh! The earth rejoices!” A new recording

of the music of “Christ lay in the bonds of death” takes place in the Lutheran church where Bach was baptized, and the musicians for this recording are assembled near the baptismal font. Alex Ross, the music critic for *The New Yorker*, writes, “Listening to [this music] I pictured Bach’s parents looking on at the baptism of the infant and wondering whether he would live. They had no idea.” (April 11, 2011, p. 87) We might paraphrase this and say, “Looking at the infant Jesus in the humble situation of his birth, his parents might well have wondered if he would live. *They* had no idea.”

Nor did Jesus.

Oh, yes, I know there are passages in the Bible—mostly in the Gospel of John, written some 70 years after Jesus’ crucifixion, that make it look like Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him and how it would turn out and that he had a special destiny and all. But the best biblical scholarship casts doubt upon this for many reasons, and questions the supposition that Jesus thought of himself as the messiah. Indeed, it seems to me not only most reasonable to have such doubts but fairly orthodox as well, since how can Jesus be fully human, as our faith tells us he is, if he knows things about himself that no human being could possibly know? We might well believe that Jesus had no more idea of what would become of him than did Bach’s parents regarding their son or do we about our own futures. Better, it seems to me, to think that Jesus died as he lived, a humble individual who presumed for himself no privileged position before God or among his fellow human beings. But if this was the case, why was he not forgotten?

In the first half of the last century, there lived a German Lutheran biblical scholar by the name of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann believed that the Christian faith, like all

religions of the world, expressed itself in myths, by which he did not mean falsehoods but rather stories that were larger than life and which give voice to the deepest understandings of reality. Such stories are not reports of historical events, though they may sometimes appear to be such, but rather, they are expressions of how human beings are related to what is higher and especially how human beings are related to God. As a case in point, Bultmann looked at the story of the resurrection of Jesus and argued that it was not a story about what happened to Jesus but rather about what happened to his disciples: viz., that even though Jesus died, their faith in him did not and lived on in them to become the faith of the church. For Bultmann, the resurrection miracle was not the empty tomb but the rising of the church from the wreckage of Jesus' death on the cross, and more specifically, that his followers came to see in Jesus the revelation from God of "the things that are above" and went on to preach this message to anyone who would listen. The rest, as they say, is history.

Many Easter worshipers, perhaps the great majority of Easter worshipers, will find this unsatisfactory as an account of the resurrection. They will have come to church to hear how Jesus was brought back to life after being cruelly killed and then raised to the heavens to sit at the right hand of God; and in so doing, making possible life after death for all who follow him. In this way, the meaning of Easter is in its promise for life in the next world, which is all well and good, except that we are in *this* world, and most of us have no desire to leave it and will go to great lengths to stay in this world for as long as we can. Add to this that there is no one who knows anything about the next world and what life there would be like, and I suggest we leave the next world to God in the faith that whatever will become of us when we die is and must be entirely in God's hands. If

God loves us as our faith teaches God does, we have nothing to fear in death. So this morning let's concentrate on the meaning of Easter for this world and the lives we are presently living.

Doing so, we find that Easter is first of all inspiration for each of us as individuals to seek the things that are above. Easter tells us that as Christians we have been raised with Christ and united to Christ and should as a consequence approach the world from the vantage point of Christ and see things with the eyes of Christ. In this way Easter affects how we live our lives: the life and teachings of Jesus are the basis for the decisions we make and our attitudes toward and perspectives on the world of our experience. We should be different people because we have been raised with Christ, and not in the future, but now! This is the power of Easter for each of us individually in the present moment.

There is secondly the way that Easter affects us collectively. Together we are the church that was born out of Easter, a community that has grown up in memory of Jesus to be the living expression of Jesus' life in the world. The institution of the church is, to be sure, not and has never been without flaws, and anyone who says otherwise is either lying or a fool. But even as we admit this, it is really quite miraculous that the movement that became the church would have arisen around the memory of Jesus and its message spread to all the corners of the earth. The tension between the institutional church and the spiritual community of the church is well expressed in a hymn we sing periodically:

The church of Christ, in every age
beset by change but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage

and keep on rising from the dead.

Even as the faith and hope of the first disciples were raised after Jesus' death to make them the church, so too must the church be constantly brought back to life when it loses its way and forgets its mission or wearies of its work in the world. And while I've got you here, I will tell you that Emanuel could these days use a bit of resurrecting. There is no lack of vision or spirit in the congregation, but the church is in need of the energy and response of more of its members if it is to continue to be vital and effective as the body of Christ in the world.

The rise of the Easter faith could not have been predicted from anything that came before in Jesus' life—no more so than the greatness of Bach's music could have been predicted on the day of infant Johann's baptism. But defying all expectation, faith in Jesus arose and has come to us, as it did to Bach, to inspire us to seek that which is above. We say, "Christ has risen! He is risen indeed!" But so, my friends, are we! Amen.

Resurrection of Our Lord/Easter Day, April 24, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church