

EASTER IS A PROMISE



Last Easter I gathered hope from Christ, who had risen, wounded, from the dead.

JEFF BRASS PHOTO

*Easter people offer hope to one another through the stories of their lives.
Are you one?*

PEG BOWMAN

Last Easter I could not celebrate the joy of the resurrection. I played joyful hymns on the organ and led choruses of Alleluias, hoping that their joy was real for someone in the congregation. But try as I might, I could not get Lent to end on time. My life was out of sync with the liturgical year. So I went through the motions of coloring eggs for the children, sprucing up spring clothes, planning Easter liturgies, and cooking an Easter lamb. But I did it all with a heavy heart and a burdened soul.

Nor was there a miraculous conversion for me on Holy Saturday at the Easter Vigil. There was no dawning of light in my soul at sunrise on Easter morn. I just could not celebrate the joy of the resurrection. Events in my life had "entombed" me, and I felt that I was experiencing a living death. Since I could not celebrate with joy, I was tempted not to celebrate at all. I thought that Easter would be a lie for me.

Instead, last Easter was possibly the best of my life. Definitely it was the holiest. It was also as true an Easter for me as any Easter could be because it was a feast of hope. Clinging with all my might to my faith, I read the Easter scriptures and sang the Easter songs with new eyes. From my

place in a tomb of sorrow and humiliation, I began to learn some new truths about Easter.

As the Paschal candle pierced the darkness during the Easter Vigil, I remembered that this Holy Saturday liturgy, with its fire and water and exultant cries about necessary sin, celebrates "in retrospect." No one was present when Jesus emerged from his tomb. We say to him now what no one said to him then. We keep vigil now as no one knew to do then.

Jesus emerged alone, and we have no record of his struggle. We remember the terrible violence of his death, the complete exhaustion of all of his strength, and the total emptying of his heart. All we know of his emergence from the tomb is that when he looked down at his body *his wounds*

were still there. In fact, it was by those very wounds that he proved who he was to his friends.

Last Easter was not the time for my own emergence from sorrow. It was a time for the wordless faith that so many people report "was the only thing that got me through." It was a time for gathering hope, like a tap root gathers nutrients long before a visible plant can emerge above the ground.

Last Easter I gathered hope from Christ, who had risen, wounded, from the dead, so that all of us could rise from our deaths, too. Gradually I began to notice and gather hope too, from the many truly "Easter people" I found all around me. Bearing their own wounds and scars, they are living witnesses that Christ has triumphed over death for all of us. For me, they are proof, as the living Jesus is proof, that death has no lasting power over us. Joyless though I was, I found I was not hopeless.

My Easter People

My friend Kathy, one of several friends who 'stood vigil' near me as I struggled to new life last spring, shared with me a line of poetry from Emily Dickenson: "*Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.*" Kathy is an Easter person herself, for she has risen to life after personal loss and

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Where are you (emotionally and spiritually) as you head toward Easter this year?
- Who are your Easter people? What hope do you gather from their stories?
- How are you an Easter person for the children you teach? How can your story bring hope to them?

death again and again. Hope began to flutter weakly on its perch deep within me as I saw Kathy reach out to me, scarred with her own wounds.

I also gathered hope from Patty, rocking her new baby boy. Deep in her eyes I could still see the grief over her stillborn son of a year before, but her joy in this new life mixed with that grief to give her a look of wise serenity. As she shared some of her story with me, I felt that it was a retelling of the Easter story.

I gathered hope from Anne, recovering from alcoholism. Deep in her eyes I could see the sorrow over lost days and broken promises, but her new-found sobriety, and her commitment to Alcoholics Anonymous had transformed her into a new person. In her eyes I saw serenity, and I saw her new life as a resurrection.

I watched Eleanor and John come each week to be catechists in our program for mentally handicapped children. They were *beginning* catechists in their late seventies—he, hard of hearing, and she, ill with cancer. As I saw their smiles of joy while working with the children, hope whispered within me, "You aren't always going to feel this bad. You will feel joy again. These others did. So will you."

I knew all of these people, by their

wounds and by their lifestyles, as Easter people. I began to believe that I could be an Easter person, too.

The greatest lesson of all for me came from Emily. She was elderly and terminally ill, and in the face of death she was serene. She came each week to the Mass for which I led the singing. Before she died she asked me to sing at her funeral, and even chose the songs she wanted sung. I learned something more about victory over death as I sang for her. "Amazing Grace," Emily's soul sang at her funeral. "I once was blind, but now I see!" Hope whispered again within me, "It won't always be dark. You'll be able to see again."

But it was Emily's song of departure as we took her body from the church, that eventually became the song through which my Easter joy was restored. It took a long time past Easter for it to happen, but I am now, at last, able to join in singing Emily's song: *No storm can shake my inmost calm While to that Rock I'm clinging. If Love is Lord of heaven and earth, How can I keep from singing?"*

(Quaker hymn)

Easter is a promise, my friends. God always keeps promises. □

Peg Bowman is a religious educator from Woodstock, Illinois.

PLANNING AHEAD

Dear God,

It's Saturday night, and we left the party early so I could get home and prepare this lesson for tomorrow morning. Why did I put it off again to the last minute; what happened to all my good resolutions? Last week we had such a good class that I was inspired to come home and get things ready for the next lesson. And here I sit again, rushing my preparations.

It's not really fair to the kids when I throw a lesson together without enough planning. I'm sure they can tell the difference. Aren't we trying to teach them that you are a part of our lives all week, and not just on Sundays?

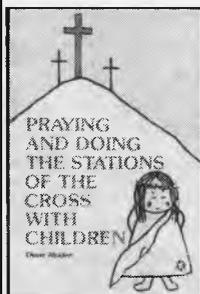
Please be with me, God. Give me inspiration for this lesson that I may reach them with your love; and give me strength and resolve to carry this class with me through the week and be able to plan ahead for next week!

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