

Easter – March 23, 2008
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Growing up, my brothers and I, when we were vying with one another used to compete to get the last word in. If it was an argument, the continuing exchange might drag on for hours. We still do it today, although it's usually just belaboring an old, very bad joke. Sometimes it'll go on for days via email, each of us trying to top the other or at least get a rise out of one of us.

A few minutes ago, we heard the story of Peter and John running to discover an empty tomb. In the weeks to come you'll hear of Thomas and his witness, of an encounter with the risen Christ over a loaf of bread, and the words of promise that declare that none will ever be taken from Jesus. What do we make of these stories? One thing is that they are not just about Easter, but about Jesus' entire life, death, and resurrection. Even more, they are our story – the story of our redemption. These gospels tell us that Jesus is not only the first word of all creation, he is the last word – a word that tops all others and gets a rise out of all of us!

Jesus took all our anxieties, fears, and sins into the Garden of Gethsemane, infused them with love, and made hope the last word. Jesus took our hurt, suffering, pain, disillusionment, and betrayal upon himself in his passion, infused them with love, and made wholeness the last word. Jesus took death, our most dreaded enemy, upon himself at Calvary infused it with love, and made eternal life the last word.

All the words to describe the limitations which confine human existence have become next-to-the-last words. Our redemption means that a love so full, so rich, so universal, so powerful, and so complete has shattered these human words that confine us, once and for all. "Jesus died for our sins" means that human limitations, including sin, are not final: life is. Jesus took our limited human condition upon himself and transformed it by his unlimited love.

How did you get here today? Drive, walk, stroll, dawdle, skip...? Did you notice in the gospel story that everyone is running? That's because of the impact all I've said before had on the early church. John has them running because, in their excitement, the people of the early church simply couldn't keep their feet still. Frequently, it doesn't seem to have that same power for most of us. Perhaps it's because we have heard it so often, it simply doesn't affect us much anymore. Sometimes it helps to hear the same old story – the story of our redemption – in another way. Listen.

¹ Early before dawn one Friday morning, I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking down the alleys of our city. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice, "Rags! Rags! New rags for old! I'll take your tired rags!"

Now this is a wonder, I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping around the tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

"Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another." He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shone. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing. He put her stained handkerchief to his own face and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

This is a wonder, I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

"Rags! Rags! New rags for old!"

In a little while, when the sky showed gray behind the rooftops, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. Now the Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

"Give me your rags," he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, "and I'll give you mine."

¹ Walter Wangerin, *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, rev. ed. ©2004) p. 3.

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow ran a darker, more substantial blood—his own!

“Rags! Rags! I take old rags!” cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman. The Ragman seemed more and more now to hurry.

“Are you going to work?” he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head.

The Ragman pressed him. “Do you have a job?”

“Are you crazy?” sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket—flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

“So,” said the Ragman, “give me your jacket, and I’ll give you mine.” Such quiet authority in his voice.

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman— and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman’s arm stayed in the sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs, but the Ragman had only one.

“Go to work,” he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took the blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman, though he was weeping uncontrollably and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm and stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, and sick—yet he went with terrible speed.

On spider’s legs he skittered through the alleys of the city this mile and the next, until he came to its limits and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow.

And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps even to discover what drove him so.

The little old Ragman—he finally came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And then he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope because I had come to love the Ragman. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know—how could I know?—that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night too. But then, on Sunday, I was awakened by a violent light.

Light—pure, hard, demanding light—slammed against my sleeping face and I blinked and I looked and I saw the last and first wonder of all. There was the Ragman folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead but alive! And, besides that, so healthy!

There was no sign of sorrow or of age, and all the rags he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I myself got out of the junk car and walked to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him.

Then I stripped myself of everything and I said to him with yearning in my voice, “Dress me. Make me new again!”

He dressed me, my Lord. He put new rags on me and I am a wonder beside him.

The Ragman! The Ragman! The Risen Christ!