

“Unimaginable Sign of Hope”

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John 11:17-27, 33-45 = the raising of Lazarus

The movie, *The Hurricane*, is a biography of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter. “Hurricane” Carter was the champion middleweight boxer who was imprisoned for life, wrongly convicted for murders he did not commit. Denzel Washington played the role of “Hurricane” Carter. As the movie so powerfully depicts, after exhausting every possibility for appeal, Carter tells his wife to divorce him and to move on with her life. He explains: “I’m dead. Forget about me.”



In his own mind he was dead ~ buried in a cave, a cell, forever.

Carter uses his prison time to read and study. Eventually he writes a book about his life, a bestseller, soon forgotten.

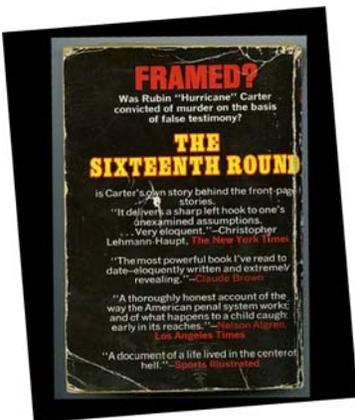
A decade later, a troubled ghetto youth, Lesera Martin, buys the book for a dime at a garage sale in Canada. Moved by the book, Martin writes a letter to Carter and begins a relationship and a process which eventually overturns the wrongful convictions. Carter is released after 2 decades imprisonment. He couldn't get those decades back. He couldn't get that life back again.



But he could and did get a new life, a resurrected life. He was dead but now lives again.

There was more than one resurrection in this biography: both Rubin Carter and Lesera Martin. Rubin Carter emerges from a grave of the living dead. Lesera Martin transcends his rough background, a highway to death, to become a respected human rights lawyer.

None of this is a coincidence. As Carter himself notes at a pivotal point in the narrative, Lesera's name is a variant of Lazarus. Carter says to Lesera that hate killed



Rubin Carter and buried him, but Lesera's love, the love of Lazarus, raised him up and gave him life again.

Resurrection really happens. Resurrection is alive and well and living among us. With the eyes of faith we recognize it.

In Sunday School, what's the verse we all memorized when we had to choose a memory verse? Everyone knows the shortest verse in scripture: John 11:35: "Jesus wept," only two words in the old King James. How many remember that?

What's the longest verse in Scripture? I don't know either. Nobody in Sunday School ever volunteered to memorize that verse. By the way, the longest chapter is Psalm 119 which goes on and on and on.



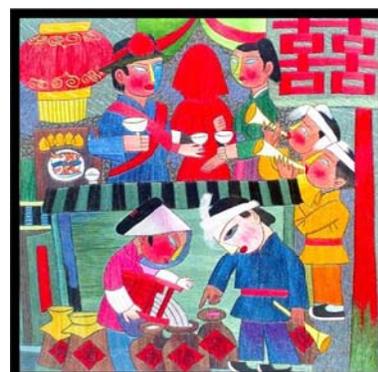
This passage from John also has one of the grossest images in Scripture: verse 39, where Martha reacts to Jesus wanting to open Lazarus' grave. She says: "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Perhaps this verse is overly graphic, but I never fail to read this that I don't recoil involuntarily at the thought.

Three of our Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke have a common proto-Gospel on which they draw and around which they are organized. Bible scholars have labelled this proto-Gospel the Q source ~ Q from the German word for 'source,' that is, *Quelle*.



John on the other hand draws from an entirely different proto-Gospel called "the sign source." It is organized around miracles, a crescendo of signs, 7 in total, each sign more awesome, more hope-filled than the previous. And the pinnacle, the most awesome miracle, the final sign, the greatest sign of all: Jesus, the one executed on a cross is now alive among us.

John begins with a wedding and ends with a funeral. The hopeful signs in order from least to greatest are:



1. the wedding in Cana, where Jesus transforms water into wine.¹
2. soon after, Jesus heals the son of a royal official in Cana.²
3. then Jesus heals a lame man at the pool of Bethesda.³
4. the feeding of the 5,000.⁴
5. Jesus heals a blind man.⁵
6. The next to last is Lazarus being raised from the dead.⁶
7. The ultimate, complete, final sign is Jesus dead and now alive.⁷



Most have heard our dear Charlotte Spenser speak of her experiences when she was widowed. All grief is deep and there is no scale on which we can compare sorrows. Yet the anguish of the loss of a spouse is like no other. Sometime after the funeral or memorial service when all the condolence wishers have gone and we are utterly alone, it often hits the hardest. Just as with Mary, Martha and even Jesus, there is nothing left but tears.

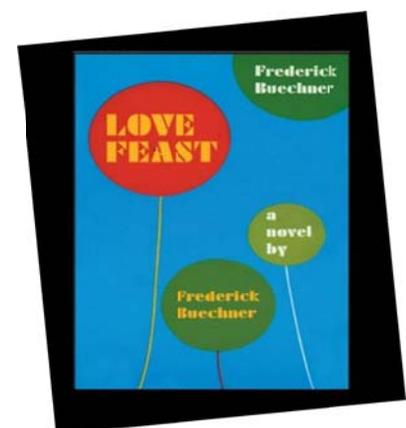
Who knows, perhaps 4 days after the funeral, Charlotte was in just that heart-aching place, grieving deeply. She cried out to God asking for, begging for a sign that her beloved was safe, resting in the everlasting arms. In this state, she went onto her deck seeking solace.



Now as she tells it, her deck was where plants go to die. Who knows why she was compelled out there. Yet there she was. There among the pots and piles was an Easter Lilly tipped over, upturned. And there she saw a sign, an unmistakable sign, the unimaginable sign of hope. There was the lilly for all purposes absolutely dead, yet it was blooming ~ two beautiful flowers rising from the stalk.

Bad stuff happens. Really bad stuff happens. But resurrection and renewal also happens. Leo Bebb, a character in Frederick Buechner's novel *Love Feast*, Bebb, the renegade, foul-mouthed preacher in the novel puts it this way:

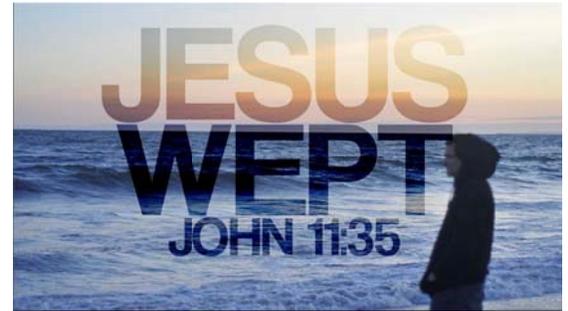
“There is lots of bad stuff in our lives, garbage, detritus, muck. But if we spread it around a little it makes the flowers grow.”



Buddhists say the same thing in an even more explicit and shocking way:

“The lotus, the most beautiful of all flowers, grows only in the foulest of sewage.”

So can you smell it ~ all around us? That's corruption. That's death hanging around us clinging like to Lazarus: the stench of a failing culture with moribund institutions; families disappearing, Christendom dying, ideologies falling, morality failing, politics dying; the death of our aspirations and a death-dealing world longing to extend its fetid life.



Can't you smell it: All is death. All is change. Yes, but death is not the last word. The ultimate word, God's last Word is and was and always will be: hope ~ hope for restoration, for renovation, for revivification, for rebirth ~ for resurrection. Resurrection is not only possible, it is inevitable. Death transformed into new life, overcoming all earth's corruption by the force of God's life for the ages. All is changing, but all is evolving, slowly, inextricably, inevitably into God's living realm.

The ultimate, undeniable and unimaginable sign of hope is the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the one whom God raised from the dead.

God got the first word. And the first word was "let there be light." And God gets the last word, and that most final of last words is: "Jesus is alive." And between the first and last word is our world and our lives and our calling and our mission, and occasionally in between all that are unimaginable signs of hope.

¹ John 2:1-11

² John 4:46-54

³ John 5:20-9

⁴ John 6:1-14

⁵ John 9:1-12

⁶ John 11:38-44

⁷ John 20:1-18