

Lift up your hearts



Amy Scott Robinson continues our series

IT IS a strange time to be a performance storyteller. Storytelling online is possible, but clunky. I've had to scramble to learn Zoom, and experiment. Despite loss of income from potential school visits, though, on the authorial side of things there's more opportunity: I now host a children's writing club online, and together we are dreaming up the next episode of my series *Gladstone the Gargoyle*, set in contemporary time.

This, along with home-schooling my two children, producing online church children's resources, and keeping up with writing deadlines, fills most days with interesting chaos.

It's all the unknowns that make the experience so difficult for many of us: what next, and for how long, and what if...? The painter Eugène Burnand (1850-1921) captured just such an atmosphere in his painting *The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre on the Morning of the Resurrection* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris; above).

In freezing the frantic dash between the disciples' hearing the news of the empty tomb from the women and witnessing it themselves, Burnand has crammed a confusion of emotion into both their faces: fear, shock, worry, grief, and a desperate hope.

There is dawn in the sky behind them, and the colour of the landscape is changing beneath their feet as they race the rising sun. The longer that one looks at the paint-



ing, the more can be imagined into the expressions of the two disciples: recent memories, perhaps, of betrayal and lost chances; and, for John, the experience of having watched Jesus die.

I can see them running through possibilities in their minds of what they are about to find and why; but they have not yet reached the tomb. The shock of the bad news is still fresh, and the good news of the resurrection is still around the corner.

Bible passage: It is the same place in which Martha finds herself in John 11.24 as she responds to Jesus's assertion that her brother will rise again. "I know he will rise again on the last day," she says in an impatient tone, making an astonishing statement of faith and pushing it aside in one breath.

I can almost hear her unspoken follow-up: "But what about *now*?" This extraordinary woman, who, every time we meet her in the Gospels, is comfortable bossing Jesus about and making herself heard, has a secure belief in the resurrection on the last day, but is not about to pretend that it solves the fact that Lazarus died when Jesus wasn't there.

For Martha, the physical presence of Jesus in that precise moment was the only thing that would do; and, sometimes, I would like to join her in her frustration. She tells Jesus firmly that she believes that he is the Christ, the son of God, and in that mo-

ment, for her, this belief only drives home the pain of knowing that, if Jesus had been there, her brother would not have died. For her, too, though, the shock of the bad news is still fresh, and the good news is still around the corner.

THE coronavirus situation seems like a prolonged version of these in-between moments, with all the turmoil and questions they hold. There have been plenty of shocks and bad news; yet there is a comfort to be found in not just knowing and believing but imagining and dwelling in the end of the story.

The **book** extract that I have chosen comes from Book Nine, chapter ten, of Augustine's *Confessions*, in which he remembers leaning in a window with his mother, looking out on a sunny garden and talking about eternity together. Neither of them knew then that, barely two weeks later, she would be dead; and this moment itself becomes eternal — a blissful memory that points to a coming promise.

In their conversation, they imagine everything falling silent so that God can speak. When I see photographs of all the eerie, empty public spaces around the world, I hear echoes of this passage:

"If, for any man, the tumult of the flesh were silent; if the images of the earth, the

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waters and the air were silent; if the poles were silent; if the soul itself were silent, and transcended itself by not thinking about itself; if dreams and imaginary revelations were silent — for to him who listens, they all say, ‘We did not make ourselves, but he who abides in eternity made us’ — if, having said this, they were silent and He spoke, raising our ears to Himself who made them, not by the voices of angels, nor by the noise of the thundercloud, nor by the riddles of a simile, but by Himself, Whom we love in these things; were we to hear Him without them . . . and if it continued like this . . . would it not be entering into the joy of the Lord?”

I HAVE a favourite **prayer**, written out and in a picture frame, which has been with us ever since we got married. It’s from *A Common Prayer* by the Australian poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig.

I think I love it because I really believe in the God of surprises: the God who plays with our expectations and, in doing so, can catch us off guard in a holy place; the God

who didn’t turn up in time to heal Lazarus, and took the time to talk to Martha about eternity before raising her brother from the dead; the God whose tomb was empty when John skidded to a halt at the entrance and Peter raced headlong in; the God who inhabits the in-between, but reminds us of the end of the story.

God give us rain when we expect sun.

Give us music when we expect trouble.

Give us tears when we expect breakfast.

Give us dreams when we expect a storm.

Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.

God play with us, turn us sideways and around.

Amen.

MY CHOICE of **music** would be *On the Willows*. It’s a setting of words from Psalm 137, sung in the musical *Godspell* as Jesus bids individual farewells to each disciple after the Last Supper. How shall we sing the

Lord’s song in a foreign land? And my **film** is *Amélie*, because of the community message, and the sheer joy of it.

Amy Scott Robinson is a writer and performance storyteller.

A prayer for midday

BREATHE on me, Spirit of God.

Awaken me to this moment of daylight’s height that points to the light of your Son that is with me.

Breathe on me, Spirit of God, as I spread my hands before you, holding in them the lost, the desperate, and the dying, holding those you have given me to love in my praying, holding in them my joys, my hopes, and my sorrows.

Let the eyes of Christ be fixed upon me and those for whom I pray.

As I rest for this brief moment, breathe, Spirit of refreshment, on all of me, that I may be drawn ever deeper into walking with the Son of Pilgrimage, by whose love I move and pray and delight in God. Amen.

(Anon.)

Quiet, brave endurance

RESIGNATION is an under-valued virtue, writes *Paul Handley*. Indeed, among young people it might not be a virtue at all. It would be disappointing if the next generation simply put up with things as they found them.

In later life, however, people have a better grasp of what can be changed and what must be endured. It is perhaps surprising that endurance is praised when someone goes out and seeks it for sport. It is unnoticed when practised by countless people in the quiet of their daily lives.

One of the most moving examples of this that I have come across recently — moving because so modestly and simply expressed — is a passage in *The Last Wilderness*, by Neil Ansell (Tinder Press, 2018). The book relates the writer’s visits to a remote area on the west coast of Scotland. On one occasion, far from help, he suffers the pain of a worsening heart condition:

“WE ALL get ill, at some time or another, sooner or later. When it comes to our own decline, it is never a matter of if, only of when. And we all have to work within the

confines of our own physical limitations. If I could no longer climb a mountain, then I would climb a hill. And if the only thing that was still a walk in the park was an actual walk in the park, then I would find a park. And when the time came that I could do nothing more than look out of a window, then I hope I would have chosen for myself a room with a view worth watching.

“I had no complaints; I felt privileged and fortunate to have been born in a time and a place where most of the hardships I had endured and wounds I had suffered were, in large part, the consequence of decisions that I had freely made. I had never

been compelled to go to war, and I had never been forced to flee my homeland for my own survival. I’d had the freedom to roam the world without the use of force; mostly I had been made welcome wherever I had found myself.

“Generations of people throughout history, and many people now, have had to live out their lives without these luxuries, without peace, without almost guaranteed access to enough food, or clean water, or medicines.

“My health might apparently be abandoning me, but I was able to be here, sitting under my tree in this most beautiful of spots, and I was grateful.”



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