

You meant it for evil, but God...

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Luke 22:1-23

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The social media algorithms must have been finetuned recently; every time I open my phone or get onto a computer, every church in Christendom has been on my feed inviting me to come to their church this Easter. After two years of pandemic limitations, it is nice to look toward large community gatherings as something other than viral super spreader events, and churches everywhere are not seeing everyone they were seeing in the pre-pandemic times, so there is a necessary and hopeful reason to look for ways to re-engage with everyone and remind them of the difference participation in the life together of Christian community. Perhaps that is why I have been struck by two things in the advertisements showing up in my Facebook feed inviting me to church this Easter is the tinge of desperation and neediness in these presentations and the cheerleader messaging that is central to these videos. What is being promised on Easter Sunday is just short of a theme park and an entertainment system and a little blue pill all wrapped up together. Somehow the gospel of Jesus Christ is never entertaining enough, sexy enough, and captivating enough, so we need attractive shiny-teethed news readers to promise us a big swag party to get us to come back to church for Easter...oh yeah, and by the way, none of those hype messages mentioned anything about betrayal, crucifixion, and Jesus' death. They were too busy getting us hype for the Easter after-party.

Curmudgeonly convert to Roman Catholicism, Richard John Neuhaus, wrote many years ago in his book *Freedom for Ministry*, that there is no 'prescribed emotion or psychic 'set' for true worship. [And yet, he reminds us] there are ministers—worship leaders, they are called—standing before the assembled people and saying things like, 'And now let's all be happy, celebrating the beauty of this day and affirming each other in the creative bond of caring...' and so on and so on. Neuhaus continues: 'such ministers are not celebrants but cheerleaders....I once heard, and now shall we pray with happy hearts, and I imagined someone in the third row from the back responding, 'No, I'm sorry. My wife is dying of cancer. My heart is not happy but broken.' I do not want to pretend to have a happy heart right now, 'but to rage against the unfairness of it all.'¹ This person is seeking the peace that passes all understanding, the peace offered through Jesus Christ, and is offered instead a painted smile. That's my problem with those videos....as they present the faith that carried us before we could articulate it, the faith that held us in some dark nights of the soul and days of brokenness, the faith that loved us when we were unlovable and forgave us when we did the unforgiveable, and basically what passes for

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 142.

faith or religion is a fast forward right through Palm Sunday and Christ's passion and death, and a soft landing right into religious amusement and the superficial promises of happiness and fun. I guess church welcome video with this copy would never see the light of day...'come to our church this Easter, this is a community where there will be a lot of stubborn people just like yourself who are often fragmented in their own lives and don't have it all together, but who have promised to love you in baptism and to work together to reflect collectively something of Christ's love for us all. You, they, we will often fail. In fact, we fail more frequently than we have any success to tout in a shiny video inviting you to You will probably be asked to give something of yourself or accept a challenge or welcome a stranger or be part of something you did not really have on your agenda, and there are going to be people here who are going to love you and care about you and you don't really understand why and don't feel like you deserve such love and you are going to learn extraordinary and interesting things about people in this community who have considerable gifts and who have decided to put them to use by trying to serve God quietly and use their gifts faithfully. And there are going to be people you care about so much you show up at their funeral even though you were not their family or coworker and there are people you may bring hem food when they are sick or walk with during a difficult time or people who are going to come to mind when you think of them as you sing in the first verse of the hymn 'Look who gathers at Christ's table...'So come to our church this Easter...just as you are...but you won't stay that way. Thanks be to God.' The other slightly annoying thing about those Easter welcome videos is that Easter is sold as being this big fun entertaining spectacle, but if you read all the Easter accounts no does it say anyone is having fun. Shocked, yes. Scared and fearful. Check. Unsure what is happening in their lives. Absolutely. Overcome by a miracle. Certainly, but a fun predictable amusing event is nowhere to be found in scripture. So let's try one more video copy for our Easter welcome...'Come to our church this Easter. You may experience fear and shock and become unsure about what is happening in your lives. The expectations that you bring with you will largely be misplaced and your life may be turned upside down and redirected in a direction you never saw before. At times you are going to feel uncomfortable and not really know what to do in the face of such a staggering miracle. See you this Easter.'

We just can't skip through the painful parts of Palm Sunday and holy week to get there. We are there in all our fragmented brokenness too, happy to sell Jesus out for a more comfortable and fun Easter. We are all there happy to show off our piety by refusing to let Jesus wash our feet only to pretend we don't know him 24 hours later. We are all there too on the way to the cross even if it is too painful to watch and beneath our station to join the rabble who show up at these grisly gatherings. The poet WH Auden in his notes on religion and theology wrote, 'As we were all in Adam, so were we all in Jerusalem on that first Good Friday where there was yet no Easter, no Pentecost, no

Christians. Who was I, I ask myself, and what was I doing? One of the disciples, in a state of spiritual despair and physical terror? Ridiculous...One of the Sanhedrin (perhaps)? No. I am not *that* devout a churchman. Pilate? I am no political big-wheel. No, Auden continues, 'I see myself as a Hellenized Jew from Alexandria taking an afternoon stroll with a friend, engaged in a philosophical argument. Our path takes us near Golgotha. I look up and see a familiar sight, three crosses surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. 'Really,' I say, 'It's disgusting the way the mob enjoys such things. Why can't they execute criminals quickly and mercifully by giving them, like Socrates, a draft of hemlock? Then, Auden continues, 'I banish the disagreeable spectacle from my mind, and we resume our fascinating discussion about the nature of the True, the Good and the Beautiful.'² And then Auden says that if someone who professes to be a Christian is asked why he believes in Jesus, he can give no more objective an answer than that 'I believe...because he is in every respect the opposite of what He would be if I could have made Him in my own image.' Thus for the Christian, Auden says 'if a Christian is asked 'why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Mahomet?' perhaps all he can say is: 'None of the others arouse all sides of my being to cry 'Crucify Him.'³ Want to try one more video ad copy? 'Come to our church this Easter and you will realize you are part of the fickle mob who shouted 'hosanna' on Palm Sunday and by Friday were shouting 'crucify him.' See you this Easter.

Seriously, we try to encounter the whole anatomy of Jesus life, death, and resurrection as we mark his journey to the cross from Palm Sunday to the solemnness of Maundy Thursday to the depths and darkness of Good Friday and into the mystery of Easter. We look beyond a cotton candy religiosity to a disruptive grace that is unleashed that we cannot control or easily turn into a commodity. Richard John Neuhaus reminds us that the celebrant invites us to 'lift up our hearts,' and we respond, 'we lift them to the Lord.' He continues though: 'Nothing is said about the state of hearts so lifted, only that they be offered to God. Our doubts and resentments, our tears and confusions, these are offered together with our ecstasies and gratitude for the amazing grace that makes whole our fragmented selves.'⁴ May that amazing grace lay hold of us this day, not just in the places we want it to, making whole our fragmented selves as we in the heights and depths and everywhere in between as we try to follow Jesus Christ our Lord.

² Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 113.

³ Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 113.

⁴ Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 142.