

Easter from Birmingham City Jail (John 20.1-18)
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April 24, 2011

They all waited to see what Martin would do. They had argued all day, trying to persuade the young civil rights leader to leave Birmingham. The protests they had planned didn't seem to be working, and a new injunction meant that the next time they marched they would go straight to jail. It no longer made sense to stay. What made the most sense, the group reasoned, was to return to their homes and churches to preach for Easter weekend. Afterwards, they might regroup and perhaps come up with a new strategy. It didn't seem there was much choice as they sat together in the small suite at the Gaston Hotel. Yet Martin was the leader of the movement and all eyes looked to him. He needed some time, he told them, to meditate and pray. Martin stood up, walked toward his bedroom, and told them he'd be back in a while. He wore the starched shirt and tie of a preacher as he disappeared behind a closed door.

The group waited and waited and finally the door opened again. Martin walked into the room in a change of clothes. He wore blue jeans and a work shirt. According to his biographer, Taylor Branch, everybody knew what that meant: "The fact that he came out in blue jeans is announcing, 'I'm not going to the service with the flowers and the anthems and the great choirs on Easter. I'm going somewhere in blue jeans,' which meant jail."¹

No one can say what happened to Martin when he went into his room to pray. But it might be said with some conviction that he came out of that room a new man. For the life he lived afterwards was completely different; it was the new life that stepped outside

¹ *The American Experience*, "Citizen King," episode 187, January 19, 2004.

of the church that gathered in Jesus' name to a way of being that embodied Jesus' mood of agape love for everyone. And if there were no linen cloths lying in the room where he had prayed, then there were his church clothes, lying perhaps in a pile. The old Martin was nowhere to be found.

I am struck by the image of Martin making that decision in 1963. For everyone knew what the conventional move would have been. Coretta had just given birth to their fourth child, Ebenezer Baptist Church stood to be packed to the rafters, and there was hardly anything better for a preacher than to bring the house down on Easter Sunday. On top of those enticements lay the urging of his core leadership that he stop the work in Birmingham because it was dangerous and, to that point, ineffectual. So there was a great amount of pressure, some of it positive, that he do what was expected of him. But instead he chose something all too rarely chosen on Easter; he chose to follow the rather radical teachings of Jesus. Martin chose a path that, once started on, gave him a new life. Of course, he wasn't the first one.

The earliest followers of Jesus were known for what Martin called their "gospel glow," the nonconformity with which they shone by "refus[ing] to shape their witness according to the patterns of the world."² The first Christians drew on the narratives of Jesus' life and teachings, including, of course, stories of his resurrection appearances like the one we've heard today. In the liberal church we read stories of the risen Jesus with a metaphorical eye not a literal one, believing that they do not contain scientific facts but rather spiritual insights. And one of the most sublime insights of all is found in John's

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 25.

version of the Easter story. It's a beautiful and compelling story, but one of the truths it offers is so small as to go nearly unnoticed at first.

The heroine of John's Easter story is Mary of Magdala. On Sunday of the first day of the week, we are told, Mary visits Jesus' tomb and finds that the stone has been rolled away. Afterwards, she fetches Simon Peter and another student and they peer inside the tomb to find not Jesus but the linens within which he had been wrapped. The men leave, but Mary stays; she weeps there until two heavenly emissaries speak to her and then Jesus appears and begins to ask her questions. When Mary recognizes Jesus, she cries out that he is her great teacher, and then he says something completely unexpected and haunting. "Do not hold on to me," Jesus says.³ "Do not hold on." Then he explains that he will be leaving soon and encourages her to go and tell the other disciples. Mary does go and what follows is presumably the birth of the movement that will bear Jesus' name; even in his absence it will keep him alive in the world by practicing the things that he taught and realizing his mood of agape love for all people.

I am struck by the power of an Easter story wherein Jesus says to those who love him most that they should not hold on to him but should go and tell the others. More importantly, perhaps, they should go as he taught them to go, carrying out his teachings by caring for the sick, helping the poor, and visiting the imprisoned. It begs the question of how we each understand the meaning of the Easter story and how, if we lived it out, we might find ourselves living new and very different lives. I don't doubt that's the sort of question Martin must have considered as he sat in jail over Easter weekend and wondered what he had got himself into, though Martin didn't simply sit and wonder. No

³ Willis Barnstone, *The Restored New Testament* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 530.

sooner was he put in jail than he began to gather scraps of newspaper and toilet tissue, anything he could find, and he began to write. It was a gospel of his own, I suppose, a new interpretation of what it meant to be a person of Christian faith who sought to live out that faith in tangible ways.

Martin's *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* marked a kind of turning point for him. In it, he addressed a group of moderate clergy who had criticized him for stirring up trouble in Birmingham. Martin wrote a response to these clergy that is about as sad, angry, and hopeful as anything in print. He said that as a Christian he had come to Birmingham because sisters and brothers were suffering there and he was called to use creative nonviolence to address their need. He said that he had been gravely disappointed by the dozens of mainstream churches that stood idly by, preferring the absence of tension to the presence of justice. He said that there was no longer any time to wait because the time was always ripe to do what was right. And he said that he had grown more and more comfortable with the charge that he was an extremist of sorts because Jesus, too, had been an extremist for love. Martin's letter was so full of life that it jumped off the page, and the path it laid out for him seemed completely clear. When he came out of the Birmingham jail, having missed Easter in the service of his faith, Martin's new life had begun. Ever after he saw that the only way to follow Jesus was all the way, the only way to get to Easter was to go through Good Friday and keep on going. In Martin's own words:

We must [each] make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soulsaving music of eternity? More than ever before, we are today challenged by the words of

yesterday, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.”⁴

Friends, the good news of Easter is that whenever and wherever we put the teachings of Jesus into practice, he is newly alive and so are we.

Then may it be so.

⁴ King, *Strength to Love*, 29.