

But...
Acts 10:34-43, Luke 24:1-12
April 8, 2007 Easter Sunday

Listen for how frequently the word *but* appears in Luke's version of the Easter story. On Friday the women left Jesus' body in the tomb, *but* on Sunday the body was not in the tomb. They came to the tomb looking for Jesus, *but* two messengers of God asked, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, *but* has risen. Remember how he told you that he would be crucified and on the third day rise again." The women hurried back to tell the men, *but* the men didn't believe this idle tale. *But* Peter, harboring some hope, ran to look for himself.

How many did you count? Five (The NRSV translation of Luke has six but my summary only has five!) *But* is a conjunction that joins together two phrases. It signals that things aren't always as they appear. There is more to the story. The disciples think that Jesus' life has ended, *but* to the contrary, Jesus' life among them continues in a most powerful presence. The disciples don't expect to see Jesus again, *but* in fact they see, feel, and experience him in far deeper ways. They think his influence upon them has ceased, *but* his influence becomes so profound that they form a community in his name, a community that spreads throughout the world, a community which we continue today. They assume that the biography of Jesus is complete, *but* the Author of Life adds a new chapter. In fact, new chapters have been written for nearly two thousand years, and new chapters are being written through our lives and our life together this very day! When that round stone was rolled across the entrance to the tomb, they presume that that is the end, a period on Jesus' life, *but* God changes the period to a semicolon, for there is more to the story. They think that Jesus' voice has been silenced, *but*, in the words of the United Church of Christ slogan, "God is still speaking." Gracie Allen said, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma."¹

It's like an old cartoon picturing a thoughtful scientist in white lab coat. He stands before a large black board filled with scientific figures. The scientist has written a bracket. Inside the bracket is the phrase "here a miracle happens" followed by an equal sign and an answer.²

That's Easter. *But* here a miracle happens. *But* here God is at work. Before the disciples can be too overwhelmed by a defeatist attitude, God intervenes with a life-affirming perspective.

Leith Anderson, a pastor, shares an experience that illustrates the differences in these perspectives. As a boy, he grew up outside of New

York City and was an avid fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers. One day his father took him to a World Series game between the Dodgers and the Yankees. He was so excited, and he just knew the Dodgers would trounce the Yankees. Unfortunately, the Dodgers never got on base, and his excitement was shattered.

Years later he was engrossed in a conversation with a man who was a walking sports almanac. Leith told him about the first major league game he attended and added, "It was such a disappointment. I was a Dodger fan and the Dodgers never got on base."

The man said, "You were there? You were at the game when Don Larsen pitched the first perfect game in all of World Series history?"

Leith replied, "Yeah, but, we lost." He then realized that he had been so caught up in his team's defeat that he missed out on the fact that he was a witness to a far greater page of history.³

Like Leith, we humans can easily fall into the trap of seeing the events of our lives from a single perspective, especially when things don't go our way. It is important to take time to thoughtfully reflect on events, not just in the midst of them, but as time goes on. The messengers of God who address the women in the tomb encourage them to remember Jesus words. "While he was still with you in Galilee, he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Once reminded, they indeed remember and they have a new frame for understanding their experience.

Like the women, we can recall the events of our lives, including the details, thoughts, feelings, and dynamics. With the experience clearly in focus, we ask the "God questions." Where was God in the experience? What might God be saying to me through this event? Does the event bring to mind any biblical stories, sayings, or experiences from my religious tradition?

Mulling over these questions can lead us to new insights and help us notice God's activity where we had previously overlooked it. We can reframe our experiences and integrate them into our future perspective. We need not live with a defeatist attitude, but we can live with a life-affirming outlook. It doesn't always come easily, especially when life has been cruel and our suffering immense. Be gentle with yourselves, not to rush growth and rebirth before its time. But be open, for God is still at work among us.

God is also at work through us. Oftentimes God needs our participation in order to continue God's creative work in the world. That is why the church is the living, breathing Body of Christ today. As followers we are commissioned to continue the ministry of Jesus. God needs our

cooperation. When we fail to uphold our responsibility, sometimes God is unjustly blamed. “Where was God? Why didn’t God answer my prayer? Why did God save someone else’s loved one, but not mine?”

A little Eskimo girl did not have enough food to eat nor clothes warm enough to keep the arctic cold away. One day a newspaper reporter came to her village to write a story. In witnessing her poverty, he questioned the girl.

He asked, “Do you believe in God?”

“Yes, I do,” she replied.

“Do you believe God loves you?”

Again she responded, “Yes, I do.”

“Well, if you believe in God and you believe God loves you, then why do you think you don’t have enough food or enough warm clothes to wear?”

She answered, “I think God asked someone to help me with these things, but someone said No.”

Just as Jesus was sent as an instrument of God’s intervention in the world, we are also called to cooperate with the life-giving power of God. Easter offers not only the hope of personal transformation, but Easter also calls us to align ourselves with God’s life-affirming work for the transformation of the world. If God sometimes seems silent, perhaps it is because we have not listened and followed.

There was a moment in the life of Itzhak Perlman, the great violinist, when the gift of his music seemed threatened. On November 18, 1995, Perlman came on stage to give a concert at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. Getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. He walks across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly. Then he sits down slowly in his chair, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play. The audience remains reverently silent while he undergoes this ritual.

But this time, something goes wrong. Just as he finishes the first few measures, one of the strings on his violin breaks. The snap as it breaks sounds like gunfire. People in the audience expect him to get up, put on the clasps, pick up the crutches, and slowly move off stage – to either find another violin or else find another string for this one.

The promise of music seems dead.

But Perlman does not get up to move. Instead he waits a moment, closes his eyes, and then signals the conductor to begin again. The orchestra begins, and he plays from where he left off. He plays with such passion,

power and purity as has never been heard before. Anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You can see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece in his head.

When he finishes there is an awesome silence in the room. Then the people rise and cheer. There is an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium

He smiles, wipes the sweat from his brow, and raises his bow to quiet the audience. Then he says, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.”⁴

The music did not cease; the means of making music had to be adjusted, but the music went on!

My friends, life doesn’t always go as smoothly as we desire nor turn out as we expect, but the worst is not the last word. God always has the last word. Our lives may change, *but* God is still at work. Crises will befall our world, *but* God is still speaking. Hear and believe the good news: Christ is not entombed in death, *but* Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

God of Surprise and Mystery, thank you for the meaning and message of Easter. We are grateful for the reminders that your love is stronger than evil, that life triumphs even over death. Open us to the wonder of your presence with us. Startle us into awareness of your work in the world.

We praise you for your awesome and gentle intrusions into our lives. Into dark crevasses of despair, shine your light. In the haunting silence, sing soothing melodies. Proclaim peace in the chaotic violence of our world.

We acknowledge that we are sometimes reluctant to trust in you. Receive our skepticism. Teach us. Stretch us. Grow us. Deepen our trust that you are and that you are a force for goodness.

Be a source of strength for those living with cancer, AIDS, malaria, and other life-threatening illnesses. Abide with those who navigate the ongoing challenges of physical disabilities or mental illness. Open new pathways to those seeking healthy changes. Comfort persons wrestling with the pain of loss and grief. Grant courage to those in the midst of recovery efforts from the Gulf Coast to the Solomon Islands to Mozambique. We pray for the sustenance of all who live in poverty, that they might be raised up to healthy standards of living.

Roll away the hard-hearted stones of hatred and fear that imprison so many lands in civil strife. Break forth with hope into Sri Lanka, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Offer your protective presence upon

military troops and contractors serving in other nations, that their physical and mental health might be sustained. Grant new life and hope to veterans recovering from injuries and seeking to rebuild their lives at home. Shed your solace upon families and friends who grieve for troops who have died.

We long, O God, for your resurrection power in so many aspects of our lives and our world. Use our energies in union with yours that the compassion and justice of Jesus might be revealed through us.

We lift our prayer in the precious name of Jesus, trusting in his life-affirming power, and joining our voices in prayer with him as he taught us saying...

¹ www.ucc.org.

² Rev. Ted Virts.

³ Rev. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, "Practice Resurrection" April 15, 2001.

⁴ Source Unknown. Received in an e-mail.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA