

**Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021**  
**Grace Church, Bath, ME**  
**The Rev. Frank C. Strasburger**

I want to invite you to join me in a memory. It was almost exactly 54 years ago—March 26, 1967, Easter Day. This pretty secular non-observant Jewish kid was attending Old St. Paul's Church in Baltimore at the invitation a close college friend and his family. (Apologies to those of you who've heard this story—and some of you have—but it just seems too apropos to waste.) The St. Paul's Rector, The Rev. Halsey Cook, preached about identifying with Jesus on the way to the Cross, and on the Cross, and beyond the Cross into the Resurrection. Now, I'd taken Religion 101, so I was at least familiar with the story. I thought, "Ok, I can identify with Jesus on the way to the Cross and on the Cross, but what is this fairytale about the Resurrection, and why would anyone with any brains believe it?" Just then my eye fell upon a distinguished gentleman in the second pew. I recognized Harrison Garrett, principal stockholder of the Baltimore *Sun* and a scion of the family that had owned the B&O Railroad, perhaps Baltimore's leading businessman. "Harrison Garrett believes this stuff," I thought to myself. "Well, of course, so do the folks I came here with. None of them are dummies. You can't just write off Christianity as the faith of the simple-minded." I wanted to stop and chat with the Rector but had a train to catch; that conversation would wait several years—but it did happen.

What was I missing? I was about to find the answer, but not because I relentlessly pursued the question. No, this one took me by surprise. You see, I'd lived a pretty charmed life. I was once asked in by a college career counselor, "Have you ever failed at anything?" I couldn't figure out how to answer the question. I knew "no" was the wrong answer but honestly couldn't come up with anything I'd failed at. Of course, it wasn't that I hadn't failed; all of us fail. It was that I was unable to bring myself to acknowledge failure of any sort. I was bright enough to have done well in school with relatively little effort, and I had developed a talent for reformulating failure as someone else's fault, or something that didn't matter, or something I didn't care about.

But when I graduated from college, I decided to teach English in a boys' boarding school. Mind you, I'd majored in music, and had actually sought a job in American history, and my knowledge of boarding schools was limited to novels like *Death Be not Proud*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *A Separate Peace* I was really flying by the seat of my pants. This turned out to be a 24-hour-a-day job, so whether the decision was conscious or not, two months after graduation, I found myself totally immersed. And I *loved* it. It was the first thing in my life into which I'd ever throw myself body and soul, and I could feel from head to toe that I'd made the right choice. I cared deeply about the kids, I cared deeply about my teaching, my apartment was full of kids morning, noon, and night, and I had never been happier. Spoiler alert: whenever you care that deeply about what you're doing, you're setting yourself up for some kind of pain—loss, hurt, failure, perhaps all of the above.

One fine day during Winter Term, I found in my mailbox a letter with no return address, and reading it as I walked up to my apartment, I quickly realized it was unsigned, as well. "You think you're doing a terrific job and that everybody loves you," it began. "Well, think again." And then the writer proceeded to rip me limb from limb. He turned out to be pretty perceptive, and while I wasn't guilty of everything of which he accused me, he hit home more often than not. Now it's not as if no one had ever criticized me before, but my strategy in those situations was simply to take them to lunch, invite them to tell me more about what bothered them, and then

persuade them they were wrong. Or, at least, persuade *myself* I'd persuaded them they were wrong. But that wasn't an option this time; I had no idea who'd written the letter. So for the first time in my life, I had no choice but simply to sit with it, to face it, to absorb it. I remember looking at myself in the mirror through tears and saying out loud, "You've really blown it this time." But strangely, I wasn't just devastated, though I certainly was that. No, I was simultaneously relieved. I'd been wasting a lot of energy keeping a balloon of imaginary perfection inflated which this guy had just popped, and though the balloon was gone, I suddenly had a lot more breath. To my astonishment, failure—which I'd avoided like the plague I assumed it to be—not only didn't kill me, strangely, is left me feeling more alive than ever. When I ultimately left my apartment, I naturally wondered at first who might have been the writer and how many of them knew about it, but almost at once I stopped myself. "Let go of all of that and just get on with it." And, miraculously, I did. Suddenly, I was more open to experiences like I'd just had. It was the late '60's, after all, and everyone was letting it all hang out, so it wasn't hard to find people willing to be honest with me. The important lesson I'd learned is that you don't die of failure, or pain, or loss. In fact, failure, pain, and loss are the principal ingredients of new life. This was my first resurrection experience, though I certainly didn't immediately interpret it that way.

One evening nearly two years later, I was back in Baltimore sitting in Halsey Cook's office, having asked to discuss that Easter sermon. Of course, since he'd preached a sermon or two in the mean time, he asked me to tell him what I'd said, and in the retelling, I realized I'd had it all upside-down. I had thought I could identify with Jesus on the way to the Cross and on the Cross, but that's exactly what I wouldn't and couldn't do. I ran away from failure, pain, and loss with all the energy I could muster until finally, I was dragged to it by an anonymous student who felt sufficiently angry at and betrayed by me to tell me the truth in a way I had no power to resist. Well that's the bad news. But the good news is that once I stopped running away from the Cross and instead embraced it, the Resurrection was no longer a fairytale; I believed it because it had happened to me.

The message is clear: there's no Easter without Good Friday. Just last week, Julia Baker, our parish administrator, commented to me that Palm Sunday had always bothered her, because so many people seem to begin celebrating Easter before its time. She's right. Palm Sunday is a kind of "false" Easter. We celebrated Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but it's a triumph mocked by a donkey, and it quickly turns to dust as the Passion unfolds. But because we already know how it all comes out, it's easy for us to escape the pain and, in so doing, to rob ourselves not just of Good Friday's horror but also of Easter's joy. Holy Week invites us to take this journey with Jesus as though we don't know where it leads—to accompany him on the way to the Cross and on the Cross, so that his Cross becomes ours. It is, to be sure, a leap of faith that Easter is on the other side, but there's no other way to get there. *Amen.*