

Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011: Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

The hope of Easter sunrise is found at the tomb amid the darkness and disbelief.

by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue

I was in Nashville with colleagues, and a few of us had made our way to the Bluebird Cafe, which might be called the mother church for country music songwriters. A quartet of men and women sang and played guitar for about 80 people from 9 p.m. to around 11. The music was beautiful, and I wandered out of the café with the honest testimonies of human nature and destiny stirring within me. Later I reflected on the recurring themes in the songs: missed opportunities, love taken for granted, the grind and monotony of work, failed relationships, the destruction of substance abuse, broken hearts.

The themes in the best of our indigenous music—blues, country, jazz—have a way of flowing from Saturday night into Sunday morning, as the Saturday night crowd brings its stories into the Sunday congregation. The hope is for a word that transcends all of the pain, confusion and boredom, or at least makes some sense of it. The Christian story offers that hope as it carries us along this same continuum, from Saturday night to Sunday morning, from the descent into hell to an empty tomb and a risen Lord.

"So if you have been raised with Christ," Paul writes to the Colossians and to us, "seek the things that are above." The church reads this passage at Easter for at least two reasons: it seems to be rooted in baptismal instruction, which was embedded in the vigil of the ancient church, and it is filled with the imagery of resurrection. In a concise way it connects the reality of the first Easter with the necessity of a present Easter. The past flows into the present moment, and all of this is located in the word *above*.

We Christians believe that there must be an above. If there is no above, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, if the dead are not raised, then we may as well "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." If there is no above, life is nothing more than a series of

missed opportunities, failed relationships and refrains from our favorite blues or country songs. It is difficult to seek the things that are above, but the alternative is more challenging: to make our way through life as if there were no above. If that's the case, then nothing computes: not the broken hearts, not the grind and monotony of ordinary work and not the passage of time.

I am aware of the danger posed by seeking the things that are above: the reader may worry about my cosmology or wonder if it's escapist. I hear you. But whenever I am around pastors in mainline Christian congregations and the devout women and men who sustain them, a recurring set of stories emerges—testimonies about missed opportunities, failed relationships or the rapid pace in which their children grow up.

We who make our way to sanctuaries on Easter morning might not have articulated these experiences with music accompanying us, but we have likely, in our own ways, descended into hell.

The hope of Easter sunrise is found at the tomb amid the darkness and disbelief. The shocking turn of events leads the disciples out of their grief and despair, and Paul claims this reality not only as apostolic testimony but also as existential promise: "When Christ who is our life is revealed, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Across 28 years of ministry I have learned that Easter is not only theologically essential, it is pastorally necessary. I am drawn to the hope, once again, that there is simply more to life than this life. Although I am attuned to politics and culture, to strategies and outcomes that are somewhat within my own control, I hear the words of Paul as a corrective to my own instincts: "Seek the things that are above," he insists. C. S. Lewis put it this way: "Aim at Heaven, and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."

On Easter morning we will sing the words of the best theologian in my own tradition, Charles Wesley. Before we reach a particular stanza, one that's buried deep within the hymn, a momentum is building with the affirmation, "Christ the Lord is risen today." I imagine the hymn sung in country churches where a young teenage boy is playing the trumpet, and I can see the relief on his face when he's finished; I can also imagine a small orchestra of professional musicians accompanying a large city congregation, with every seat filled. In either setting, singers come to the midpoint of the hymn and declare, "Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia! Following our

exalted Head, Alleluia!" Then comes a phrase that reminds me of our true human nature and destiny: "Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!"

This Holy Week we have been to both the cross and the grave. Some of us are carrying heavy crosses. Some of us, in this season, have been to the grave. But now it is Easter, and once again there is a miracle: we have died, and our lives are hidden with Christ in God. Look! The stone is being rolled away, and we hear the promise of the Risen Lord: "Because I live, you will live also." We will set our minds on the things that are above. Yes, ours is the cross and the grave, but yes, ours too are the skies.