

TEXT: John 20:1-18

Easter, 2021

#### THE SOUNDS OF HOPE

Early one morning this past week my wife Linda and I were sitting on our lanai having breakfast, and enjoying a delightful a concert, as songbirds were engaged in a round of call and response. I can't distinguish between most birds and their tunes, but I do know how to enjoy their music. I also know it won't last but another couple of weeks when the songbirds fly north, and then all we will hear in the morning are those blasted leaf blowers!

Living in Southwest Florida means such concerts are an annual joy, as we are treated to an influx of migratory birds as late winter and early spring bring warblers, orioles, finches and dozens of other species. You might call them the original snowbirds. They aren't here for very long, mostly during February, March and April. Many of them are enroute to far off places in the Northeast, where they will spend the summer, and have come from as far away as South America.

It is really quite amazing, when you think about it, how these tiny creatures are able to travel hundreds and hundreds of miles without benefit of roadmaps, signposts, or a GPS. Nor is it a carefree journey. As writer Evelyn Underhill notes: "Migration is not an easy thing . . . for a tiny bird to face. It must turn deliberately from solid land, from food, shelter a certain amount of security and fly across an ocean unfriendly to its life . . . [each bird] an ounce and a half of living courage, launching out with amazing confidence [midst] storms, hardship, exhaustion, perhaps starvation and death . . ." (*The House of the Soul*, 73) Amazing, indeed! And how can our feathered friends do this year after year? What drives them, propels them, draws them forward? "Hope," say Underhill. Hope.

Not surprisingly poet Emily Dickenson in her best-known poem famously compared hope to a bird.

"Hope" she begins, "is the thing with feathers -  
that perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -"

We don't know if Mary Magdalene heard any birdsong as she waited in the garden on that first Sunday. Certainly, she may have. Those minutes before dawn are often filled with a veritable symphony of chirps and trills and all manner of song. Perhaps they comforted her as she stood outside the tomb. We do know that as she was in a state of despair. She had literally built her world around Jesus. She had been healed by his touch and his love, but now he was gone. His death had been most brutal, most cruel. And she had seen it happen. She had witnessed as he took his last breath and gave up his spirit. She had seen Nicodemus and

Joseph of Arimathea take his body down from the cross. She had followed as they carried it away and laid it in a borrowed tomb. And now all that was left for her to do was to anoint his body with burial spices. One final act of love.

You've heard the story. You know what happens next. The tomb is empty, save for two men dressed in white, who ask why she is weeping. It is a jarring question, no doubt. A strange thing to ask someone visiting a grave. She is in mourning. Deep mourning. Of course, she is weeping! And now the shock of a missing body. Did grave robbers come and desecrate it? Did wild animals break in and drag it away. Did these two strangers move him? "They have taken away my Lord," she wails, "And I don't know where they've taken him!"

She turns and flees from the scene of her grief, practically running into the gardener. He too asks why she is weeping, why the tears. "Sir," she pleads, "if you have carried him [off], tell me where so that I may take him away!" (20:15)

And then it happens. He speaks just one word. Not just any word, but her name. "Mary!" And in that moment, she recognizes Jesus, and her despair is changed to hope. Like an old familiar tune, his speaking her name stirs within her all the memories of the past, and a newfound hope for the future.

"Songbirds," one expert tells us, "vocalize to communicate . . . [They] use [songs as part of mating rituals and] calls to keep contact among the members of a flock or family group . . . ." (Kyle Carslen, "Bird Listening," [www.birdwatchersdigest.com](http://www.birdwatchersdigest.com)) Parents and offspring even recognize one another's calls.

And Mary recognizes the call of Jesus, as he speaks her name. It is, quite literally, like music to her ears. "Rabbouni!" she cries out in response. "Teacher!" He speaks of what lies ahead, and tells her to go and tell the others. And she does. "I have seen the Lord!" she exclaims. "I have heard his voice! I have heard his song!" For hope, that thing with feathers, has perched in her very soul. And despite all that has gone before, it will never again stop singing --never.

Throughout the pandemic, we have seen story after story in newspapers, television reports and social media, detailing some of the real challenges faced by medical personnel as hospitals have periodically been filled to capacity and well beyond, struggling to keep patients alive. In both New York and later in California, as the health care system reached near breaking points, patients were being treated by doctors, nurses, and others, in less-than-ideal conditions. Tents were erected, convention halls were taken over, and on and on.

Some patients were able to be released in a fairly short amount of time, others lost the struggle. But some went through days and weeks of treatments, being placed on ventilators, hanging onto life by a thread. Many didn't make it. But others pulled through, and became sources of encouragement for worn down staffers.

One of those who had an especially challenging recovery was fifty-four-year-old Mark Schwartz. As he lay in his bed at Monte Fiore Nyack Hospital in New York he noticed something odd. "Occasionally, throughout the days there, [I] would randomly start hearing music playing, and wonder, 'What's that for?'" (NYT, 4-23-303)

Later he discovered that the hospital was one of many across the nation that play particularly upbeat and inspirational songs as recovered patients were discharged and sent out the hospital doors to return home. Songs like "Lean on Me," "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and the theme from "Rocky."

In some hospitals they don't wait till discharge, but rather play such music at critical junctures in a patient's recovery, like extubating, when a ventilator tube is taken out a patient starts breathing on his or her own. One ICU Director in East Harlem notes that lullabies are often played over hospital PA systems when a new baby is born. "Right now," she says, "Extubating a patient feels similarly miraculous." (Ibid).

Most people know that when you hear Code Blue over a hospital PA, somebody is in trouble. Deep trouble. And there are other Codes--Code Black, Code Pink, Code Green. At Lenox Hill Hospital, though, a new code has been added, which is called out at the time of a successful extubation. It is a tense moment, when the decision is made to remove the breathing tube. It has kept the patient alive for days, maybe even weeks. But now, as the doctor eases it out staff and family hope that he or she can breathe on their own. The tube is out, there is a moment when the future hangs in the balance, when suddenly, a quick breath, and then a rhythm. All around, smile, even laugh in relief. And then someone calls, Code Sun, it is repeated over the PA, Code Sun--followed by a familiar tune:

Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter  
Little darling, it seems like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun, doo da doo doo  
Here comes the sun, and I say  
It's all right

Commented [JD1]:

Commented [JD2R1]:

I suppose it's no mere coincidence that Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb just as the sun was coming over the horizon. I suppose it's not mere coincidence that as the birds were singing in the garden, as her name was spoken, she recognized the Risen Jesus. I suppose it's no mere coincidence that in all that she rediscovered hope. And so can you and I.

On this and every Easter, we can find hope that in the end God does prevail. That nothing, neither pandemics, nor civil unrest, nor violence, nor death, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love made known on that morning so long ago, and on this and every morning. For the sun has breached the horizon, the birds have sung their songs, and Christ has Risen. Christ has Risen, indeed.

Amen

John H. Danner