

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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*III Easter, Luke 24:36b-48*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Nils Lofgren ran away from home just a few weeks into his senior year of high school. He “put a note of apology ... under [his] pillow ... hitchhiked to the airport, flew to [New York City], subwayed to Greenwich Village ... and found [himself] in an upstairs dressing room at the Fillmore East with The Animals, who were performing there” that night.<sup>i</sup> After that first evening, though, Lofgren caught pneumonia and, nine days later, returned to his mom and dad on Chicago’s South Side. Upon convalescing their son, the Lofgrens made the unorthodox “decision to [allow Nils to abandon his studies and] stay in his old room while pursuing [his rock-n-roll] dream[s, albeit while paying] a reasonable rent, [following] all [the] house roles [they set], [and keeping his daily] chores.”<sup>ii</sup>

Yet that same winter, Nils found his way backstage “at The Cellar Door[, a club] in Washington D.C, where [none other than] Neil Young handed [Nils] his ... guitar and listened to [the young Lofgren] play ... [Nils would watch] four Neil Young & Crazy Horse shows that weekend, [after which the Canadian frontman] encouraged [Lofgren] to “look him up” if [Nils ever] got to [Los Angeles]. Still just 18, Nils *did* make it to L.A, and *did* “look up” Neil Young.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, upon their reconnection, Young asked him “to play guitar, piano, and sing a bit” on what would become *After The Gold Rush*, one of rock-n-roll’s great albums.<sup>iv</sup>

While best known for his collaborations – after his work with Neil Young, most notably for his long career as a member of the E Street Band – Lofgren has built an expansive solo catalogue over the last fifty years. My favorite of his songs, “No Mercy,” opens his 1979 album entitled, *Nils*. The recording begins with the backdrop of sounds from a Madison Square Garden boxing match, over which Nils sings:

*Out for the First, atmosphere is heavy,  
world title lays on the line.  
Strong and proud, he is much older[, but]  
I’m the faster, I’m in my prime.*

*Third Round late, he starts to tire,  
open cut over his left eye.  
Smelling blood, [my] attack is relentless.  
In the box seats, I see his girl cry.*

*“No mercy!” No quarter,  
no place to hide from me or the man.  
Lefts and rights never came in harder.  
“No mercy! Take it while you can!”<sup>v</sup>*

These first stanzas foreshadow a perspective uncommon to the boxing trope: unlike a *Rocky* film where the contest and its action carry all the meaningful suspense, the protagonist in Lofgren's song realizes early in the bout that he's the better – and by the third round, he tells us listeners he can knock out the aging champ. Instead, here the contender expresses ambivalence about whether he will follow through with a certain win, thereby locating the drama *within his own heart*, not as a battle with fear or uncertainty, but as a struggle with the righteousness and the consequence of what the world views as “victory.”

Today's Gospel appointment immediately follows the more familiar “Road to Emmaus” story, when “[Jesus] was at table with [Cleopas and his companion ... When he] took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them [... When] their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus; and [then] he vanished from their sight.”<sup>vi</sup>

After Cleopas and his friend return to Jerusalem to tell the eleven disciples what had happened to them at supper, today we pick up the story at the moment of Jesus' *reappearance*, when he says to all those gathered, “Peace be with you.”<sup>vii</sup> Now, despite the Emmaus tale they have just heard ... and despite the reassurance of Jesus' own words ... still the disciples “were startled and terrified,” the lesson reads, “and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”<sup>viii</sup> In response, their teacher asks, “Why are you frightened, and why do you raise doubts in your hearts?”<sup>ix</sup>

As in last week's Thomas story from the Gospel of John, Jesus offers his pierced hands and feet as corporeal evidence of his identity, punctuating his offer with the invitation, “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones.”<sup>x</sup> In response, our appointment reports the disciples “in their joy ... were disbelieving and still wondering,” or, in the simpler sentence structure of the New International Version: the disciples “*still did not believe [because] of joy and amazement.*”<sup>xi</sup>

So in *this* Easter story, the disciples' grief and fear do not carry the meaningful suspense of their “unbelieving,” as at Jesus' arrest and at his crucifixion. Rather, the disciples' *joy* bears the drama – their struggle with wonder and amazement at God's eternal victory becoming an uncommon obstacle to belief.

Returning to “No Mercy,” Lofgren continues:

*Back in my corner, they scream, “No mercy!”  
“Put him away! Don't let him recover!”  
[Yet I could feel]  
Someone's eyes drill holes in my head,  
It [was] his proud, determined mother.*

*[With her watching,]  
I wish another could do this thing for me:  
his eyes are flooded – God, he can't even see!  
I've hungered this title, but now it don't seem right.  
I fight back tears as I destroy his life.*

*Crying, “No mercy!” No quarter,  
no place to hide from me or the man.  
Right and wrong never come in order.  
“No mercy! Take it while you can!”<sup>xii</sup>*

As the young contender nears victory, his distinguished opponent’s frailty moves him, and he can see just far enough into the future to know that his own reign will be equally fleeting. Further, with pugilism the presiding metaphor, boxing’s mercilessness demands destruction of one, for the achievement of another. In other words, by this world’s rules, there can be only a single champion, humankind constantly set in competition against itself:

“No mercy!” we learn on the playground.

“Don’t let him recover!” we cry in the public square.

“Take it while you can!” the marketplace demands.

See, the world’s mercilessness so disorders the disciples’ expectations, that their *joy* at Jesus’ appearance prompts their *disbelief*. That is, the very idea that God would show mercy to them, these sorrowed believers – that love would triumph over loss, and life could triumph over death ... that news is simply too good to risk joy in believing it. And as Jesus shows the disciples his hands and feet, his reassurances only exaggerate their uncertainties.

Likewise, we encounter this Easter in an American moment when a deadly pandemic has coined isolation, anxiety, and grief as our most basic social currency. This fearful, exhausted economy has revealed the unfair, unearned inequality of our nation and our world, with racism seeding and stealing from so many of its unreconciled accounts. And as all of us trade in our – therefore, *different* – experiences of this COVID time, white violence terrorizes people of color – not with the well-practiced patina of post-Jim Crow racism, but murderous policing and mass shootings captured from multiple-angle video we must endure, almost in real time, on our televisions ... until, in the last news cycles of the week, a group of United States legislators have banded together in a “caucus” founded upon unapologetic and unvarnished nativism, racism warn as another bauble of privilege – one to be boasted, rather than secreted.

Easter in this American moment feels a bankrupt idea, not worth the pages of scripture upon which it is printed. And, so, confronting our ills, we dismiss this Gospel Jesus as a rube, one who chose weakness when he could have chosen strength. A sucker’s sucker, he was the very Son of God, yet he allowed them to hang him on a cross, scarcely protesting his violent fate, choosing mercy over might. Through tears of anger and fear – frustration, disappointment, and confusion – we turn the dying Savior’s words back at him, screaming at the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us? You fool! Why have you forsaken yourself? How could you allow all this? Why are you doing this to me?”

And in response to this doubt, Jesus does not ridicule our vulnerabilities. Jesus does not argue his winning points. Does not go looking to trade up to new friends who will better honor the work of the Gospel. Instead, Jesus leans in with love – his unrelenting, *annoying*, inexhaustible love. He asks, “Have you anything here to eat?” – I bet he even smiled when he said it.<sup>xiii</sup>

As in Emmaus, Jesus chooses a supper table as the setting for announcing the world’s reconciliation ... *a supper table*. See, rather than a boxing match, Jesus calls a dinner party for the “[opening of] their minds to understand the scriptures[. And after sharing a piece of broiled fish, he says] to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sin is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations ... you are witnesses of these things.’”<sup>xiv</sup>

For the disciples, for us, and for the whole world, Jesus’ Resurrection inaugurates a Community bound by companioning, rather than competing; by reconciliation, rather than wrath; by devotion, rather than destruction – a humankind that seeks the welfare of all and the suffering of none. And if we are to be faithful witnesses of that Resurrection – to these, God’s grandest hopes – then we must dare belief even in *this* Easter ... even if we understand ourselves weeping at the foot of the cross – powerless and overwhelmed – we dare belief in an Easter of God’s mercy; even if we fear ourselves as complicit in Pilate’s power – seen and unseen, known and unknown – we dare believe in an Easter of God’s redemption; even if we understand ourselves threatened with the very cross upon which they hanged Jesus, we dare belief in an Easter of God’s Love – of God’s claim to our belovedness, against which no one can take our wonder, our joy in this risen Lord.

Believing in this Easter for us and for all people, we declare: “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” trusting in the callback: *The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

Praying belief in *this* Easter,  
in the name of the risen Christ,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Lofgren, Nils. *Face The Music*. Fantasy Records, 2014, p. 16.

<sup>ii</sup> *Face The Music*, p. 17.

<sup>iii</sup> *Face The Music*, p. 26. Of his engagement on *After the Gold Rush*, Lofgren writes: “With great disappointment, I informed [Neil and record producer, David Briggs] that I wasn’t a professional pianist. Briggs and Neil pointed out to me that I’d won classical accordion contests, which I confirmed. They said they just needed some simple piano parts and they thought I could handle it ... Who was I to question the great Neil Young and David Briggs’s judgment? I shut my neurotic mouth and simply said, ‘Yes, thank you!’

“One day, during a lunch break, Ralphie Molina (drummer) and I stayed in the studio, jamming on the ‘Southern Man,’ half-time groove. At some point, I double-timed the beat a la the classic polka feel. We got into a roaring groove that Neil and Briggs walked back in on, returning from lunch. ‘What’s that?’ they inquired. ‘That’s the ‘Southern Man’ riff double-timed like a polka groove,’ said I, the accordionist on piano. Neil and Briggs loved it, and it became the new solo and outro groove in the song which you can hear clearly as a dramatic shift in feel and energy in this ominous recording. My accordion expertise accidentally put to great use!

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“Anyway, when we were finished with the album, Neil gifted me his funky Martin D-18 acoustic guitar that I used on the record. Still my most treasured guitar.”

<sup>iv</sup> While *Rolling Stone* can make me crazy with their preference for 1960s and 1970s rock stars, they did get this one right, ranking *After The Gold Rush* at #74 in their 2012, “500 Greatest Albums of All Time” (though their ranking of Billy Joel’s *The Stranger* (#70) ahead of any Neil Young calls their whole enterprise into question).

<sup>v</sup> Lofgren, Nils. *Nils*. A&M Records, 1979.

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 24:30-31.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 24:36.

<sup>viii</sup> Luke 24:37.

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 24:38.

<sup>x</sup> Luke 24:39-40.

<sup>xi</sup> Luke 24:41a. Different translations of this verse prove interestingly distinctive: “And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, ‘Do you anything here to eat?’” (New International Version); “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’” (New Revised Standard Version); and “And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, ‘Have ye here any meat?’” (KJV).

<sup>xii</sup> *Nils*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Luke 24:41b

<sup>xiv</sup> Luke 24:45-48.