

To set the scene: I stood up before the congregation, said a prayer, and launched right in with the quotes at the top. At the very end, the worship team came up and we went into Chris Tomlin's new song, "I Will Rise," with that wonderful line "Jesus has overcome, and the grave is overwhelmed, the victory is won, he has risen from the dead. . ." D.W.

The Pit
An Easter sermon by Dan Whitmarsh, 2009

*. . .His dying into the earth
begins the great reversal –
as blood from a vein leaps
into the needle, so with his rising,
we surge into light.¹*

“And then he was alive. The tomb could not hold him. The stone was simply blown aside by God’s returning life – not returning *human* life, which always ends in dissolution and death, but *God’s* life, which is triumphant over anything and everything that threatens human existence, including most of all dissolution and death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God has reversed the story, reversed the odds, reversed the direction – from death to life.²

“It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.³

From our earliest days, the Pit lay on the edge of our dreams. It was in the lullabies our mothers sang to us; it was the theme of the nursery rhymes we chanted as children.

*Lullaby, my little one,
rest sweetly through the night,
should terrors come into your sleep,
my love will be your light.*

And what terrors could those be, but the terror that was the Pit.

*Sing and Dance around the land,
through forest, plain, and town,
close to home we all remain,
we always fall back down.*

¹ Shaw, Luci. “Present,” in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, Mark D. Baker, ed. ©2006 Baker Publishing

² Rutledge, Fleming. “Reaching Out,” in *This Incomplete One: Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person*, Michael D. Bush, ed. © 2006 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

³ Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Falling down – as children it seemed so simple, the stumbling of boys and girls attempting their first early steps. But scholars point us back further; falling, they tell us, has always meant the Pit.

Our earliest morality tales, the fairy tales we learned upon grandfather's knee, often ended with the naughty child wandering too close to the Pit, falling in, never to be heard from again. Our teachers, our preachers. . . certainly, they taught of so many other things: how to be good, how to be wise, they taught us reading and writing, they taught us the ways of nature and the universe, but most lessons eventually returned to the Pit.

It lay a short ways beyond the back of our village. On the playground, boastful classmates would claim they had been there, they had seen it, they had heard the anguished wailing said to pour out on warm harvest nights; but we never believed them. Still, we wondered. Wondered what it looked like, wondered if the rumors were true.

This is what we did know: the Pit had always been there; at least, in the history of our people it had always been there. Our preachers told us that at the very beginning there had been no Pit, but that the people had made the gods angry; in retaliation, the gods had created the Pit as punishment. Again, more stories and fables, no way of knowing how true they might be.

What we did know was that the Pit remained, deep, dark, impenetrable. And we knew two more things: Those who went into the Pit never, ever returned, they were never heard from again; and we knew this: eventually, everybody went into the Pit. Both were mysteries. Our sages and philosophers attempted to explain the first; perhaps, some said, the other side of the Pit was so wonderful that nobody would *want* to return. Others taught that the Pit had no bottom – those who fell in would keep on falling, forever. But nobody had ever returned to tell us; it was all so much guessing.

The second truth was the most troubling. We all knew the Pit was dangerous. We all knew the warnings: Never go near the Pit. And yet. . . eventually, everybody fell in.

Or, at least, that was what we assumed. Some went out for a walk and never returned; others were seen climbing into their beds at night – in the morning, their blankets were cold and empty, and they were nowhere to be found. Ever again. There were stories that were told of shivering hunters in the woods on the edge of the Pit – glancing up from their hot soup and coffee to see a child, a man or woman walking through the fog toward the Pit, turning neither right nor left, simply wandering toward the edge and, without slowing, stepping over the side. Why? we asked. Why would anybody jump into the Pit? It was a question that had no answer.

We had many questions without answers, but we learned to live with them. Usually.

One summer in my youth, the mother of my best school-friend disappeared. It was early one morning, as summer's heat was finally breaking the fog and gloom of the rainy spring; they gathered together for breakfast, a basket of homemade bread and fresh milk; they said their morning prayers, and then went out into the day. She carried a basket out into the field, "to get enough berries to make a pie for dinner," she told them. They watched her as she happily walked beyond their field and reached the woods. . . and she was gone.

When she didn't return that evening, we all searched the woods; the police asked around town, they offered a reward, they passed word on to the other villages in the valley, but everybody already knew. She had gone into the Pit. I said we learned to live with our questions. But I knew differently. My schoolmate was never the same. None of us were. Our own parents fretted, they tried to make excuses, they even tried to blame her - "she never should have gone over there; she should have known better" - but, in the end, nothing lessened the fear, or the sadness. We suffered as our friend suffered. And we learned to fear the Pit like never before.

Those were the difficult times. Sometimes an old person disappeared, and we were sad, but we all agreed, "She lived a good life; if the Pit is kind, she will be happy again." But the other times - when a mother or father disappeared, when a child went in. . .it was anger that surfaced. Rage. Men and women would scream, they would break things. They would yell out their hatred of the Pit. They would cry out about how unfair it all was; they would scream that they could no longer stand it.

But nothing could be done. Nobody seemed to have any power over the Pit. No matter the warnings, the nursery rhymes and morality tales. . .still, year after year, people would disappear into the Pit. And this we knew: the Pit never returned her prize. There was only one direction with the Pit: Down.

I learned the mystery of the Pit when I was a young man, taking on new responsibilities as a member of our family. Childhood was fading. "You're becoming an adult," my father told me. "Time to start earning your keep around here."

And so that cold autumn morning I left early, carrying only my rifle and pack with the few supplies needed for a day of hunting. Winter would be here soon enough; we had to fill our food supplies to carry us through. The fields were mostly picked clean; but I thought a small deer, even a wild turkey or few grouse would make a nice addition to the dinner table on those long, cold nights that lay ahead.

It was a miserable day, with mist giving way to drizzle as I made my way across the small creek that marked the west boundary of the village. At lunchtime my luck had only been wretched; two small pheasant flushed, and both shots missed. I paused to down some tepid coffee and a sandwich made of leftovers from last night's table. The food offered enough energy to carry on through the afternoon, but my luck wouldn't turn. Nothing to be seen but the endless wood, the thickening moss, the water drops collected from rain and mist dropping to the dark forest floor. I was cold and wet, dejected, tired; I could think of nothing better than the fire of home, and mother's stew on the table. Giving up on the hunt, I turned toward home.

But I heard music.

Through the trees, I heard music. The soft splinter of notes, mixing with the late afternoon wind, the dripping of rain through the leaves. It came, it went, it came back again. From time to time gypsies would camp in our woods; It was well-known that teenagers from the town would often sneak out, away from the watchful eyes of parents; there were hidden alcoves among the trees

where a dozen could gather and party and never be discovered. Whether this music came from the fiddle of passing vagabonds or even friends of mine out for a night of fun, I couldn't tell.

Wandering closer, I soon made out a campfire, with two huddled shapes sitting close by. They seemed to be singing – it was sweet, it was mournful – but there was music behind their voices; its source, beyond my sight. It drew me toward them, out of the woods into the small clearing in which they sat. I didn't think I knew them from our village, their singing in a language I didn't understand. And yet. . .it was an enchanting melody they sang. Plain, simple, and yet it touched a chord inside and pulled me forward. A small kettle hung over the fire; I smelled a soup of some sort cooking inside; the hunger from my day's wandering jumped at the thought of a warm meal; and yet, these two singers, these two strangers took no notice me. Their song and their food alone was working their magic

Until I said, with some trepidation, "hello?"

And they were up. Throwing back their cloaks, clutching out at me with bony, darkened hands, cackling with sickened delight; and I realized, in a glance that left me cold with horror, that we all stood on the edge of the Pit. Fear lurched in my stomach and I turned to flee, but it was too late. I was too close, too tired to fight. Showing surprising strength for their withered arms, these two grabbed me and pulled me back, thrust me toward the Pit, pushed against my last efforts to save myself. . .

and it was over. For a moment the cloudy evening sky tumbled overhead, I could see the light of campfire flickering off branches, and then, all was dark.

How long I lay there, I have no idea. Hours; days; years? All was black, all was silent. I could hear nothing, I could see nothing, I could feel nothing. My shouts into the darkness fell flat, as if underwater. I drifted, losing all sense of time and space. The only thought that remained was this: those who fall into the Pit never return.

Were there others around? All those who had gone before? I couldn't tell. How does one describe utter darkness, total silence, lack of any feeling? It was like floating in water, only I couldn't move. That, I knew. My body seemed frozen, paralyzed. Perhaps I was? Perhaps in the fall my body had been damaged? Only I felt no pain. I felt nothing except fear, at first, sheer terror and panic; but, eventually fear gave way to despair. All was nothing. Blackness surrounded me, silence like the grave held me tightly. And I lay there, waiting in eternity.

Until. . .how does one tell the exact moment when the afternoon sky begins to darken into dusk? When the day turns to evening? How do you mark the moment when stars first break through the canopy of sky?

In the same way. . .in a moment after eons, somewhere out at the fringes of my senses. . . something was different. Something was. . .changing. I began to make out. . .sound. Muffled, but becoming clearer. At first, incoherent murmurings, but as I strained to understand, they gave way to voices – shouts. Angry shouts.

I cried out to them “I’m here! I’m here! Save me!” but could feel the uselessness. As if rags were stuffed in my mouth, my voice wouldn’t carry. I gave up, trying to listen all the more.

And this is what I heard:

“Throw him in! Throw him in! It’s all his fault!”

No distinct voices, just the murmuring, the chanting of an angry mob.

“He said he’s the Master of the Pit! Throw him in!”

It grew louder and louder; moving as if toward victory it reached a fevered pitch, and then – the loudest of cheers, punctuated by a single cry of anguish, and all grew silent again. Except for the singular sound as of gravel sliding a steep slope, the pop and crunch of falling sand, an echoing thud. And then all truly was silent.

I strained to hear more; I called into the blackness, I lay in stillness, straining my ears for more, hungry for something, anything, but it was pointless. All was as it had been before.

Except. . .

How does one mark the moment of first light, when the eastern horizon begins to glow in primal sunlight? How does one mark the beginnings of the gentle song of a lark singing in the distant wood? How does one measure the exact time when night gives way to early dawn?

My eyes beheld a quickening light.

At first, only the faintest light and deepest dark, shadows of shadows. Slowly these gave way, and I began to see gray dark walls of stone, as in the inside of a mountain cavern. I tried to look around, but found I was still frozen in place; and yet, in front and above me I could soon see soaring walls of granite reaching beyond my sight, and then, looking down, I found the cause of my imprisonment: ropes like vines held me fast to the floor. Growing out of the ground itself, long tapers wrapped around my legs, my arms, my torso, my neck and head. Much as I strained against them, it did no good. They were strong as a new steel chain. I could see, but I could not move.

The light was growing brighter now – inside this cave, inside the Pit it seemed almost as bright as day – and finally I could see why.

A man lay on the ground a few yards away. I could only see him out of the corner of my eye; he wasn’t moving. And yet he was, I almost don’t know how to say it – he was glowing. The light was coming from him. From inside of this man. His skin was translucent, his face was radiant. All the light in the room seemed to find its source in this man, as if he were made of electricity itself.

In spite of this strange light, I assumed he was dead, or unconscious, stuck like me, until. . .he laughed. The deep, heart-felt laugh of one who recognizes the joy of work well-done. The laughter of one who has no care in the world. Beautiful, rich, joyous; it was wondrous to me to hear.

And then his eyes opened and he was looking at me. I could see – his eyes staring into mine with a strange fervor, and yet he was smiling. Tears of joy were streaming down his face as laughter filled this cavern. . .and then he sat up. The vines wrapped around his body simply slipped off, as if melting at his motion. He climbed to one knee, then the other, and pulled himself up, stretching his arms up to the heavens, laughing, a laughter of pleasure and of song. He turned; looked at me, and finally walked over.

He stood over me a moment, his laugh temporarily muted, he shook his head and – I shall always remember this – a tear dropped from his cheek. For a moment it hung in midair, as if suspended in space, but it was falling toward me – it landed on my chest, and to my amazement, the vines that had held like steel pulled back – recoiled even, as if the tear was poison to them –

he reached out his hand – I took it in mine, and stood.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, we are finished with this place. Let us go.”

And this was most wondrous of all – he lifted off the ground, as if flying upward; and, with my hand in his, I flew with him. The walls of the Pit drifted downward past us, the wind picked up in my ears, I looked in wonder and awe at this man, this man who had been thrown into the Pit by the mob; His gaze remained upward, as if seeking out the line that would mark the lip of this cavern.

Was this possible? Was I dreaming? Could it truly be that he was lifting me out of the Pit? Returning me to the land from which I’d fallen? It was unheard of – nobody returned from the Pit. And yet, and yet. I saw it with my own eyes. Far overhead a slit appeared, it quickly widened as we flew upward; the space between filled with the brilliant blue of a summer sky; we rocketed skyward and as we did this man who was pulling me upward began to sing – a shout of glory, a cry of triumph, an exuberant melody of joy and satisfaction. . .

And then we stood at the top. The impossible – returning from the Pit – had been accomplished. He and I stood, gazing in wonder as the deep green wood seemed to bend around us; the songs of the summer lark and the buzz of the dragonfly hammered in our ears, the fresh, clean taste of air filled our lungs.

A small pool lay ahead of us. He walked over, bent down, sank his face deep in the clear water, and drank. It was all the invitation I needed; I joined him as quickly as I could move; the icy, crystalline water poured down my throat, fairer and sweeter than any wine I’d ever tasted. The moment was glory.

Finally, after all this time, I found my voice to ask him: “Who, who are you?”

He turned to me, a gentle, friendly smile on his face.

“It depends on who you ask,” he replied. “I’ve been know by many names. Some have called me a wretch, others have called me a King. My friends have called me Joshua, or Teacher. For now, you can call me friend.”

“Will you come back with me?” I asked. “Will you come back to the village – to see my family, to join us? Will you stay?”

He glanced wistfully over his shoulder, back in the direction our village lay, and shook his head.

“No, that’s for you. You go – your mother is waiting. Go and tell them what you’ve seen. Go and tell them the story has changed. Go and tell them of this reversal. Go and tell them this: No longer will the Pit hold you. What had been true: those who go into the Pit never return, well, I’ve reversed that. The Pit couldn’t hold me; they should have known that. And since I have returned, the Pit has lost its power to hold you. Up to this moment, there has only been one direction possible with the Pit: In. No longer. Now the Pit must give up her prize. Now all must rise as you have risen. All is reversed. All is changed. The Pit can no longer hold you.”

“But won’t you come with me, even for a day?” I asked. “I have so much to ask you.”

“No, I can’t.” He said. “I have work still to do.

And, with that, he rose, he wrapped his mighty arms around me, he embraced me for a moment. . .letting go, he gazed skyward, said “yes, I have work still to do,” and, even as his words echoed in my ears, with a victorious shout he dove back into the Pit.

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