

THE RIGHT HAND OF THE LORD

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Grace Church in New York
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The right hand of the Lord bringeth mighty things to pass. The right hand of the Lord hath the preeminence. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118)

Last month I was curious to read about the 50th anniversary of a boxing match that is still described as *The Fight of the Century*. In March of 1971 I was just nine years old, but even as a third-grader my friends and I could not escape the hype. So return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear, when the handful of prizefighters always vying for the title were all household names. In one corner was the undisputed, undefeated heavyweight champion of the world, Joe Frazier, otherwise known as “Smokin’ Joe.” And in the other corner was the challenger, Muhammad Ali, the former heavyweight champion who was determined to be number-one again. Like Frazier, Ali was also undefeated in the ring, but had been stripped of the title when he refused military service over his objection to the war in Viet Nam.

Ali was a controversial figure for reasons that were more than merely political. They were religious as well. He had embraced Islam and adopted his new Muslim name. But Ali brought race into the ring along with religion and politics. His pre-fight trash-talking was legendary, and he accused Joe Frazier of being the champion of white people in suits. He alone was fighting for the forgotten man in the ghetto. Frazier was a black man himself of humble origins, and he seethed with anger over Ali’s racist taunts and insults.

It all finally came to a climax on March 8, 1971 in Madison Square Garden. When the two fighters entered the ring it was as if a clash of civilizations was about to begin. No one could be impartial. Those rooting for Ali saw him as a brash and cocky iconoclast who would smash the established order. Those cheering for Frazier looked on the champ as a defender of decency, hard work, and humility. The bout would go for the full fifteen rounds, each one more exciting than the last. To the experts it did seem that Frazier was getting the best of Ali. Then in the fifteenth round the champ removed all doubt. Frazier connected with a devastating left hook that dropped Ali to the canvass. Ali quickly returned to his feet and finished the round, but everyone already knew who would win the fight of the century. By unanimous decision the judges declared that Joe Frazier was still the heavyweight champion of the world. The left hook of the champ brought mighty things to pass.

Why, on Easter Day, am I talking about the brutal – some say barbaric – sport of boxing? You’ve come here today to hear about springtime and flowers, life and love, bunnies and chocolate, perhaps even a little God and Jesus. But two sweaty guys in a boxing ring beating the daylights out of each other is hardly the image that comes to mind when you think about Easter. So let me tell what sent me off in the unconventional direction I’ve gone. It was not so much reading about the 50th anniversary of the Fight of the Century, but reading the words of the Psalm (118:14-24) that the choir sings every Easter: *The right hand of the Lord bringeth mighty things to pass. The right hand of the Lord hath the preeminence.* Or, if you like your Psalms in contemporary English: *The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! The right hand of the Lord is exalted!* Either way, it sounds like a Biblical boxing match to me.

The Psalm harks back to the Song of Moses in the Book of Exodus. If you recall, Moses and the Hebrew people were engaged in a fight of the century all their own. They were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh, their opponent, would not let them go, and so the struggle ensued. The bout would go for many rounds, each plague more gruesome than the last. Finally, it seemed as though Pharaoh had the Hebrew people up against the ropes: their backs to the Red Sea and the Egyptian chariots and

horsemen ready to deliver the knockout punch. All hope seemed to be lost, but then God instructed Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, and through his chosen champion God parted the waters so the people could pass through it on dry land. The Egyptians pursued, only to have the waters come crashing back down upon them. And so the Hebrew people sang: *Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy (Exodus 15:6).*

For the Jews, God's deliverance at the Red Sea was more than a fight of the century. It became their defining moment as a people. By the time of Jesus they had already been eating the annual Passover meal in remembrance of the Exodus for over a thousand years. What is more, the prophets foretold that the grand miracle was but a sign of things to come. God would send another Moses, a new deliverer, a Messiah who would usher in the new creation. This morning we've heard Isaiah (25:6-9) promise that the Lord of hosts will *destroy the shroud that is cast over the peoples. He will swallow up death forever ... and wipe away the tears from all faces.* Such were the hopes riding on Jesus of Nazareth, when he entered Jerusalem for an epic showdown. In this corner, Jesus, the one proclaimed to come in the name of the Lord. In the other corner, the corrupt and collaborating principalities and powers of the city. It would be the fight of the century. The crowds welcomed Jesus as if he were God's promised Messiah. "Hosanna," they shouted, which is a Hebrew prayer meaning "save us, now!" Those cheering for the other side would shout back, "We have no king but Caesar!" It would be more than the fight of the century. It would be a clash of kingdoms for the ages. How did it go? For those rooting for Jesus, let's just say, not well. Within a few days the authorities had arrested Jesus, subjected him to a quick and dirty trial, and executed him. Jesus was more than down for the count. He was worse than knocked out. He was dead and buried.

I won't pretend that you don't know what happened next. You know the Easter story. We just heard Mark's account of the empty tomb. But what you may not fully grasp is how all-encompassing a victory it claims to be. The earliest Christians began to interpret the resurrection of Jesus through the lens of the Exodus. Once again, the right hand of the Lord had brought mighty things to pass. But this time, if it was true at all then it was true for all – not merely for one race, but the entire human race. And not merely for the human race, but for all of creation. God had turned the tables on the evil powers of this world, and delivered the knockout punch to Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness, so that death itself dropped to the canvass with a thud. The Psalmist would go on: *I shall not die, but live ... This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes ... This is the day which the Lord hath made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.*

My guess is that many preachers in Christian pulpits today will be declaring that we live in an Easter world. They will announce that life is stronger than death, and that love triumphs over hate. I won't disagree with them. The problem is the powers of death seem to have gotten on their feet again, and they are as determined as ever to do their worst. Last week I was out here in the church with some of the maintenance guys getting things ready for Holy Week and Easter. Specifically, we were making sure that every other pew was securely closed off – wired shut for Easter. The absurdity of the task was not lost on me. Going into Easter without every other pew is like entering the ring with one arm tied behind your back. Who would do it? I thought that if my 2019 self could have peered two years into the future to behold what I was doing, I would not have been able to explain the actions of my 2021 self. What would account for it? Termites in the pews? A new fire code? No, my 2019 self would have concluded that at some point in the next two years I lose my mind! Perhaps the futility of being a Mets fan finally breaks me. Or some newscaster misuses the word "iconic" one too many times and it just finally pushes me over the edge. Never would I have guessed the cause to be a pandemic. What a nasty, devilish, evil thing a virus is. Is it just me, or is anyone else ready for the right hand of the Lord to triumph, and deliver the knockout punch to the coronavirus? In the past year we have quite literally endured the fight of the century.

The resilience of evil, deeply ingrained in the natural order, sows doubts in our minds that the right hand of the Lord has really triumphed. Easter joy is often muted by fear and trembling. You may have noticed that fear and trembling is how the Gospel of Mark ends its Easter narrative. The best ancient scrolls cut off (at 16:8) without a witness to the resurrection. The risen Jesus never

appears, and an empty tomb alone proved insufficient to convince the women that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Perhaps someone had stolen the body, or they'd arrived at the wrong tomb, or Jesus hadn't really died, or grief and stress had caused them to snap. Surely some natural explanation accounts for what they experienced. So say the skeptics still today. The church invented the resurrection for its own purposes, and rational minds would be wise not to invest hope in it.

With all due respect to the skeptics, what we say to them is that they have it backwards. The church didn't invent the resurrection. Rather, the resurrection invented the church. The church only came into being because of the resurrection. The church was a defeated, scattered, KO'd movement until God breathed life again into the cold, dead body of Jesus. Concerning the Gospel of Mark, the most likely scenario is that the end of the scroll describing appearances of the risen Jesus was damaged and lost over time. Besides, Mark's severed ending isn't all that we have, and perhaps it isn't even lost. Luke and John who follow, and Matthew who precedes have plenty to say about what happened after the discovery of the empty tomb. The risen Jesus began appearing to the women, then the disciples, and then to many others.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to Paul the Apostle. In today's reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians (15:1-11), Paul writes that shortly after Easter, Jesus appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time. Surprisingly, we have no other reference to Jesus' appearing to the 500. You would think one of the Gospel writers would have described such an important incident. I wonder if what we have here is Mark's missing ending hiding in plain sight. Presumably, Paul and Mark would have been listening to the same oral traditions. It could be that Mark had written about the 500, and Paul was referring to the incident. In any case, the reports of the empty tomb combined with the appearances deliver the one-two punch of Easter that drops death to the canvass. Yes, the bout rages on, but we already know who wins it. The right hand of the Lord triumphs.

Today's Psalm about the right hand of the Lord reminds me of two other boxing matches that were perhaps even more significant than what purports to be the Fight of the Century. The decade was the 1930s. In one corner was the undefeated American, Joe Louis. In the other corner was the German, Max Schmeling. Although Schmeling steadfastly refused to join the Nazi party, he nevertheless represented Hitler's claims of Aryan supremacy. Joe Louis, a black man, stood for everything Hitler disdained and wanted to wipe off the face of the earth. It truly would be a clash of civilizations and world views. The first match occurred in 1936, and Schmeling emerged victorious after twelve rounds. Hitler gloated. Americans were stunned. It would be two years before a rematch would occur. By this time the world was on the brink of war. Joe Louis was ready. He came out and hit Schmeling with such a barrage of lefts and rights that the German fell to the canvass for good within two minutes. The right hand of Joe Louis – and the left – had triumphed!

Some years after the war a radio call-in show was exploring the significance of Joe Louis' victory. This is what one caller said, *"My name is Walter. I'm Polish, and I'm a Jew. And I'll tell you what the fight meant to me. I was in a concentration camp trying to survive the Holocaust – and we knew if we could just hold on that the Germans would not win, because Joe Louis had already defeated Max Schmeling."*¹

Walter's witness gives us a foretaste of the much larger victory that is Easter. For us and for all of creation, the resurrection of Jesus is the assurance that God has already defeated the powers of death. The right hand of the Lord bringeth mighty things to pass. The right hand of the Lord is exalted. Our song of triumph has begun. Alleluia.

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¹ "The Stadium, Part Six: Bronx Tales of Blood & Glory." 2008, NY Daily News, p. 8.