

There's something rather... let's call it, ironic, about the sanctuary I spent some time in growing up (whether I spent enough of that time actually paying attention in worship is a completely different matter). But at the front of that sacred space is this beautiful stained-glass window of a triumphant Jesus Christ, wind blowing in his hair, standing tall above a couple Roman guards, one bewildered by the Resurrected Christ, and the other is just sleeping through it all. And yet, the irony in the sanctuary comes from what is, basically, directly across from that Gospel-encapsulation stained-glass window. It hangs right over the balcony, as if it's soaring high above all the people who not only gather there for worship, but for choir rehearsals, cleaning crews, children running up and down the aisles. It is a *crucifix* in a *Lutheran* sanctuary.

Evidently the church I grew up in for so many years had missed the memo on what was supposed to be one of the deeply held convictions of Lutheran churches everywhere: to not do anything that smelled of the Catholics, including the ones just down the road from us in Upper Sandusky. Granted, we did our fair share of holding up to that: we didn't cross ourselves, we didn't dip our fingers into baptismal fonts, no massive pall on a casket for

a funeral. But we looked over that no-crucifix detail. We overlooked the precision game-plan setup by Lutheran coaches (aka pastors) however many centuries ago: that we Lutherans would still proudly hang crosses, just with no Jesus on them. Our supposedly clever theological argument was that He obviously wasn't hanging on the cross anymore, so why should He be in our own sanctuaries, or classrooms, or hallways? Instead, we were going to be the church of the Resurrected Christ, who not only refused to stay on a cross, but shattered open the massive gravestone itself. Nevertheless, in that sacred space, there that crucifix hangs...still to this day: soaring over all worshipers who come in and everyone else in between.

Now, I hope my Lutheran membership card doesn't get revoked by Bishop Allende, but when I first started to really notice that particular Jesus was when I started singing in the big kids' choir, and I had to sit up front around the altar for rehearsal on Wednesday nights. That's where my face started to wonder, right above the balcony. It was...captivating, mesmerizing, with a fair share of awkward weirdness, all at the same time. From there on out, whenever I took Communion, and I went back down the side aisle, there my face looked up, to what soared over us all who took part in the sacred meal

made possible by that very sacrificial act. It's not that I tried to spiritually force myself to look at that crucifix, it was just a natural movement, as natural as putting out my hands to receive the body of Christ.

Maybe that's why they put that image of the suffering Christ up there to begin with, for the communed to take in that quick glance, before they returned to their pews. Not to stare at it, not to venture too deep into Roman Catholic-controlled waters; just enough to remember the very words of Isaiah this morning: wounded, crushed, oppressed, perversion of justice.

Of course, when Good Friday always came along, and all the black drapings took over the entire altar area, nothing was done to that Jesus that soared above the sanctuary. That image was Good Friday in of itself. Nothing had to be done. Right there was the entire story. That was just how much He loved us. Nothing more had to be done; just look up, just like they had to on that Calvary hill long ago.

And then, the ultimate irony would happen in that very sanctuary three days later, every year. The sunlight had to be divinely directed to hit that beautiful stained-glass window that stood on the other side of the sanctuary from the balcony. That was a pretty solid living artistic reminder of the light

invading the worldly darkness two thousand or so years ago. But that wasn't the divine irony for me. It would happen every time at the end of the service, every Easter Sunday, when the choir made its way to their respective places in front of the altar, and invited anyone else to come forward, to sing George Frederic Handel's even more glorious artistic proclamation in the *Hallelujah* chorus.

There was holy irony singing that most powerful Resurrection song while looking up at that suffering Christ. Now, still to this day, my favorite part of the relatively short song happens at the moment when we can always tell whether or not the singers are paying any attention to the director whatsoever, or they had never sung the song before at all, or they're just so into their bellowing out singing that they're not even thinking about what comes next in Handel's masterpiece. It's when the song gets to the last set of hallelujahs, and the choir is, all of a sudden, meant to come to an undeniably complete halt...silence, for just the briefest of moments.

It was as if for that very split-second, we recognized the suffering that still exists in God's world. We acknowledged that Isaiah's nearly-depressing words still had their fair share of truth. We knew that for the briefest of

moments in all eternity Jesus did hang on that cross...for us; not to punish us, not to make us feel guilty, not to convince us to hop onto any Lutheran or Catholic or any kind of Christian salvation train or else. Except, looking up at that Jesus was looking up at the very love that not even a death on a cross stood a chance against. And that kind of earth-shattering love gave any child of God, including all the singers in a choir to bellow out with utmost convincing ferocity, a most beautiful and blessed assurance-filled “Hallelujah!” to not only conclude Handel’s Resurrection refrain, but to live our life, all the more, with the most hope-filled determination.

Yes, we know Jesus no longer hangs on a cross on some hill far away, because He’s far too busy in all of us. Yes, we know there is still suffering this world: there are still crushings and wounds and perversions of justice, but just like Jesus...we cannot stay there, we cannot allow those moments to define this life and God’s world. We have to come down from such horrible circumstances with the same Resurrection new life that our Lord unleashed into all sanctuaries throughout the world for all time. And still, to this day, the vault of heaven continues to resound for the whole world to experience: that Christ *is* still risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.