

EASTER CAN BE A TIME OF JOY — *and grief*



Last night, I watched an alto and a baritone sing back and forth to each other, “O death, where is thy sting?”



Simcha Fisher is an award-winning writer and speaker. In addition to her regular columns for Parable, she writes for major Catholic publications, blogs for The Catholic Weekly and at simchafisher.com, and is the author of “The Sinner’s Guide to Natural Family Planning.” She and her husband have 10 children and live in Marlborough.

It was part of Handel’s “Messiah,” the three-hour-long oratorio often performed at Christmas, but originally meant as an Easter piece.

It makes sense either way. Everybody loves the parts predicting the birth of Jesus, with the exuberant, “For unto us a child is born” and the delightful and glorious choruses exulting in the son of God who has come to save us.

Everybody also loves the second part, which deals with that same child as a man, “despised, rejected,” and finally crucified — and then rising again. This is where the famous “Hallelujah!” chorus actually appears.

People like to sing it for Christmas, but the composer placed it as a Resurrection song.

The night after I saw “The Messiah,” I had a long dream drenched in sorrow and woke up sobbing.

My father was in this dream, as well as my husband and children, but the one person who didn’t appear was my mother.

I dreamed I was in the garden on the side of the house I grew up in, which has since been built over. I was collecting brilliant wildflowers in different colors, but the bouquet looked terrible no matter how I arranged them.

I had wasted them, and I ended up throwing them away.

That was a dream about my mother. I had this dream on the anniversary of the last day I saw her alive.

I had driven an hour into the rural spot where her nursing home was and had a fruitless conversation through plexiglass.

This visit was during the pandemic, so that was as close as I could get. Even if I could have made physical contact, the mother they wheeled out for me to meet was largely already gone.

She was a tiny, featherweight doll of a woman, looking like most of her stuffing had come out. She was deep in Alzheimer’s disease and could only mumble random

things, and she couldn't sit up on her own.

She didn't know who I was, and I had to struggle to remember who she used to be.

It was terrible. Terrible. And then she died shortly after.

When she died, I hardly mourned because I had already been losing her steadily for years as her mind crumbled away.

Death just put a period on a long sentence about loss. But it didn't make the grief stop. It just made it intelligible. At least I knew what I was grieving for.

"O death, where is thy sting?" It's right here. It comes and goes, but it does hurt, sometimes at Christmas, sometimes at random times, but most of all at Easter, even though I know that Jesus is risen.

My mother is the one who taught that to me. I was never able to speak clearly to her, even when she was alive, even when she was fully in her right mind.

She never really saw me come to know Jesus. That was a bouquet she gathered and offered to me over and over, and all she saw when she was alive was me wasting it, throwing it away.

Why am I writing about death and grief on the verge of springtime, when everything will soon be new? Why talk about it in the weeks before Easter, when the birds will soon be returning, the water will be flowing and the buds will be pushing their fresh, green heads out of the dry wood — and most of all, when we proclaim that Jesus is alive?

Because when Jesus rose in triumph and strode forth with such disdain for the grave, remember this: He still bore the marks of the nails in His hands and feet.

This is why I'm writing about grief around Eastertime. So many people carry the marks of grief and loss.

The wheel of the calendar turns and we find ourselves in a season of triumph and rejoicing, but maybe we look at ourselves and our lives, and what we see is wounds.

I want to remind you that Jesus had wounds, too. Even after the Resurrection, they did not vanish. Wounds heal, but scars do not disappear, not in this life.

This is what is written in the body of our Messiah: It is written that joy and pain are held together in one body. He is with us in both. ■