

April 17, 2022 | Easter Sunday and Marathon Sunday
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON
An Easter Word by Nancy S. Taylor

Christianity is no spectator sport. It requires our participation ... your participation. To that end, I invite you finish these sentences, shouting out the words.

"It was the best of times, it was ... (*the worst of times*)"

"It was a dark and stormy ... (*night*)"

"A long time ago in a Galaxy... (*far, far away*)"

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy... (*in its own way.*)"

"My mama always said life was like a box of ... (*chocolates*)"

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and ... (*the earth*)"

Well done. You lovers of story.

On this Easter Day, I am reminded that our Christian faith is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of ideas or propositions, or even a set of creeds.

Rather, we are inheritors and stewards of a story ... a particular story ... a shining story replete with angels and animals, with despotic Herod's and gentle Josephs, with strong women, stargazers, and prophets. The story of God assuming flesh, being born in a stable; the story of heaven come to earth. The story of a peasant child who would become the Prince of Peace. The story of the lost being found, the guilty forgiven, prison doors bursting open, and the dead (our beloved dead, your beloved dead) rising to new life in God's transcendent love.

The Christian story is not, however, a once and done, happily-ever-after story. It's not over. Not yet. It is the unfolding story of an ongoing drama that matters, deeply matters. It is a real life drama in which the forces of good and evil are joined and the stakes are high. It is a story in which you and I are asked to play our part; to take the side of the good, the side of God: the side of peace in a violent world; the side of mercy in a vengeful world; the side of warmth in a sneering world; the side of the poor in a world that prizes wealth; the side of the downtrodden in a world vicious with power.

To take our part in this story, we Christians must train, practice, strengthen and ready ourselves for the race of faith, much as you, athletes, ready yourselves for your race.

As athletes, you get outfitted with the right equipment – energy gel, hydration vest, GPS running watch, the all-important footwear.

For Christians, the necessary equipment includes the bread and cup of Christ's communion table; the waters of baptism; and, not least, the biblical stories; stories by which we acquaint ourselves with the God of Jesus.

For Christians, as for athletes there is repetition in our preparations. We repeat the same practices over and over again. Our version of stretching and warming up has us coming to church, tasting the bread of life and drinking from a sacred cup, praying, practicing forgiveness and generosity, and not least, immersing ourselves in our canon of sacred stories). We do so seeking to build up our moral and spiritual muscles, to ready ourselves for when the going gets rough; to test ourselves that we might represent our God with integrity.

Of course, there's a difference between Christians and marathoners. You runners are always training for the next race. Christians on the other hand, are never not being put to the test. Our whole lives are lived out in the contest between good and evil, indifference and engagement, mercy and justice, courage and cowardice. We are asked to take God's side in every encounter in the course of every day, with every thought we think, in every word from our mouths, in every deed done or left undone.

Fortunately, unlike runners who compete against a merciless timeclock, we run our race of faith in the presence of a kindly and forgiving God. Somebody say, *Amen!* A God, moreover, (are you ready for this?) who has transformed the Finish Line of Life into a Doorway Into Heaven. This is our story. This is our Easter faith.

To shift the metaphor a bit: At Old South Church we have been running this race of faith since our founding in 1669 ... that is, for over 352 years. Although we have been at it for over three-and-a-half centuries, we don't view what we do as a marathon, not even as an ultra-marathon. Rather, we understand ourselves to be participants in a relay race. Twelve generations of Old Southerners have carried the baton. Each succeeding generation has grasped the baton and run with it, each taking their turn; each succeeding generation authoring a new chapter in the ongoing drama of good and evil, oppression and freedom, justice and mercy.

As I head into retirement, I have a personal word to say you – you passionate pavement pounders: Having run a leg of this relay race with you has been a very special delight. An absolute privilege. You, runners and athletes, are now part of Old South Church's story. You have changed us and me. To which, I say: Thanks be to God and Amen!

Now, finish these sentences:

"If God is for us, who can be ... (*against us*)?"

"Now abide faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is ... (*love*)."

And, finally: "May the force ... (*be with you*)." And also with you!