

TOM EHRICH

# The TENDER GRACE of GOD

A STORY OF EASTER AND AN INCHWORM NAMED BOB

A green inchworm drops onto my son's blue blazer on his way into church. While we wait for the opening "Alleluia," I see the inchworm, coax him onto my finger, and hand him to my twenty-year-old son. He, in turn, names the inchworm "Bob," transfers it to his bulletin, and watches it crawl from one part of Easter worship to another.

When it comes time to join a procession carrying flowers to the bare wooden cross up front, my wife moves Bob to a pink azalea blossom and hands the flower to me. I hand it to a woman up front, and soon Bob is placed on the

is the daughters of Zion shouting aloud as the Israelites straggled home from bondage in Babylon. It is the shout of angels at Bethlehem.

It is the shout of those who cannot save themselves, those who are—despite all appearances—not a great deal more self-sufficient than an inchworm named Bob.

Earlier, while watching Bob crawl from Hymn 261 to Hymn 243, my wife told a story of playing with an ant in church. She was a child, and the ant gave her delight. A grown-up saw the ant and crushed it. Bob has fared better today, because the big and power-

bring itself to do, namely, to be gentle with the weak and to respect all of life.

While the proud giants of commerce and politics wonder whom to crush next, God holds life in his hand and says to it, "Shalom! Peace be with you!" Moved by love for what he has made, God breathes life into his beloved.

We, at our best, transfer that life from one hand to another, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, protecting the weak, embracing the outcast, treasuring the children, honoring our families, loving the lost, and taking our turn among those needing rescue.

At our worst, we crush and grind,

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cross, among 10,000 azalea blossoms and daisies, plus one Easter lily. For that brief moment, I picture Bob crawling happily from flower to flower, while music washes over the cross.

During the closing hymn, I join the procession of once-a-year choristers coming forward to stand with the choir and sing Handel's "Hallelujah!" chorus. This, according to legend, is the piece that Handel composed in one all-night sitting, after which he exclaimed that he had seen heaven opening.

"Watch me!" mouths the director. Good advice for any chorus, but especially pertinent in this moment, for our offering to a church packed with family and friends is not about us. As pleased as we are to be standing here with the regulars, this is the age-old shout—joy, relief—of those being rescued.

It is the shout of Miriam dancing on the safe side of the Sea of Reeds. It

ful chose to be tender.

Handel's shout of "Hallelujah!"—a delicate piece, actually—is best sung by a small and reedy chorus like ours, not massed choirs of Germanic bombast, in thanks to the big and powerful God for his decision to be tender. God chooses what the world can never



or fail to see, or feel unable to care. But this is a day to remember that we have a best. By the grace of God, we are not trapped in our worst.

And so, as the organ dances into Handel's thirteen-note introduction, we who have been loved back to life take a deep breath, watch the director, and join the shout of ages.

We do not do this often enough, perhaps, for we are busy and easily embarrassed. But here, today, surrounded by azaleas and daisies and one Easter lily, we look up to heaven and sing, with voices rubbed raw by life, "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ! And he shall reign forever and ever!"

Pause for a heartbeat.

"Hallelujah!"

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# Resurrecting the EMBALMED CHURCH

**I**n the story of the death of Lazarus, found in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John, one of the most telling moments comes when Martha meets Jesus after he arrives in Bethany. Lazarus has been dead for four days.

Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21). Later, Mary says the same thing to him. And when Jesus goes to Lazarus’s tomb and weeps, some of those who see him grieve say, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (v. 37).

These comments are based on the assumption that Jesus’ purpose was to keep people from dying. But a careful reading of the story reveals that his purpose was not to keep Lazarus from dying—it was to let him die, then to raise him from death. Jesus decided to take his time before going to Bethany, making sure that Lazarus was dead. Then Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb and he stumbled out of the darkness of death into the light of day.

The good news of Easter is not that we will not die. It is that death has lost its sting. It has lost its dominion and its power. We might be tempted to believe that life consists of not dying. But Jesus did not come to save us from dying. He

came to show us the way through death to resurrection.

There is an important difference. Resurrection is not self-preservation. If we try to preserve our life we end up embalming it. Preserve your life, Jesus said, and you will lose it. Lose your life and you will find it.

The church can easily forget this. Whenever the church has lost its way it is because it has come to believe that its primary purpose is self-preservation rather than death and resurrection.

We can become so intent on self-preservation and maintenance, on protecting what we have, that we preserve the life out of it. An embalmed church is a dead church.

So as we come again to the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord, let us live as people who have been buried and raised with Christ, giving up once and for all the idea that our job as Christians is to keep the body of Christ alive.

Our job is not to keep the body of Christ alive. It is to take up our cross daily, to die and be raised out of a life of cautious self-preservation into a life of reckless giving through the power of the Resurrection that makes all things new. May God give us the grace to loosen our grip on our lives, and, in letting go, to find them at last. □

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