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The Seed of Glory

I Corinthians 15: 42-49

In Louis Sacher's great children's novel, *Holes*, a young man by the name of Stanley Yelnats is walking down a street near a bridge when suddenly a pair of shoes falls out of the sky and hits him on the head. Stanley picks up the shoes just as policemen drive by to ask him how he happened to have them.

He tells them they fell out of the sky. The police don't believe him and arrest him for theft. Turns out, the shoes have been given by a famous baseball player for a charity auction – and they were stolen.

The judge doesn't believe Stanley's story either, and sentences him to eighteen months at a juvenile corrections facility, where kids spend their entire day digging deep holes in the broiling Texas desert.

Stanley had always been told that he and his family lived under a curse, and he is beginning to believe it.

Nobody likes him; he doesn't even like himself. He is weak of personality and body.

By the time Stanley finishes digging his first hole, his every muscle aches, his hands are blistered, his skin is sunburned, his throat is parched, and he longs for his parents. He almost wishes that he were dead.

But what Stanley Yelnats doesn't know is that when he began digging his first hole he began planting a seed of glory that would eventuate in the resurrection of his life and the reversal of his entire family's misfortune.

Jump from a broiling Texas desert to a hockey rink, where a joyous crowd has begun its victory chant:

“Ten-Nine-Eight-Seven-Six-Five -- . . . ,” An announcer screams what has become a famous question:

“Do you believe in miracles? Yesss!!” Suddenly, the clock strikes zero, and the 1980 US Olympic hockey team spills out onto the ice, having defeated the seemingly invincible Russians.

The winning goalie wraps himself in an American flag. Players dance and scream like lunatics.

Total strangers are stopping their cars on interstates, rolling in the snow, hugging.

One man stands in the center of that delirious scene, drinking it all in. His thoughts surely stray back to the day he fell into the deepest, darkest hole of his life, the moment twenty years ago when he learned he had been the last person cut from the 1960 Olympic team, the last American team to win a gold medal in hockey. Only in

this moment can Herb Brooks look back upon that dark day of failure as a player

and see it as the hole in which he planted the seed of glory that started his career as a coach,

the seed of glory that bursts into fruition in this moment, having engineered the so-called “Miracle on Ice.”

Leap again, from a twentieth-century hockey rink to the bedroom of a fashionable eighteenth-century

British home, where resides a famous failure on the brink of a physical and psychological breakdown.

It has not always been the home of a failure: William Wilberforce was elected to Parliament at age 21,

distinguishing himself as one of the best and brightest politicians of his era. His future seemed limitless.

Then he became a Christian, at about age 35. Soon thereafter, having become convinced

that *he* is a child of God, he realizes that *all* people are children of God,

and he does the unthinkable, lobbying for the abolition of the slave trade in the British empire.

He introduces the first anti-slavery resolution in Parliament in 1788.

He is voted down, ridiculed, shamed by former friends, but he continued to introduce the same bill

year after year until, after a decade of trying, he appears to be on the verge of success, only to lose

when key supporters are wooed away on the day of the ballot by the promise of free opera tickets.

William Wilberforce falls into a hole, completely devastated physically, psychologically, spiritually.

Into his darkness comes John Newton, yes, the same former slave-owner whose conversion to Christianity

led him to pen the hymn *Amazing Grace*. Newton says, “You, sir, are like Daniel in the lion's den.

And the God who delivered Daniel from the lions will likewise deliver you from your critics.”

Slowly, painfully, Wilberforce emerges from that dark hole to continue his struggle.

Two hundred years ago this year, February 23, 1807, Britain abolished the slave trade throughout her empire. When Wilberforce finally realizes that he is going to succeed, that at long last the vote is going his way, he bows his head and weeps.

Let us take one leap more, into a sweaty, sultry black Baptist church in the 1950's, in Montgomery, Alabama, where a young black minister is about to ascend the podium to deliver a painful word to the people, a word so difficult that he almost has to drag himself into the pulpit. He must tell them it is likely that a Montgomery judge will rule that their informal shuttle service is illegal, the means by which they have ferried folks to and from work and thus avoided the segregated city bus system. The young minister tries to put a positive spin on the situation, but the mood of the evening is despairing. As he sits in the courtroom the next day, he feels himself falling into a hole, sensing that all of the sacrifice, a people's magnificent, concerted effort to force the city of Montgomery to acknowledge their humanity, is about to be undermined by a racist judge. He has felt himself sliding into a dark hole for a long time, but now he is sure the hole will swallow him. Suddenly, dramatically, he hears a rustle in the courtroom behind him, as reporters seem to be scurrying everywhere, whispering. One of them slips him a sheet of paper that reads, "The Supreme Court of the United States has just ruled unanimously that the Montgomery segregated bus system is unconstitutional." Out of the hole of his despair young Martin Luther King Jr. feels himself rising as if lifted on wings of glory.

My point is, resurrection is a reality woven into the framework and fabric of human history. Resurrection is a reality meant to be experienced within the rhythms of our existence. God has designed a universe in which resurrection is a constituent element of the human destiny. That is what Paul is trying to help us see in the magnificent fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians: he calls us to look at life's pattern in its total and grand scope. "What is buried is physical, what is raised is spiritual. What is sown in dishonor is raised in glory. What is buried in weakness is raised in power. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. The first Adam was a man of mortal flesh; he gave rise to mortal flesh. The last Adam is a life-giving spirit, giving rise to life-relishing spirits. As by Adam all died, so, too, by Christ shall all be made alive!" When we celebrate Easter we celebrate the glorious centerpiece of God's creation, for God has designed the resurrection rhythm to be the very heartbeat of our universe.

What Jesus experienced on Easter morning shares a common thread with what happened to Stanley Yelnats and Herb Brooks, and William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King, Jr.. All of them fell into holes. But all of them came to see their time in the hole as where they planted a seed of glory that allowed them to experience the reality of resurrection. God raised them out of holes. True, there are those who do not see it so. They see our notion of resurrection as wishful thinking, even worse, a violation of the rules of life. Things live, then they die. That's the way life is supposed to be, they say. But that is not the Christian understanding of the structure of things. Things live and, yes, in time, they fall into holes. Some of those holes we call death. Some of those holes we regard as worse than death. But we are not meant to stay in holes. We are meant to rise out of them. It is the nature of God to raise us out of holes. We are not intended for holes, rather, we are intended for resurrection. *Easter is a celebration of the resurrection character of our God.* Creation has been designed by a God who delights in resurrecting. That's the great truth of Easter morning. Hidden within our Holy Week story is a dark truth about God:

our God permits us to live in a free and dangerous world, where love is often ridiculed by hatred, where creativity can be frustrated by convention, where goodness can be thwarted by evil. God permits us to live in a world where we can fall into holes.

God even permitted the Christ to enter a matrix of hatred where his love is rejected. God allowed his Son to feel the cold grip of the hold of death, allowed him to be placed in a hole for the dead. Some would say that is where his story ends, where it is supposed to end. But our faith says no. We believe that holes are where God plants seeds of glory. To stop the story of God on Good Friday would be to distort our understanding of the personality of God. That God would allow the Christ to die on a cross tells us something about the character of God, *but the empty tomb tells us even more about God's values.*

Easter tells us that our falling into holes is only *half* the natural order of things. Our falling into holes is meant to show us the limits of our creaturely power and ambition. Our falling into holes makes us aware of our neediness and opens our being up to God's resurrection reality. The resurrection character of the Father is on full display through the story of his Son on Easter morning, but God intends the same resurrection experience for everyone who opens their being up to God's transcendent power. We are not meant to stay in holes!

Easter is not primarily a matter of what happened to Jesus after he died. Easter is not primarily a statement of what happens to us when *we* die. Easter is fundamentally a celebration of the personality and character of God, a God of resurrection. Easter is a celebration of how we believe God interacts with humanity and shapes the character of our lives. No Christian should come to the end of his or her life and say, 'I hope God's resurrection power is real.' You ought to be able to look back upon the narrative of your life and see times when you fell into holes, times when your ambitions were dashed, when your dreams were crushed, when your plans went awry, when your life hit the wall, and you fell into the pit. But you also ought to be able to look at the narrative of your life and see the hand of God lifting you up out of those holes and allowing you to experience a foretaste of resurrection, so as to prepare you for that day when you experience it in full. Resurrection is not something meant to happen to us only at the end of our lives. Rather it is a rhythm that God has implanted into the very fabric of life. This is why we celebrate this morning!

I think on this Easter morning of a certain musician, whose life had fallen into a great hole. Professionally, he was dead: no one came to hear his music. The public had turned their backs on him. Financially, he was bankrupt: he had had to close his company. Physically, he was a wreck: he had suffered a stroke that left his right side partially paralyzed and his mind so addled that friends feared that he might be losing his sanity. So he retired to a quiet place, a small cell, where there he contemplated abandoning his musical career. But in the solitude of that cell he began to hear the resurrection rhythm of God. He conceived a musical composition that would express the totality of the redemptive story, the need of creation for a Savior, the promise of a Savior, the life of a Savior, the death of a Savior, the resurrection of a Savior, which paved the way for the redemption of all humankind. Between August 22nd and September 14th, 1741, this musician wrote in frenzy, aware of God's presence. He said it was as if the heavens opened up and he saw God Almighty upon the throne and he burst forth in music: "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" Out of his great pit, George Frederick Handel composed his immortal *Messiah*. He had fallen into a dark hole. But that hole became the place where he planted a seed of glory.

As he neared the end of his musical composition, Handel knew that he must express to the world that the God who had lifted him out of his hole was a God of ultimate triumph. So he ended his work with these stirring words: "Thanks! Thanks be to God!"

Thanks be to God, who giveth us the Victory, who giveth us the Victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ!”
I do not know what your hole might be.
I do not know what pit into which you have fallen – or soon will.
Perhaps your hole is vocational, relational, physical – surely, to live is to fall into holes.
But I do know this: we are not created to stay in holes.
We are not created to remain frustrated.
We are not created to remain downhearted
We are not created to live forever in despair.
We are not created to remain diseased.
We are not created to remain estranged.
We are created by a God of triumph to be lifted up out of holes
and to feel in the very marrow our bones
that God has given us the power to overcome life through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Never forget, if we have been buried with Christ in a death like his,
we are destined to be raised with Christ in resurrection like his. This is our glorious heritage.
The Spirit of Christ is always, always, a life-giving Spirit.
To live is to fall into holes.
But those holes can just be the place where we plant seeds of glory.
On this Easter morning let our hearts ring out in gratitude and hope,
Thanks! Thanks be to God!
Thanks be to God who giveth us the Victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

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