

Last week before the ten o'clock service, after Richard Long had announced that it was the Sixth Sunday of Easter, I heard a little voice exclaim, "It's Easter! Yay!" Now the owner of the little voice was not rejoicing because *Easter is a season, not just a single day*. I'm pretty sure he was hoping for some more chocolate bunnies. But I was happy for the reminder, and tried to notice what was Easterish: happy songs and readings with happy endings. Today, the seventh Sunday in Easter, is the last hurrah of white vestments for awhile. We've had continuing stories from the Acts of the Apostles, the Revelation to John, and the Gospel of John. It's rare that the church lets us stick with three "series" for seven straight weeks.

And they really could be series. Indulge me, please, as I imagine the Acts of the Apostles as a Netflix series filmed on location in the Middle East.

In the first episode of the Acts, we meet Peter and John, who have been commanded to stop healing and preaching this Jesus nonsense. Peter's the intense one, and John the dreamy one. The Temple police lock them up, but 5000 men saw the healings, and the crowd protests outside the jail, so our heroes are released. Next, we meet Paul, who is fed up with these Jesus people, claiming that their teacher, humiliated by the Romans on a cross, has come back from the dead. He's got a satchel-full of arrest warrants, but then he is knocked off his horse by a vision of Jesus himself. Next episode, back to Peter: one week he raises Tabitha from the dead, and the next week he dreams that God wants him to eat Gentile food, which results in a big argument on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. His sidekick Mark eventually finds a compromise: a fusion place, on Yelp. Not too far away. Then we see Paul again, years later. He's gone over into Europe. The most zealous persecutor has totally done a 180 and become the most zealous missionary. He baptizes a wealthy woman named Lydia and she makes her house a "church." And finally today, Paul and Silas cure a slave who made big bucks for her owners by fortune-telling. (Romans were crazy for fortune-telling.) When her owners find she's lost the knack, they have our heroes thrown in prison, but God sends an earthquake. Great special effects. And more and more people join but it isn't really a separate religion, and nobody calls it Christianity. The cast

is much more diverse now that the series has moved to Greece. Multicultural. And pork sausage. And shellfish. Gymnasiums, too, so: *could have used a lot of sunscreen*. The early episodes were filmed in Jerusalem, so everyone is bearded, long robes, and those Jewish hats. All the restaurants in Jerusalem are kosher. It's a series about people who are totally committed to keeping the momentum going, and about bumbling police and religious types. It's supposed to all end in Rome, but that's season three or something.

Now there's nothing like a good story, but the ones that stick with us are more than just entertaining. They answer some question inside us. For me, I love the book of Acts, because it's a story of people pushing away boundaries, breaking out of jails, and switching sides. I relate to this story, because I have defended some stupid boundaries in my life, and been knocked off my high horse in the process. In 1973, I was having lunch with a college classmate. I spotted a guy two years older bringing his tray into the room, someone I knew slightly from choir and disliked. He was pretty flamboyantly gay and I often heard him criticizing other people. Unaware of my own hypocrisy, I began criticizing him, to my classmate, mostly for just being *so gay*. My classmate didn't take the bait, but changed the subject to his girlfriend, a southern beauty named Molly, whose parents he was going to meet that weekend.

The next evening, I was visited by a friend of that classmate, who told me that the flaming gay man with the lunch tray was actually my classmate's secret boyfriend. The Molly thing wasn't real. NO! I thought. But the visitor had a warning for me: if he ever heard about me trash-talking his friends again, he's spread some gossip about *me*. I was stunned, then afraid, and really ashamed. Why did I care that someone was gay? Why was I persecuting people I hardly knew? Was I afraid that *I* might be gay? I don't think so, but I was quite afraid of the gossip he might invent. And when the shock and fear wore off, I began to work on my insecurity. I needed to be more open. Less snide. Less judgmental.

I still do. My point is, we have choices to live narrower or wider lives. Peter decided to put the kosher rules aside, and Paul joined the folks he thought were his

enemies. The more you read the Acts of the Apostles, the more you are impressed at how innovative those women and men were. And counter-cultural. Those are our people, in the very first generation.

OK, back to Netflix.

The second readings have been from the prize-winning series *Revelation*. The whole Book of Revelation is a dream-sequence which, although a nightmare at times, makes very clear that God's gonna win, no matter what the good guys are fighting. The budget is huge, and the whole show is shot in a studio with very bright lights and all-white costumes. Between takes, stagehands are busy with windex and dust-busters. Everything in heaven is really clean. They're all wearing sunglasses. Basically, the first and last episodes are the beginning and ending of a dream that lasts the whole series. The dreamer is John, Jesus' best friend and probably the guy who wrote the Fourth Gospel. During the middle episodes, we see the throne room in heaven, with magical creatures and elders, and a multitude of people whose robes have been washed, in the blood of the Lamb. He doesn't explain why Lamb's blood is better than Clorox, but OK, it's a dream. And in any case, the whole Jesus story is full of reversals, anyway: Life comes from death, love comes from hate. God is dead, but wait: you can't kill God. At the end of the dream, the last two episodes, last week and this week, the world ends, and a new world begins with a wedding. The groom is dressed like the city of Jerusalem. Amazing costume, which I think came from a drag show. He's coming down a giant stairway from heaven. Everyone is invited to be guests, or maybe we're supposed to be the bride, it's not clear. We all live happily ever after.

The soundtrack is to die for.

When I gave my twelfth graders a chance to pick what book they wanted us to read first in our Biblical Studies class this past semester, they voted for Revelation. I was surprised, but they love superhero films, and so we started with the last book in the Bible. To be honest, I've always kind of looked down on Revelation. It is a

big favorite of smug Bible-thumpers who want all the secular humanists to go down in flames or get Left Behind. As we read together, the kids cheered the poor Jesus followers who'd been so oppressed by the demonic villains and their allies the kings and queens of Earth. They loved the battle-sequences and were charmed by the wedding at the end. But they never figured out why the most magical animal of all was a sheep. Some symbols don't translate. I don't get the Easter bunny, either.

Revelation is a dream. A wish. A hope. A happy ending. How about you? How do you picture the afterlife? Is it reward and punishment? Is it a banquet? A family reunion?

Take a minute to picture a place where all your suffering is gone, your wounds are healed, and you're learning cool new stuff every day. To me, there's always a nice breeze.

OK. Back to the third and final Netflix series, The Gospel of John.

Like in most French movies, people in this show talk a lot. Jesus has the most lines. By far. They all sit around for a long time after dinner, smoking and sipping coffee, and talking about relationships and how the stupid critics don't understand *anything*. It's a series about this really handsome guy named Jesus, who keeps saying he has to leave soon, and they don't want him to go. To be honest, I think he talks about himself too much. But he brought them to the big city and the crowds there went nuts, but now he's acting like his career's all over. In the second week, we meet Thomas, who loved him, but his heart broke when Jesus died. The others told him no, he was only dead for a couple of days, but he had to see for himself. Third week, Peter, who had claimed, three times, he didn't even know Jesus, and so Jesus had to ask him if they were really friends or not, three times, at breakfast on the beach. Grilled fish.

Then there was a flashback episode to the suspicious officials in the Temple who didn't think Jesus was for real, and asked him straight up if he was The One, like in The Matrix, but Jesus basically said, *Words are cheap. I have no more words for you. You've seen me. Decide for yourselves.* And they basically take the blue pill and go back to sleep, and keep hoping for a Messiah with better weapons systems. Then two weeks ago it's the Last Supper. Judas is gonna break up with Jesus, and he sort of sneaks out. He regrets it the next morning. But, anyway, at dinner Jesus tells everyone that he's leaving, and they can't come with, but he tells them people will always recognize them if they keep loving one another. And then in today's finale he sort of says goodbye and tells them that they shouldn't worry: he is going to send the holy spirit to them, which apparently is some kind of super power. John the Baptist used to talk about it, also. And -- spoiler alert -- next week they suddenly don't need google translate any more.

The Easter Season in three series. Seven episodes each. The hero stays strong, and returns from the dead. His friends can't remain loyal and then they understand: God really did this. Died because of our sins. Surely there is something in this story we each connect with. A time we failed to do the right thing. A person we betrayed, or denied, or didn't believe. We suffered, failed, felt terrible. Knocked off our high horse.

But there are people in our lives who just kept loving us, no matter what. Even when we felt unworthy. Those people were Christ for us. And we can be Christ for others, too. Because death didn't have the last word. The wedding scene, and not regret, is the happy ending.

John:

2: Doubting Thomas

3: Breakfast on the beach

4: Temple officials ask Jesus if he is the Messiah: he says, my actions have answered your question, and no matter what words I tell you now, you will not listen.

5: At the Last Supper after Judas had left, Jesus said: people will know you are my followers by the way you love one another.

6: And to all of you who love one another, I will send the Holy Spirit.

7: Jesus finishes his Last Supper prayer, asking God to keep him and his friends united, no matter what.

Acts:

2nd Sunday Peter answers the high priests: we can't help it. You can't shut us up!

3rd: Saul, recently breathing threats and murder, is knocked off his horse.

4th: Peter raises Tabitha from the dead.

5th: Peter dreams that God wants him to eat Gentile food.

6th: Paul crosses over into Europe, meets Lydia, and she and her family are baptized and set up the very first "church" in Europe, in her house.

7th: the fortune-teller, the earthquake, and the jail-break

Rev:

2: Dear Seven churches, Greetings from Jesus, from the holy spirit, and from heaven in general!

3: Scene from the throne room in heaven, with four living creatures and Elders

4: An Elder tells John who these people from every nation, robed in white are: they have been through the great ordeal

5: In the dream, the world has ended and a new one begins with a wedding between heaven and Earth.

6: In the dream, an angel takes John up high on a mountain to see the bride at the wedding: a new Jerusalem with no Temple, no gates, no suffering, and no darkness, because the light of God shines 24/7

7: The end of John's vision, in which Jesus repeats he is the first and the last, and that he is coming soon, and the former sufferers in their white robes echo his invitation: come to the wedding!