

This spring, I wanted to write a column about Easter. Not just my usual, seasonal shtick about the chirping birds and the blooming blossoms, but a real, honest-to-goodness Easter column. I know it might be a bad idea, that some eyes will roll and my stock will plummet with the local intelligentsia, but I just can't help myself. You see, after twenty years of wandering and wondering and fancying myself much smarter than my religious friends and neighbors, I've gone back to church. And though it's not the church I grew up in, or even the same denomination, it's been like coming home.



To be honest, my return to the fold was motivated by two fairly secular emotions. The first was my growing desire to sing with a choir on a regular basis. (I love to sing, and with choral singing, you don't have to be very good – I'm not – to be part of something great!) The second was maternal guilt – a deep, nagging awareness that, in my ambivalence, I was failing my daughter, that I had a responsibility to educate her in the faith of her culture, if only so she'd have the tools to make up her own mind about Christianity when she was older.

On both those counts, church has been a smashing success. We have a fabulous choir – mainly why I chose this particular church in the first place – and I look forward to choir practice and Sunday morning services with a pure kind of joy I haven't felt in years. (Honestly, I think if more people sang in choirs, doctors would be prescribing a lot less Paxil and Zoloft.) As for my daughter, she's wild about Sunday school, is singing in the children's choir, and sits with a friend of ours like a perfect little lady on Sunday mornings. She pretends to sing the hymns, gamely mumbles her way through the Apostles' Creed, gazes in awe at the teenage acolytes, and basically just glows with solemnity and wonder. I watch her from the choir loft and can hardly sing, sometimes, for the lump in my throat.

So I'm getting to make pretty music, and my five-year-old's getting her education. Mission accomplished; that was the whole point of going back to church. But somewhere in the midst of all this joyful singing and dutiful mothering, something unexpected and wonderful has occurred. I've begun to recover my faith.

At first I thought it was just nostalgia playing tricks on me. After such a long absence from the church, it's indescribably moving every time the organ begins to play and I realize that – hey! – I know this hymn. It was equally overwhelming the first time the congregation stood to say the Apostles' Creed, and the words just came pouring out of me from some long-forgotten place in my memory. After twenty years, they were still there on the old mental hard drive! Wish I could say the same for at least half of what I learned in school.

But it's more than just nostalgia. The significant difference – with the hymns, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the various calls to worship – is that this time, I'm really listening to the words I'm saying. As a child, they were all rote – just something to memorize, regurgitate on Sunday, then forget. Now, suddenly, it's as if I'm hearing these words – and thinking about them, and feeling them – for the first time. And they're incredibly beautiful and meaningful. And suddenly, the world around me seems incredibly beautiful and meaningful, too. My random, meandering life seems suddenly full of... import?

I don't go in for labels like "evangelical" and "born again." They come with a whole set of associations, many of which I neither seek nor claim. Besides, I don't know enough to call myself anything, yet – I'm a total neophyte, just beginning to figure out what it means to have faith. There's so much studying I need to do, so much I need to learn. And the hardest part, for a natural skeptic like me, is knowing that there will be times when I simply won't know... when I won't have the empirical evidence I think I need.

But I'm up for the challenge. I really am. For Lent, while everyone else was giving up chocolate and tabloids, I decided to give up my smarty-pants, know-it-all attitude. The peace that passeth understanding? Bring it on! I'm wide open.

As for my daughter – this is all new to her, and I don't kid myself that her enthusiasm for church will last. She's already noticed that sermons are long and hard to understand, and let's face it – it ain't easy sitting quietly for a whole hour when you're five. Still, I know that by bringing her into this warm, loving community – and by exposing her to the language, the music, the rituals of the church – I am planting seeds. Maybe they'll grow and flourish immediately. Maybe they'll lie dormant for a while, or, like mine, their blooms will be plowed under when she goes off to college, only to sprout again decades later, when she's a mother taking her own child to church for the first time. It doesn't matter to me, as long as they're planted. To everything there is a season, right? Didn't I read that somewhere?

To those of you scoffing as you read this, I understand. I've been scoffing through my entire adulthood, so I get you. I'm one of you. I've seen lots of foreign films and read plenty of New Yorker short stories. I'm educated. I'm sophisticated. Okay, that part's debatable, but I do follow politics and current affairs and developments in science. According to their website, I could even join Mensa were I so inclined. (I say this in all humility, because for me, a high I.Q. has been more self-defeating than beneficial – the cause of much second guessing, navel gazing, and basic non-achievement.)

But all of the above seems like so much ephemera compared to this brand-new, age-old, deeply familiar, completely original, sparkling-clear mystery I've glimpsed, though just barely. I know I could spend a lifetime trying to solve it. I want to spend a lifetime trying to solve it. I can suddenly, finally, imagine a world where man's knowledge, as vast as it is, is not all there is – where knowledge, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, will eventually vanish away, leaving only faith, hope, and love.

So this year, for the first time, I am rushing toward Easter with an awakened mind and a resurrected heart. I will go through the motions with care – the basket, the eggs – because these, too, are rituals, and ceremony matters. Then, I will dress my daughter in her Easter dress, and, feeling like a child myself, I will stand with my new choir mates, before my new congregation, and sing "Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!"

And, miracle of miracles, I will believe it.