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Spring meditations

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Chapter 1: *Hope*

Winter was harsh. Cold and deadening, stormy and aggressive, it tried, so it seemed, to do away with any possibility of spring. It does that every year. Every winter grips the earth with a freezing grasp until nature is little more than a brittle skeleton coated with ice and dripping with icicles and frozen beyond breath.

And yet, spring always comes. Winter never wins the final battle. The cold, seemingly lifeless limbs outlast the ice. The warmer sun melts the freezing grip and calls forth the hidden breath while new life begins to stir.

New life. An old saying reminds us that where there is life, there is hope. But isn't it also true that where there is hope, there is life? Hope feeds on the past and nourishes the future. In the midst of even the longest winter, we can look forward to spring because the past has taught us that spring always comes. Life is more powerful than death because life is a gift from God who is love, and love is eternal.



A hopeful person is a hope-filled person. This is one of the lessons spring teaches us. After the death of winter comes the resurrection of spring. Nature revels in resurrection, and it encourages us to hope. Just like winter giving way to spring's irrepressible vitality, our moral and emotional winters fade and are transformed by the risen Lord.



When I was working in Chicago before joining the seminary I used to travel by train. You can get pretty much anywhere in that city using the train system, if you're willing. I used to like the longer train rides in the off hours, when there was enough room to actually take a seat. I preferred the window seats. I would gaze at the city passing by while I made my way to wherever I needed to go. I coveted time to think, reflect, and pray during those days because I could hear God's call reverberating in my heart. But life was so noisy that I would often lose track of that call. Long train rides with a window seat would help the noise fall away and give me a chance to listen to God's voice whispering in my soul.

I would see many beautiful things on those rides: the amazing architecture of the city, the gorgeous shore and horizon of Lake Michigan, the bustle of a young population eager to work hard and get ahead.

One image from those trips has stuck with me more than any other, but it's not what most people would call beautiful, at least not at first glance.

The train was speeding through a poverty-stricken, dilapidated section of the city, with boarded-up stores, burnt-out buildings, and collapsing houses pockmarking the landscape. I felt the melancholy. I felt the weight of the sadness. It was heavy, very heavy. I wasn't catching even a whiff of hope.

Then the train slowed and came to a stop, and I found myself looking at an empty parking lot surrounded by a precariously leaning fence. The asphalt was cracked, and broken pieces of the asphalt were piled up like rubble after a bombing. Because the train had stopped I had a chance for more than a quick glance. As I continued to gaze at the empty lot, I saw more than just rubble and failure. In the cracks of the asphalt, lush green grass and brightly colored wildflowers were bursting up toward the sky. Ivy and flowers with many colors were climbing joyfully along the leaning fence. A flowering shrub rejoiced in the corner, blissfully unaware of its dire need for pruning.

Here was new life. Here were living creatures that hadn't been told that this neighborhood was dead and hopeless. Amidst the angry, broken blacktop and the rusty links of the hapless fence a cheery grin winked out at me. Life wins. Hope fails not. Love is the deepest core of all things and will always find a way to sing out anew from the darkest, coldest winter, to grow and blossom in the cracks of the pavement.



One of my favorite saint stories comes from third-century Rome, where deacon St. Lawrence was the pope's right-hand man, in charge of the local church's finances and of taking care of the poor.

It was one of those periods in history when Christians were being persecuted for refusing to worship the false gods of a tyrannical state. Rome's governor arrested the pope and some other churchmen, condemning them to execution for treason against the Roman deities. He had heard that St. Lawrence was in charge of the treasury, so when questioning the deacon he asked about the riches of the church. Lawrence agreed to hand those riches over but asked for a few days to gather them together.

During that time, he sold the church's assets and gave them to the city's poor. When he returned to the governor he brought along homeless and ill beggars. He announced to the governor, "Behold the treasures of the Church." The governor was furious and sentenced Lawrence to be grilled to death over a bed of hot coals.

While Lawrence was in prison the night before his execution, he was full of energy, of joy. He stayed awake praying and sang hymns of praise to the Lord. His guard couldn't understand it. Finally he approached the prisoner and asked him why he was so overjoyed when his execution was merely hours away. Saint Lawrence looked him in the eye and smiled, telling him what he was looking

forward to: eternal life with God in heaven, seeing the Creator face to face, an everlasting embrace of love with the origin of all that was good in the world. Thus began a long conversation about the Gospel, at the end of which the guard asked to be baptized. He also became a saint, and a martyr, just like Lawrence. He is known as St. Romanus.

Lawrence was a human spring, filled with hope. This hope gave him strength to resist the most powerful worldly authorities. It gave him purpose and sharpened his wits. It overflowed into energy and enthusiasm even when it required him to give up all the possibilities of life on earth in order to be faithful to his friendship with God. It made him a light in the darkness, a tender but riveting blossom sprouting from the cold and wintry stones of a prison cell.



Do you want to be a hopeful person? I do. Certain days I feel the vitality of hope coursing through my veins. Other days it seems my veins are still and lifeless, discouragement and frustration grip my heart with a freezing grasp. But when that happens, I know what to do. Our souls aren't merely natural; they are spiritual. We don't have to wait for spring to feel the warmth of hope. We have the capacity to remember the springs that have passed and to contemplate the sureness of the springs to come. That thought can bring spring to our minds and hearts whenever we need it. Even

when we find ourselves in a prison, condemned, rejected, humiliated, with nothing left for us on earth—even then—we can hope.



Making It Your Own

- † Choose one sentence from this chapter that really resonated in your heart or compose a one-sentence summary. Write it on a sticky note. Put it where you will see it throughout the week. Let it become a reminder of the truth that winter never wins.
- † Many people criticize religious faith because they don't understand why there is so much evil and suffering in the world. But the deeper mystery, the harder question, is to fathom why there is so much good and beauty in the world. Take five minutes each day this week to write down the good things that have come to you in life. Describe them in detail. Think about them. Let the past feed your hope.
- † What types of activities feed *your* hope? Maybe going for a bike ride or a walk seems to refresh you. Maybe reading children's stories or good fiction seems to encourage

you. Maybe taking quiet time to pray in a beautiful church or chapel strengthens you. Identify your top three hope-feeding activities and do each of them at least once this week.

- † What types of activities tend to drain your hope? Maybe watching the news makes you feel negative and pessimistic. Maybe spending too much time online makes you feel distracted and stressed. Maybe there are some relationships in your life that bring you down instead of building you up. What can you do about these hope-drainers?
- † Jesus rose from the dead during spring. How often do you think about his resurrection? What does it really mean for you? Take time this week to get out your Bible and go to the end of any of the four Gospels to read the narration of Christ's resurrection. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. Underline phrases that resonate in your heart and maybe even memorize one of them. Let God's word touch your soul.
- † Who do you know who seems to be a hope-filled person? Take time to visit with that person this week. Ask where the person's hope comes from and what it means for him or her.