

*Lord of the Dance*  
Resurrection of the Lord  
Mark 16:1-8  
Sunday, April 12, 2009  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

A man and wife and the wife's mother went on vacation to Jerusalem during Holy Week. While they were there, the wife's mother suddenly got sick and died. When the couple met with the undertaker, he told them, "You can have the body shipped back to the States for home for \$10,000, or you can bury her here in the Holy Land for \$150." The wife turned to her husband and said, "Honey, you make the decision. I'm too upset!" So the man thought about it and finally said, "We'll have the body shipped back to the States." The wife turned to him and said, "Honey, I am so touched that you didn't let money get in the way." As they were leaving, the mortician pulled the husband aside and said, "I'm just curious. Why would you spend \$10,000 to ship the body home when it would be wonderful to bury her in Jerusalem, the Holy City, and you would spend only \$150?" The man replied, "Long ago a man died here in Jerusalem, was buried here, and three days later he rose from the dead not far from here. No offense, sir, but this is my mother-in-law. I just can't take that chance!"

The time when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is always a time of hope, promise, and even surprises.

If you saw the wonderful film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and stayed to the very end, you witnessed (in my opinion) one of the few truly exhilarating moments in last year's crop of movies. The story line follows three orphans – two brothers and a girl – from childhood to young adulthood in the slums of Mumbai, India. In some ways, the story is harrowing in showing what life is like for the tens of thousands of children who grow up in settings like this. Jamal Malik, the protagonist, in much the same way that David Copperfield and Oliver Twist where the child protagonists in Charles Dickens' epic novels, hardly knows what to do when things work out for him despite the formidable odds.

Just as the film is coming to a close at the train station in Mumbai (and I promise not to spoil how the story ends), the credits begin to roll. Suddenly as two trains pull up on either side of the platform, all of the characters in the movie suddenly pour out break into an exuberant dance number reminiscent

of the films that are made in Mumbai's movie studios – known affectionately as “Bollywood.” The movie's ending is one of the reasons why I prefer to watch films in theaters before watching them on DVD. The enthusiasm on the screen seems to sweep out and embrace the audience. I saw it three times and each crowd left with huge smiles.

When news that the film had been nominated for eleven Academy Awards made its way to Mumbai, it seemed as if the infectious final dance number had spilled across the entire city. Mumbai's slums that had provided the setting for the movie turned into quite another scene the night the Academy Awards were broadcast live all over India and the film won eight Oscars including Best Picture. One news report said that “crowds gathered around the few television sets in the slum and it took barely a minute for word of each award to spread through the slum's winding lanes.”<sup>1</sup> A neighbor of one of the child stars who herself lived in the slums said, “It seems like happiness is falling from the sky.”<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Ismail, the father of one of the children in the film, said, “Normally, no one talks to us and no one comes here, but now everyone is here.”<sup>3</sup>

Alison Downie, a PhD student at Duquesne University, writes in an essay, “Is it written that every child born into miserable conditions will grow up to enjoy a happy life? Of course not. The appeal of \*Slumdog\* is mythic, symbolic, and, therefore, in the broad sense of the word, religious, telling what is deeply true and teaching how to live in harmony with truth.”<sup>4</sup> A young boy, growing into manhood, has to continually choose between right and wrong and finds a way to successfully do it – unlike his older brother, Salim, who tries to manipulate and control everything around him for selfish gain. When Salim forcefully takes “what he thinks he must have, [he] loses what he needs most: his own life's meaning. In Jamal's story, the girl and the [the vast fortune that comes his way] symbolize the meaning and fulfillment that a courageous way of living brings about, even in a context of horrific suffering. What is written is that a life of integrity is its own reward.”<sup>5</sup> Some would say that this film's achievements suggest “that the

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Dolnick, “Mumbai Slums Celebrate Oscar Win for ‘Millionaire’”, *USA Today*, Tuesday, February 24, 2009, [http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/movieawards/oscars/2009-02-24-mumbai-slumdog-reaction\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/movieawards/oscars/2009-02-24-mumbai-slumdog-reaction_N.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Downie, “Fairy Tale, Myth, and Slumdog Reality,” *Culture and Review*, March 9, 2009, <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/8896>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

movie touches deeply and awakens something like faith, which has more than once been called foolish, naïve, and childish.”<sup>6</sup>

As I help connect the dots between dancing, of all things, and the exhilaration of Easter morning, I must confess to you that it came as something of a surprise to me as a teenager when I discovered that I loved to dance. I grew up in a conservative Methodist home in East Tennessee where dancing was considered much akin to card playing. That era might have been a hundred years ago for some of you, but it wasn't that long ago for me. In fact, the most trouble I ever caused my older sister, Mary Frances, was when I, at the age of twelve, told our parents that she, at the age of sixteen, had gone to a high school dance without permission! It took me years of atonement to make up for that childhood blunder!

What is it about a dance of exhilaration that touches the soul of even the most skeptical among us? Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, said, “Without music, life is a waste... I would only believe in a God who knew how to dance... Only in dance do I know how to speak the symbol of the highest things.”<sup>7</sup> Agnes De Mille, the 20<sup>th</sup> century American choreographer of such works as Aaron Copeland's ballet, *Rodeo*, in 1942, and Rogers & Hammerstein's ground-breaking musical, *Oklahoma*, in 1943, said, “To dance is to be out of yourself – larger, more beautiful, more powerful.”<sup>8</sup> Martha Graham, the 20<sup>th</sup> century American dancer and choreographer and perhaps the foremost pioneer of modern dance, said in 1953, “I am a dancer. I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living... In each it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, quoted in *Friedrich Nietzsche and Weimar Classicism* by Paul Bishop and R. H. Stephenson (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2004), 128. The text of this edition is also found on line at Google Books:

[http://books.google.com/books?id=ljxXTx7A1pMC&pg=PA128&lpg=PA128&dq=i+would+only+believe+in+a+god+who+knew+how+to+dance&source=bl&ots=V-1bAsw\\_PI&sig=m6vFt7A5JwEO5Zc7VBqZ9mwG6kQ&hl=en&ei=KffgSZCvEqTgtAPa0ZS1CQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=6](http://books.google.com/books?id=ljxXTx7A1pMC&pg=PA128&lpg=PA128&dq=i+would+only+believe+in+a+god+who+knew+how+to+dance&source=bl&ots=V-1bAsw_PI&sig=m6vFt7A5JwEO5Zc7VBqZ9mwG6kQ&hl=en&ei=KffgSZCvEqTgtAPa0ZS1CQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Graham, “An Athlete of God,” included in the collection of essays, *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 84.

If you appreciate classical dance, you may know that its history is littered with the story of great dances and ballets that have been lost over the centuries. Robert Greskovic, the dance critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, says that “this happens when there are no comprehensive records left, no reliable moving pictures or notation scores, and no sufficiently reliable individuals to tell a new generation in depth what the original was like. When a ballet goes out of repertoire for an extended period of time, it becomes known in the lore of the field as ‘lost.’”<sup>10</sup> Greskovic says fortunately there are “intrepid individuals” who involve themselves in reconstructing a ballet. They’re like detectives who work with “various bits of information... [which] may include still photographs, drawings, diagrams, extant musical and written literature – reminiscences, reviews, essays, working notes, film fragments – and any eye-witnesses, either professional or amateur, who still might be around to be queried about the lost work. If and when the work gets finished, the result still stands as a kind of educated guess about the ballet reconstructed...”<sup>11</sup>

Suzanne Farrell, one of the most noted ballerinas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has, since she retired as the primary dancer for the New York City Ballet, focused on finding the lost dances of the great choreographer, George Balanchine, who was her mentor. Even if some of the participants are still around, it’s still hard work. A revival of the beloved 1957 Broadway musical, *West Side Story*, recently opened on Broadway and one of the chief tasks of the show’s creative team was to recapture the choreography that Jerome Robbins created for the dancers fifty-two years ago.

I want to suggest that those of us who worship together on Easter morning have joined forces to rediscover, to recapture a great dance that first took place two thousand years ago.

If it is true that the Christian faith is never more than one generation away from extinction, what if it is the joy and exhilaration of Easter that has been missing from our lives? What if it is our time to reclaim the power of our faith in the midst of a world of misery and disbelief? After all, the author of Ecclesiastes says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Greskovic, *Ballet 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving the Ballet* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 207.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

mater under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; ...a time to mourn and a time to dance...”<sup>12</sup>

In 1963 Sydney Carter, an English poet, folk musician, song writer, and Quaker (1915-2004), was inspired to rework and recreate another kind of dance altogether. Beginning with traditional English Christmas carol entitled “Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day” which “tells the Gospel story in the first person voice of Jesus of Nazareth,”<sup>13</sup> Carter began to write words about the entire life of Jesus similarly using the Lord’s first person voice.

In his book *Green Print for Song* (1974), Carter writes: “Scriptures and creeds may come to seem incredible, but faith will still go dancing on. I see Christ as the incarnation of that piper who is calling us. He dances that shape and pattern which is at the heart of our reality. By Christ I mean not only Jesus – in other times and places, other planets, there may be other Lords of the Dance. But Jesus is the one I know first and best. I sing of the dancing pattern in the life and words of Jesus.”<sup>14</sup>

When Sydney Carter chose the tune to go with his words, he decided to honor his Quaker roots by adapting “Simple Gifts,” an American Shaker hymn.<sup>15</sup> I’d like to play the tune for you, but we need a dancer, don’t we?

[Play the tune on the grand piano as Erica Ehrlich dances.]

When we sing “Lord of the Dance” at the conclusion of today’s service, you can see all the ideas that Sydney Carter tried to encompass. It is the Gospel story of Jesus Christ – from birth to ministry, from crucifixion to resurrection. It is to be sung as if Jesus, himself, were singing it – “I am the Lord of the dance,” said he. Carter once admitted, “Whether Jesus ever leaped in Galilee to the rhythm of a pipe or drum I do not know.”<sup>16</sup> What Carter successfully did was to make the story come alive.

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<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4b.

<sup>13</sup> “Lord of the Dance,” Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord\\_of\\_the\\_Dance\\_\(hymn\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_of_the_Dance_(hymn)).

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Day, “I Danced in the Morning,” essay printed at *Claves Regni*, the online magazine of St. Peter’s Church, Nottingham, England and All Saints, <http://www.stpetersnottingham.org/hymns/dance.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> “Simple Gifts” was composed by Joseph Brackett (1798-1882).

<sup>16</sup> Day, *Ibid*.

Three friends die in an accident and end up in heaven at the same time. When St. Peter greets them for their orientation seminar, he says, “In a couple of days, your family and loved ones will gather for your funeral. You’ll be able to watch and listen to everything that goes on from here. Here’s your question. ‘When people walk up to your casket to pay their respects, what would you like to hear them say about you?’ The first guy says, ‘I would like to hear them say that I was a great doctor of my time, and a great family man.’ The second guy says, ‘I would like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and school teacher which made a huge difference in our children of tomorrow.’ The last guy replies, ‘I would like to hear them say... ***LOOK, HE’S MOVING!***”

You don’t have to be good at dancing to understand what I’m trying to say this morning. However, if you want the spirit of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to stay in your heart and not fade away, then you have to be willing to move your soul and body as much as you can!

Faith in the resurrected Christ, this piper who calls us to follow him, is not static. Neither is it rigid, set in stone, nor relegated to the past.

In the world of theater and dance, a “cattle call” is an audition in which a large number of often inexperienced actors, performers, singers, or dancers, try out. The good news is that First Church needs a whole bunch of people who are willing to dance with the Lord. We’re sending out a “cattle call” in his name. Are you interested and willing? If you’re not movin’ now, I hope you will be soon!

Thanks be to God. Amen.