

We all ache for resurrection, don't we?! In 1954, Marcelle Maurette penned his powerful play *Anastasia*. It was based on the true story of a woman named Anna Anderson who claimed to be the long-lost daughter of the last emperor of Russia, Tsar Nicholas II, and his wife, Aleksandra.

The Russian tsars believed their kingdom was imperishable. They knew they would rule forever. But at the turn of the last century, a groundswell of social and political revolution tossed them aside. The emperor and his family were held hostage in the palace and then executed as the Bolsheviks bathed the countryside with blood.

Rumours persisted that little Anastasia, the youngest of the Romanovs, somehow survived the slaughter. Over the years, a number of women claimed to be her. Some were easily spotted as frauds; others convinced enough supporters to make a serious claim to fame.

And then there was Anna - a nameless, homeless, memory-less wanderer, prone to suicidal fits at the "insane asylum" where she was brought. Nobody knew where she came from. They gave her the name Anna because she had none of her own.

But one day, Anna's doctor came across a picture of the last Russian royal family. Anna bore a striking resemblance to little Anastasia. And she seemed to know more about the Russian noble house than one would expect. Anna was hypnotised, revealing that she knew even more in her subconscious. There was a real possibility that she could be the only surviving heir of the Romanov family fortune. But who would know for sure? Was there any way to prove it?

Newspapers picked up the story. Was this really Anastasia? By some miracle was her life spared, only to be thrown into this new and dismal tragedy? Or was she only a hoax, a scoundrel, a publicity-seeker? The controversy sold papers, and the press hyped it to the limit.

Enter the old empress. She was not in Russia at the time of the murder of her son and his family, and now she lived in exile. If anyone could know if Anna was truly her granddaughter, this woman would be that person. One day she came to see Anna.

The two women talked together for a long time. When she left, the elderly woman was accosted by reporters, and told the world: "Anna is my granddaughter Anastasia!" Suddenly Anna began to change. She blossomed as a person. She took hold of her life. The suicide threats were gone. She washed herself and combed her hair. She looked after herself and dressed in style. She stood up straight in a crowd, and she carried herself with dignity when she walked.

One line in the play carried the heart of the story. How did Anna climb from the pit of her insane asylum and walk again in the land of the living? What transformed Anna the nobody into Anastasia the princess? This was her secret: "You must understand that it never mattered whether or not I was a princess. It only matters that ...someone, if it be only one, had held out their arms to welcome me back from death!"

When describing the events of resurrection morning, in that garden cemetery, St John gave us some wonderful analogies to see this rebirth happening before our eyes. St John was a master of multiple levels of meaning, and we have seen it in his descriptions.

When Mary Magdalene wept because she missed her “Lord” a man appeared on her periphery, and she assumed that he was “the gardener.” Of course, Mary’s perception had to be incorrect, because, as we know from St John, the man was actually Jesus. But was Mary really wrong? St John never said that Mary was mistaken; only that she had assumed he was the gardener. In fact, St John appeared to want us, his readers, to get the subtle message that Jesus is indeed the gardener. After all, at the beginning of time, the Creator placed Adam and Even in a garden and came to walk and talk with them (Genesis 2). In the re-creation of all things, it is quite appropriate for new life to begin anew in a garden where the great gardener was once again meandering and talking with those who were favoured friends. St John confirmed this symbolic intent when he told us that Jesus said, “Mary.” Jesus spoke Mary’s name. Just as Adam and Eve, along with all the animals and all elements of creation, came into being when they were named in the first beginning, so now Mary was restored to life in a new way as her identity was regenerated when Jesus spoke her name. The cemetery of the dead among gravestones became the birthplace of new lives and a new creation.

“A grave is a sobering thing,” said Wordsworth. We try to mark each with snippets of meaning that will defuse the superficiality of life that Emily bemoaned in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. “If I was so quickly done for,” asked the little voice etched on a child’s grave memorial, “what on earth was I begun for?”

Ancient Romans tossed away the scandal of our brief and meaningless lives. When archaeologists first sifted through graveyards of the early centuries of the great Empire, they were caught up short by many burial stones inscribed with the same seven letters: N F F N S N C. These certainly spelled no known Latin word, and other connections escaped would-be interpreters. Until, that is, they uncovered older cemeteries where many grave stones carried seven-word inscriptions beginning with these otherwise meaningless letters. They read: *Non Fui. Fui. Non Sum. Non Curo*. Suddenly the intent was clear. So many Ancient Romans had found this phrase as the best representation of life and death that even poor people with small stones could abbreviate it down to just seven letters and all would understand: “I was not. I was. I am not. I don’t care.”

Although a lot of people in our modern world agree with that statement, its a different matter closer to the reality of death. I have officiated at hundreds of funerals over the past 35 years, and never met a family which would have dared place that testimony over the grave of a loved one. We cry. We weep. We wail.

Even when death is “good,” and an elderly grandmother slips willingly from time into eternity, tears of grief trace our cheeks. We were born to live, not to die. That is why those same archaeologists of ancient Rome were equally surprised by some of the memorials found next to the burial niches in the catacombs where Christians laid their dead. No N F F N S N C here. In the catacombs were inscribed verses of scripture, to be sure, but also symbols and pictures. The one, however, that mystified most, showed the upper body of a man holding a harp. It seemed to represent Jesus, but standard mythological representations usually tied that one to Orpheus.

Orpheus was the darling of Greek love, music, and tragedy. Orpheus was the master musician of his time. When Orpheus sang, the clouds rolled back from the skies, the sun shone more brightly. When Orpheus came to town, people floated out of homes and shops to dance in the streets and fall in love.

Of course, when Orpheus himself fell in love, passion intensified. It was Eurydice (YOU RID ISEE) who caught his eye and heart, and before long they were fawning and fainting after one

another. When Orpheus and Eurydice wed, the world danced.

But a week later all meaning was lost. While Eurydice romped with her friends through a field, a snake slithered through the grass and struck her heel. Almost instantly Eurydice was gone, robbed of her marriage and life itself. Deep in grief, the song died in Orpheus' heart. He only moaned and groaned, and the world hung heavy with pain. Orpheus moped and wallowed.

Reaching for strength Orpheus set out on a mission to the undiscovered country. He found the door to the underworld and slid down, down, into the kingdom of death. Confronting elusive Hades, Orpheus demanded back the woman he had loved too shortly. Hades would have none of it. His contracts were lethally binding. Orpheus did what only he could do. He sang a love song. Strumming his harp, Orpheus put his heart to music in a way that sent shivers through the shifting shades and shadows. As his voice reverberated against the wailing walls, one ghost began to thicken and colour. A few more stanzas and Eurydice stood solid before him once again. They kissed and hugged and held hands all the way to earth's surface, gripped by smiles of incredulous love.

The legend of Orpheus grew over time, so that even the most skeptical linked his name to true love. But why would early Christians reconfigure Jesus in the guise of Orpheus in the catacombs of Rome?

Obviously, they did not believe in Orpheus. They were suffering and bloody martyrs of Christ. However some metaphors command instant understanding, and when these persecuted souls recalled the words and deeds of Jesus, it was precisely in burial niches of the catacombs in Rome that conflating Orpheus and Christ made perfect sense. This is why the Christians in Rome conflated the myth of Orpheus with the reality of Jesus. They did not trust in human legends. But they did hang their hopes on the one who said "I am the resurrection and the life!" and then proved it when he himself went down, down, into the depth of death, and came up again on Easter morning as the Lord of life.

And, as wives bade farewell to husbands who had been torn apart by the bears and lions in the coliseum, as children wrapped the bodies of parents in burial clothes, as friends mourned their deaths the great metaphor of Jesus as the true Orpheus told the most magnificent promise of all. For even in these dark days of deathly persecution, followers of Jesus knew that one time soon the good and great shepherd would shout the names of their loved ones down to Hades itself, and their family and friends would hear their Master's voice, and they would rise to life and follow him into the eternal kingdom.

We all try to evade and fool death, stymying him with tummy tucks and fleeing him through our exercise routines and vitamins. But come death shall, with fateful inclusiveness, whispering our names at night or noon, and, against our wheedling and pleading. Then the hope of our faith will endure its final test. For if the Gospel is true, our good, great, and chief shepherd will not forget us, but will march down, down, to Sheol and sing us his song of love. And we, who know the voice of our Master, will rise into the dawn of eternity and follow the one who calls us by name.

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