

Thanksgiving Day 2017      Philippians 4:4-7

Once a friend and I took “The Perfect London Walk,” set out in a library book by Roger Ebert, the movie critic. Till that day, I rather liked Roger Ebert. The walk, he said, would give you a bird’s eye view of sprawling London from Hampstead Heath. It would bring fresh air, exercise, and a few significant places along the way. It would test how you really felt about your travel companion. We had good weather but I didn’t have the right shoes. The walk wasn’t perfect. It was May 28, 1998. Thirteen years after that day I would get a phone call from Placid in Charleston saying “Larry’s dead.” This set off a chain of events leading to the memorial mass after Placid’s suicide, 16.5 years after “The Perfect London Walk.” A moment when friends stood by me, which I remember and give thanks for (the fourth anniversary comes next week). Maybe it is too obvious to say, but everything in life is connected, once you see life from a high vantage point like Hampstead Heath, or heaven, or a memorial mass.

Anyway, “twenty years,” Placid would say, in groaning satirical tones. I was toiling up to Hampstead Heath. By 2:00 we got to the Spaniards Inn, where Charles Dickens set a *Pickwick Papers* scene. The English eat lunch at 2, but if I wait till then, I am grumpy. I didn’t care about *Pickwick Papers*. The most important part of the walk was to have been the Keats House. I wanted to see ornamental comb the poet gave to Fanny Brawne. This comb had a significant role in a book I did care about. We got to Keats House: “Closed Indefinitely,” said the sign on the gate.

We went to Hampstead Heath. I was indifferent to the view of sprawling London. We went Highgate Cemetery. Roger Ebert describes it: “a Gothic wonderland of shrouded urns, obelisks, broken columns, sleeping angels, Egyptian-style tombs, overgrown graves, and gloomy cedars, Highgate is a Victorian Valhalla and final resting place for 170,000 people.” The people we met that day *were* quite creepy: wearing leather, fluorescent hair, black lipstick, and safety pins through their nostrils. Alone on a path when I met them, I was so relieved to find my friend and be safe.

The most famous grave is a plinth with the huge ugly head of Karl Marx, which has survived two bombing attempts. More poignant is the grave of Mary Ann Evans, better known as George Eliot, woman of high moral seriousness shown in the novel *Middlemarch*. She had a face like a horse, not as ugly as Marx, and a loving commitment to the philosopher G.H. Lewes, who was legally unable to divorce his estranged wife. Deliberately choosing to live with him, George Eliot was rejected by the brother described so passionately in *The Mill on the Floss*. She was not invited into respectable homes. *But Jesus would have visited her*. Lewes is buried near but not beside her. On her stone are the words, “the last secret touch easing a secret pain.” The great writer knowing that *words* cannot say everything.

One grave had just one word: it was a waist-high grand piano in marble. The music on the stand was etched with a page from Puccini. I like to think it was the song starting, “They call me Mimi. I have a simple story.”

But I may be extrapolating from a stone nearby, also with no name. I have remembered this inscription many times in twenty years (*twenty years*). I don’t think it’s a quotation, rather the person’s own spontaneous feeling. “But oh, I have enjoyed it all.” I cannot remember if there was an exclamation point. It seems like the second half of a sentence. “I am sorry to leave the party, but oh, I have enjoyed it all.”

Is it fanciful to think this was a quiet lady (women being more in touch with reality) who had a big disappointment or tragedy--a broken engagement, a serious bereavement, a traumatic violation like those in the newspapers now—yet managed to come through and go beyond it.

Healing, learning, but not forgetting. However unspectacular, her life was a triumph, ending, “I am sorry to leave the party, but oh, I have enjoyed it all.”

The lack of pious jargon may or may not include religious belief. Heaven will be a party, but earthly life, even with troubles, is pretty fabulous. When I am frustrated, hassled, or whining over unimportant matters, I remember these words which startle me. I wish Placid had said them at the end. I want to live in order to say, “But oh, I have enjoyed it all.”

The second reading (Philippians 4:4-7) was set to music by an Elizabethan composer. I would play the you-tube recording, “Rejoice in the Lord alway,” from Paisley Abbey. But Fr Peter complains about stunts. Though George Eliot would see that for every complaint Fr Peter makes, there’s a secret compliment somewhere. The a’ cappella music is light and quick: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.* Then the word *rejoice* is thrown back and forth between different sections of the choir. The anthem continues, *Be **careful** for nothing* (that means, be anxious for nothing). *But in all prayer and supplication... let your petitions be manifest unto God... with giving of thanks.* Here the music becomes slow and smooth, adagio, legato. *And the peace of God which passeth all understanding* (wait for the marvelous crescendo) *will keep your hearts and minds...* in Christ Jesus. Exquisite words, exquisite music, exquisite spiritual truth. For every-day, not just holiday. To practice this spiritual truth is not beyond our capacity. We can make it our aim, to notice, to rejoice, to give thanks, and at the last to exclaim, “But oh I have enjoyed it all!”

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