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Our Saviour/St. Stephens  
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Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, what is your best day? What has been your most favorite of days?

Now, for some of us, we might say that our best day was the day when we met our spouse or significant other, or the day when we got married.

Some of us might say that our best day was the day when we became parents or grandparents.

Some of us might say that our best day was the day when we graduated high school or graduated college, or that day when we landed our dream job.

What is your very best day? What is your most favorite of days?

Now, I have had a lot of great days—including all those I just listed.

PAUSE

But I want to share with you a day I had last year that ranks among the best of my best days.

PAUSE

Now, we may probably have heard that the longest running musical on Broadway just closed this past week.

Yes, *The Phantom of the Opera* ran at the Majestic Theater on Broadway from 1988 to 2023.

And, my best day was not my attendance at a performance of *Phantom* on Broadway.

Indeed, I never saw the musical on Broadway.

But my best day does revolve around a high school production of the *Phantom*.

You see, my son Jonah was cast as the lead of the *Phantom* at Cedar Cliff High School last year.

And my wife and I were very proud of him.

But what made that production so special, and why it was such a meaningful day, was not just the part he played in the that musical.

PAUSE

Now, if you've never seen *The Phantom of the Opera*, or if you are not familiar with the story...

The musical is about a love triangle.

The phantom is a man, a tortured soul really, who lives down in the bowels of the opera house in Paris.

The phantom's face is deformed and as a result he has been shunned, and scorned, mistreated by a cruel world, and so the phantom has retreated from the world, and has come to make his abode in the bowels of the opera house, away from all the cruelty of the world.

And the owners of this opera house and the players of the opera house have come to believe that the opera house is haunted by a ghost, and yes, indeed the phantom has regularly terrorized the opera company, even resorting to murder when needed.

But this phantom has also taken under his tutelage a young woman named Christine.

Yes, the phantom has secretly been helping Christine hone her voice so as to become a great opera star.

And in the course of tutoring Christine, the phantom has grown to love her.

But then, enter Raoul, who was a childhood friend of Christine.

Raoul is visiting the opera house, and upon recognizing Christine, he immediately has feelings for her, and she for him.

And they soon fall in love, and become engaged, and so we have this love triangle—the phantom, Christine, and Raoul.

But the phantom will have not share Christine, and in fact he is causing her life to become a complete misery by the fear he brings to her life.

And then the drama reaches a climax, whereby the phantom kidnaps Christine, taking her down into the depths of the opera house, down into his lair.

And Raoul soon follows after to rescue Christine, and to put an end to the phantom.

But the phantom quickly captures Raoul, stringing him up by a noose, and he is all but ready to kill him.

But the phantom gives Christine an ultimatum: choose to live the rest of her life with him, the phantom, or reject him and choose Raoul, at which point, the phantom will hang Raoul.

And Christine who is literally stuck between a rock and hard place... Christine sings these words to the phantom, "Pitiful creature of darkness, what kind of life have you known? God gave me courage to show you, you are not alone."

And she kisses the phantom, not once but twice, perhaps once for Raoul and once for the phantom, suggesting she loves them both.

And in that display of affection, she breaks the will of the phantom.

And it would seem that the phantom will now flee with Christine never to be seen again, or the phantom is thinking that Christine is trying to fool him and so he will kill Raoul. We, as the audience, don't quite know for sure.

And slowly, methodically, the phantom moves to where Raoul is still struggling in the noose—what will the phantom do? And what happens is that the phantom releases Raoul and tells both Christine and Raoul to leave, to run, and to leave him.

And the two lovers spring to their freedom.

And the phantom, with the mob descending into his abode seeking to destroy him, the phantom at the end of the musical just disappears.

And the curtain comes down.

PAUSE

Now, of course, the musical has all sorts of Christian overtones.

The fact that Christine redeems the phantom with her mercy and love is obvious Christian imagery, made even more obvious by the fact that Christine's name contains the name Christ.

She is the Christian savior in this story.

And the fact that all the action of the climatic scene takes place in the bowels of the opera house, as if in hell itself, speaks again of Christian imagery, because the phantom is freed from his metaphorical and physical hell, when he does experience love and mercy.

PAUSE

But the musical leaves us hanging.

Because we don't know what happens to the phantom after he is redeemed. He just disappears.

And here then is where I come to count this performance of *The Phantom of the Opera* in that high school...he is where I come to see this day as one of, in not my best, my most favorite of days.

For you see, after the performance, the audience was invited to gather in the high school gymnasium across the hall from the auditorium, for a time of "Meet and Greet."

And, it was there, amidst all these people milling about, congratulating the performers, taking pictures with the performers, and so on...there in that gymnasium I saw the third act of the musical play out.

For there was my son who had been this terrifying character, my son who had been this awful, cold-blooded killer in the play...

There was my son, who only shortly before when the musical ended had been shrouded in utter darkness on stage, the phantom having completely disappeared.

There was my son, now, suddenly in this brightly lit gymnasium, the various cast members being mobbed by friends and family and members of the audience.

And there I was watching my son being greeted by adults and children. And it was nothing like anything I have ever seen...

Adults were coming up to Jonah, embracing him, with actual tears in their eyes.

And he would embrace them right back, letting them cry on his shoulder for a while.

And then little kids cautiously approached him, and Jonah would get down on their level, and encourage them to come over, saying, “It is okay. You don’t have to be afraid.” And those little kids would come over and hug him.

And periodically, as he was greeting folks, Jonah would take off his mask, and reveal the prosthetics underneath, the wounds on his face.

And he would allow people to touch his face, and I kid you not, it was as if those people were touching the very wounds of Christ.

And so, what I observed, what these individuals, children and adults alike needed, and what Jonah provided for them, what I saw going on there in that gymnasium, was a moment of catharsis.

Jonah allowed in himself a place for people to be reconciled to the phantom’s pain and I think their own pain as well.

Now, I don’t know if other people recognized it for what it was, but for me it was an absolutely, beautiful moment to behold.

People needed that “third act” of the musical, that “third act” there in the gymnasium, for even as good as *The Phantom of the Opera* is as a musical, there is something lacking at the end.

A place of catharsis, a place of reconciliation and healing for people, and in that “third act,” in that gymnasium, there was a vision, a little glimpse of what heaven itself must be like—out of the darkness of hell that was the auditorium, and into the bright light of paradise in that gymnasium.

And, it was one my best days, one of my most favorite of days, not just because I was so proud of my son for his performance in the musical, but I was proud of how he was with those people in that gymnasium—how open, how available he was for them in that time of catharsis and healing.

And, I told Jonah that on that day he gave me, and he gave many others, a truly powerful vision of what heaven is like.

PAUSE

What is your best day? What is your most favorite of days?

PAUSE

Today, we read in our Gospel from Luke about two disciples walking along a road toward a town called Emmaus.

And these disciples are in the doldrums. These disciples are downtrodden, they are despairing, they are in their own sense of hell and torment, because they have lost hope.

They say as much, “We had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.”

But Jesus has just gone and disappeared, like the phantom at the end of the musical. The women had told the disciples about their experience at the tomb, that Jesus was not there.

He had disappeared.

But then, these disciples have their own gymnasium moment. They experience their own “third act.”

For Jesus sidles up next to them as they are walking, he accompanies them, opening up scripture to them, and then eating a meal with them, and then, AND THEN the two disciples recognize Jesus, that Jesus has indeed been raised.

They experience a cathartic moment themselves. Their hearts are burning within them, and they are overjoyed upon recognizing Christ.

And this no doubt is their very best day ever. How could it not be?

PAUSE

And I have come to believe that there is something consistent about each and every one’s best day.

Whatever our best day entails...

...the day we met our spouse, the day we got married...

...the day we became a parent or grandparent...

...the day we graduated, the day we landed that job...

I believe there is a consistent theme regarding every best day, and that is this.

Every best day consists of hope fulfilled.

Every best day consists of hope fulfilled.

That is after all what that day at Cedar Cliff High School, where I watched my son and his school mates perform *The Phantom of the Opera*, and where I watched my son interacting with adults and children afterwards...

...that is what I witnessed on that day—hope fulfilled.

“Art imitating life” can and does remind us that there can be powerful moments of healing and reconciliation—that hope can and is fulfilled.

We are reminded indeed that there is certainly the promise of salvation, that there certainly is a brightly lit heaven that springs forth from a dark and despairing hell.

Yes, hope fulfilled. That is what every best day is about.

That is after all what the resurrection is about—hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And what that means for us, as servants of Christ, is that we work and strive to instill some measure of hope in other people’s lives each and every day we live, and move, and have our being.

That is our call, to elevate other people’s days which might be filled with anything but hope.

Our Saviour (We strive to elevate people’s days by bringing hope, whether that means helping with Family Promise, or visiting a person at their home or in the hospital who is in need, or preparing a meal for a family, or praying with someone.)

St. Stephen’s (We strive to elevate people’s days by bringing hope, whether that means sharing a community meal with them, or bringing Holy Communion to them, or sending a card or calling someone.)

Friends, hope fulfilled is a most incredible gift, which does bring to fruition the very best day for someone, as it has for us, when we think about our very best day.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.