

BY HIS DEATH & BY HIS LIFE

Welcome to you who are forgiven! The dawn of this day proves that you are forgiven. Jesus made it very clear that this was His intention – that He had come to call us to repentance and forgiveness – and thereby into reconciliation – into peace – with God. He made it equally clear that this would bring us to a new estrangement with the evil of this world – with everything that tries to break or destroy peace with God. The real reason people are reticent about accepting Jesus’ invitations and promises is because they fear the inevitable conflict with the old life – with “the ways of the world.” At least this shows a high degree of intelligence. It is not something to be taken lightly, as Jesus Himself reminded us over and over. The only question left is whether or not Jesus had authority enough – power enough – to make good what He had taught and lived and promised. He invited us to come live in a New Kingdom – right in the middle of whatever is going on for us here. But does this Kingdom really exist, and does He have credentials enough to get us into this Kingdom? Happy Easter! Welcome to you who are forgiven!

Every year I am more amazed at how Jesus’ story fits together – at how His life unfolded. And since I do not believe that it was fated, but rather was a matter of His faithfulness and His choices, it amazes me more and more. From His baptism to the Cross, He was following a Path with incredible, prayerful obedience. Every day was another step along the WAY. All the encounters, teachings, healings, and conflicts were part of the reality of an Obedient Son in tension with the ways of the world. To watch Him, and see the patterns, illumines our own journeys if we let it. The early Christians seemed to know this more clearly than most of us do. They wanted to be baptized; they wanted to learn; they wanted the prayer and the fasting and the guidance – and when they thought they had their purpose (their *vocatio*) clear, they wanted the death and the resurrection in whatever way God wanted to accomplish it. We do not always die physically but we always spend ourselves – sacrifice ourselves (if you remember the true definition) – for our God when we find the commission he gives to us. It is the true definition of JOY.

Yet on Easter, it has often seemed to me that we tend to forget everything we know, everything we have learned thus far. Easter is indeed a thing to celebrate. In the realization of Christ's triumph over death, we *ought* to act happy – even if we do not feel particularly triumphant ourselves. We can at least act joyful and positive out of respect for the Resurrection itself. Regardless of where we are or how we are doing – Jesus won! Big time! What can God do for encores, except maybe bring more and more of us into it?

Nevertheless, in regular Easter gatherings – like later on this morning – you can always look around and see people who were “dragged” there, if you know what I mean. Not literally of course, but it was put to them as an obligation. It was made clear that, “At least this one time of the year you ought to be willing to come with me.” Most unfortunate. How sad to meet Jesus and celebrate Easter with an aversive reaction. Oh well. Nine-year-old boys do not like girls, but most of them get over it. If we can grow up enough to like girls, maybe eventually we can grow up enough to like God.

Well, at this time of the morning – at sunrise – the number of “draggees” is doubtless relatively low. Mostly we are the enthusiasts. We do not all explain it or experience it in the same way, but we really believe in the Resurrection. We come here because there is no other moment in all earth history that is more worthy of celebration. There is no other morning with more promise, no other event so packed with hope and wonder and New Life breaking free. Most of us would not dream of greeting this day in the same way we would greet any other day. Not that the Resurrection would be any less real or potent if we chose not to lose any sleep over it, as the saying goes. But somehow it seems too crass – too ungrateful and nonchalant – to just sleep in on the day when the earliest Christians were discovering that Jesus was more than even they had imagined – far more! And that the faith He had shown them and taught them was incredibly greater, more powerful, and more far-reaching than they could possibly fathom.

Only, for once could we try not to isolate Easter from the rest of the story? Let's try not to pretend it happened at some arbitrary whim as God snapped his fingers and presto! Jesus rose from the dead. There was a reason death could not hold Him. There was a quality of life, and a relationship that God could connect to, or death

would have had its usual way. He saved us from sin, death, and the Devil by incredible power, and if we separate this from *who* He was and *how* He lived – the baptism, the wilderness, the healings, His anger, the Cross, all of it – then we get Easter American style – bunnies and bonnets and springtime and gibberish – not Resurrection!

For the most part, Easter in our time is celebrated out of context. It is a great climax without a story; a great ending without a plot; a great solution without a problem; a great victory without a war. Over and over I run into people who hear the Easter noises but have no awareness of the substance beneath and behind them. They think the whole thing is slightly phony because they only see the very last scene. It took God Almighty two thousand years – a lot longer than that, actually, but I mean the part we have recorded as Judeo-Christian history – to work up to it from the call of Abraham, the promise of a special covenant people. If God had not been so patient, humans would have had little chance to catch a glimmer of the real truth. You cannot just send the Incarnate One at any old time you want to. If Noah and his sons had come off the ark to find Jesus waiting for them ... well, it just would not work, you see? Or what if He had been born in place of Moses? There was no Passover, no temple, no Torah – so who could have heard what Jesus was trying to teach and preach? And who would have told Pharaoh to let God's children go? Even God cannot do things out of context, out of time.

We were taught in seminary that there are only two real limitations in life: time and space. All our problems stem from one of these limitations or the other. But an old saint said to me: "Don't you know that important things never come in *twos*?" "So there is a third limitation?" I asked. "Yes," he said. "It is as important as the other two, but it is very subtle: TIMING. Right timing is one of the surest marks of the Holy Spirit. Even when our hearts are right and our motives are true – if we do not pray, we act 'out of time' and no good comes from it."

"First and foremost, I handed on to you the tradition I had received: that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day ... and that he appeared to Cephas ..." and then to more, and more, and more.

If we believe in Easter, does that mean we can forget the Crucifixion? Does that mean our troubles are over? Does that mean we get to rise with Him and never be land-locked on this terribly troubled globe ever again? Quickly I realize that I do not want to hear about any problems this morning. I do not want to be reminded of the realities here, on this one morning so laced with absolute hope. Only, this HOPE was *designed* for this troubled globe – designed to come head-on against all our problems.

That is precisely why it is hope. And if the hope is *real*, then we do not have to be afraid anymore. If Easter is not for the realities, what good is it? You understand? Almost everybody here is going to say or do something they will not be proud of – will not be happy about – before sleeptime tonight. Is that incredible?! You know it is true. I am not talking about a great crime, or even ruining the day. But most of us will not make it through this day without thinking, speaking, and maybe behaving in some way that will feel wrong to our own souls. A glitch, a hasty moment, a careless thing – we will tell ourselves. What good is Easter if it cannot help us make it through even one day as true saints should be living, and as we truly *want* to live?

Of course, Easter is not trying to be “good” for something – it just is. They thought He was dead, and then they began to encounter Him alive. We have been encountering Him alive ever since. Good may or may not come of that, but it is what it is. And because *we* also encounter Him alive, we gather to celebrate this day because it reminds us and connects us with all who have known Him through all the past generations. It is clear to us that their time came and went pretty quickly. And we will be out of here before very long ourselves. So let us live for Him while we may. Earth life is short – but we are not impatient, because eternal life is long. And once awakened, we are about as grateful for the brevity of the first as we are for the length and quality of the other. Just as long as He will be with us ...

So we do not get relieved of our journey here, or taken out of our problems, or put into a world that is not still battling all the marks of alienation – from pollution of resources, to pollution of relationships, to pollution of the soul.

Yet He is risen! What an incredible juxtaposition. A friend just died ... yet He is risen! I fear a great sickness ... yet He is risen! What if I lose my job ... yet He is risen! I had this terrible argument with my ... yet He is risen! Five hundred people will die of starvation before you eat your next full meal ... yet He is risen! Two more species of animal life will go extinct before the end of this week, never to be seen upon the earth again ... yet He is risen!

We *must* celebrate Easter in context. If we carve out this day in which we think only nice, bright thoughts, then we have misunderstood the entire meaning of the Resurrection. Then we have made it irrelevant to all that goes on here, to all that matters to us, to all that God is asking us to do and be in the days we have left to spend here.

Easter does not cancel out Good Friday, it illuminates it. We are still saved by His death. We are still called to die with Him – to die daily. Easter does not repeal all that we have learned and known and watched and felt. Easter means the dying is not in vain, but it does not cancel out the dying. What Easter does show and shout is that the dying is worth it – that we do not have to be afraid of our dying anymore. “*We even exult in our present sufferings ...*” Well, Paul always *was* an extremist, you say. Maybe. Or maybe he just believed in the Resurrection, and kept it in context.

So the truth – if we get right to it – is that we are saved by His death *and* by His life. “*If, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, now that we have been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life!*” Paul, of course, had seen it from both sides. And he was not afraid to admit it and face it and talk about it.

How wonderful to keep the two together! We need them both. It is not over yet; there are all the things we still need to die to – still need to let go of. And always we will call it suffering, and sometimes it *will* be death. And we need to associate it with Jesus’ death, and with following Jesus, and with being true disciples – because that is the only way we will find the power or the willingness to go on with the pilgrimage. He leads the way into dying, and ten million resurrections are never going to repeal that necessity, that principle of what all followers are called into. If Easter weakens this realization, it is a false Easter. If Easter takes our attention away

from surrender, obedience, humility – from getting our egos out of the driver’s seat, and inviting the Holy Spirit into it – then it is a sad day, and a great betrayal of all the truth the Christ came to open to us.

Can we hold onto that if we talk about the *other* truth that goes with it? *We are also saved by His life.* Paul is after bigger truth in the astounding passage from his letter to the Romans, but in passing, he inadvertently connects to the core of it: “*If Christ was not raised, your faith has nothing to it and you are still in your old state of sin.*” What happened to your forgiveness? Jesus was crucified; Jesus did die for your sins. All the hard and glaring facts of the story are in place. Jesus did it all – went through it all – right up to and through Saturday. And if it ends there ... what does Paul say, great champion of the Cross though he is? He says, “*Your faith has nothing to it and you are still in your sins.*” The Cross is incredible, but the Cross is not enough – so says even Paul.

There has to be authority behind that Cross: the power of God; the reality of God’s Kingdom; the authentic hope which gives it all meaning and makes it worth all that we go through or ever shall be called upon to go through. Indeed, we are saved by His death. But only because we are also saved by His life.

Do we need now to go back and point out that without the death, the Resurrection would be equally pointless? No, we need to go on to say that we are saved by His life because we get to live in the presence of the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ on a day-to-day basis. This is the most exciting thing in the entire spectrum of the Christian Life, at least from a personal point of view. And it is, I keep realizing, the part that many, many Christians are missing. Resurrection means the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – with us, comforting and guiding us – every day, all along the WAY. And we are excited about cell phones?

But mostly I have wanted to remind you: We do not cancel out His death just because we celebrate His life. We are saved by both. Saved by His death as we go on with our own suffering and dying – physically, mentally, emotionally – in all the ways necessary to our pilgrimage of becoming entirely His. And we are saved by His life because we keep being drawn into New Life by the power of His love and presence. Every time we know more surely that He is risen indeed, we are willing to die more deeply. Every time we die to more

of our old desires and security idols, we find New Life – and know more surely that He is risen indeed.

So, welcome to this morning light. Welcome to hope and joy. Welcome to you who are forgiven – you who know and believe in forgiveness.

The cock crowed in the night of betrayal and unbearable guilt. But the soul-darkness is broken by this God who comes back after us anyway ... after all that happened ... after all we did, and did not do. (Jesus, you know, was crucified as much by what the followers did not do as by what the antagonists did do.)

Forgiveness is what breaks the night – and breaks the grip of death. This incredible day dawns, and we are set free: Free of the night. Free of the guilt. Free of the belief that we do not matter, and can never truly care.

He is risen, and taking us with Him. Right here! Right now! That we may see the world and all that happens here with new eyes. And that *we* may be new, and each day getting newer.

And will there be assignments along the way? Yes, of course! Would we want to be bored? Aimless? Having no part or purpose in the drama ourselves? We are saved by His death AND by His life. Therefore we put Him in charge of our own life – and our own death. He is risen! He lives! Happy Easter!