

Psalm 62
Luke 12:35-40

INCUBATION

If Jesus rose from the dead, and I trust and believe that He did, it seems like I ought to do something pretty magnificent in response to that. After all, it was done in a way to make it clear to you and me, not to Him. That is, if it were just about Jesus going on to eternal life – if it were about Jesus going to Heaven – then He would simply have done that, and none of us would have heard or known anything about it, at least not directly. But no, everything about the Resurrection puts it in front of us in a way that makes us know it is about us too. We are invited. This is our destiny too. Get ready. *“I go to prepare a place for you.”* (John 14:3) A truth that high, if I take it to heart – if I take it into my life – ought to make a difference in me so big that you could see it for at least five miles around. Don’t you think?

Sadly, that is exactly what some of you think – maybe not so much for me, but for yourselves. Such is the nature of Christian impatience. For every spiritual breakthrough, Satan designs and sets a trap for us. If he did not, he would have gone out of business long ago.

There are not very many things you can do that are destructive to a person who has caught the fire of the Spirit. If you experience the presence of the Living Christ (the Holy Spirit), know the confidence of God’s personal support, and get a true glimmer of the endless future that lies ahead, then it is clear that fear will turn to confidence, anxiety will be replaced by enthusiasm, and the energy to live and love and learn will increase dramatically.

So Satan scratched his head and said, “What in the heaven can I do with these Easter People?” He tried frightening them again with bigger fears and worries, but they just laughed. He sent them people with terrible problems to depress them and weigh them down, but they only converted those people. He sent them enemies to destroy them, but they sang hymns and thanked God for the honor of serving or the joy of going home sooner. They even prayed for their enemies, and converted some of them too.

So Satan went apart for a while to ponder the situation. When he returned, he was all smiles. He picked from the Easter People those who

had the most obvious talents for success and leadership in the natural world. Then he did a strange thing. He started cooperating with God in moving them into positions of prominence. With Satan's help, the way was smoothed so that they advanced quickly and easily into wealth and influence and prominence. That took care of about eighty-five percent of them. They did not give Satan any more serious trouble. They grew busy with their own plans and goals and pleasures right here on earth. Soon Christ's Kingdom was only a dim memory, a sideshow in their consciousness. Of course, the other fifteen percent were worse than ever for Satan, but it was still well worth it.

It worked so well that Satan wanted to make all the Easter People rich and prosperous. But this is a finite and temporal realm, and even Satan's resources are limited. So he had to devise another strategy for the vast majority of us. Again Satan did what you might think is surprising. He began to play God's advocate. Actually, if you had known him of old, you would realize that he had only reverted to his best and most ancient role, with a slight twist thrown in.

So Satan began to whisper in the ears of the faithful: "After all that God in Jesus Christ has done for you, you aren't doing nearly enough in return. Isn't it obvious that just helping one or two people isn't going to make any difference in a world like this? Forget these two. Go do something big and important!"

In these and many similar whisperings, Satan began a campaign to make the Easter People impatient. He always encouraged their enthusiasm, applauded their efforts, and urged them to take on more and more projects. He encouraged a spirit of competition. Which person or group was doing the most for God? Who is growing fastest, converting the most, making the biggest splash?

Satan took some of the very best words, the very words he was most afraid of – commitment, devotion, dedication, sacrifice, service – and he filled them with chaotic energy, and with stress and haste. He subtly added to them the note that is his trademark: Accusation. "You are not good enough. Nothing you do is ever good enough. You are not truly dedicated. You are not really accepted, or acceptable." You see where it leads? "God does not *really* love you yet. But maybe someday – if you work hard enough." And Satan started jumping up and down in the minds of everyone who would listen, crying, "Prove your worth! Prove it! Prove it! Prove it!"

In this way, Satan undercut the Gospel, the Cross, the Resurrection. Not by fighting it, but by encouraging it, cheering it, stretching it. In impatience and haste, the love withers. In guilt and fear, the love shrivels. The community turns to form and ritual and creed and program, and the real sharing and caring begin to fade away. Love, beauty, and truth all take *time*. Satan speeds things up, with fear and stress, until there is no *time* for truth, or beauty, or love. The Easter People work harder and harder, blame each other, take on more, hurry faster. The motive is perfect: They only wish to love God and serve God's Kingdom. Nothing could be wrong with that! Just do more, work harder, go faster! If you cart your kids to one more activity, it means you love them more.

The Spirit whispers also: "You are already loved. Please come spend time with me. Do not be afraid. It is not your job to save the world. Do not be anxious. Work from gratitude, not from judgment. Love, and let it turn out any way it wants to. If you feel driven, it is not coming from MY peace. Do not 'win' people; bond with them because they are mine, as you are mine. Trust ME for the outcomes. This world is temporal and will not get perfect. You can get better, but on spiritual levels it will not get better here, except in moments that will not last. Check in with ME every morning, or you will not be able to remember these things."

But who can hear quiet, peaceful whispers, when the soul is on the run? The saints have told us that "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions." But we think this means we should work harder, instead of letting it remind us that we are saved by the mercy of Christ, *not by anything we do*. The saints have told us that "Actions speak louder than words." But we think this means it depends on our actions and that we should increase our deeds, instead of remembering that our actions show whether we work out of peace, or out of fear and stress and accusation.

We have two ways to miss the pilgrimage, to miss the WAY of following our Risen Christ. One way is to procrastinate – to see the Path but never get around to walking it. That is the problem for some, but that is not the problem for most of you. Even those of you who put off the steps of the pilgrimage, is it not because you are too busy, and driven? You are already trying to serve thirty-two gods. To preach to you about being lazy misses the spot.

The other way to miss the pilgrimage is to get on the Path with haste and impatience. With that way, you will get everything off track and change the dynamic of the Path itself. Soon you will get sick of it

and rush off to other more important causes. Therefore, if you wish to belong to the Easter People, you must learn patience. Only, that does not put it correctly. It makes it sound like we have to get something we do not want. I *want* to learn patience! I *desire* to be a being of peace. I know that patience is one of the qualities of the pilgrimage. Trying to be a Christian without patience is like trying to be a cook without any pots and pans. I long for patience. Don't you? "O Lord, give me patience – and I mean right now!"

Incubation, then, becomes a principle of life for us. Instead of kicking ourselves for being too slow, we compliment ourselves and each other for a growing calmness. Always, in every endeavor, there will be a time for waiting and watching. Like a runner on third base, I will not watch the field, I will not watch the ball, I will not listen to the crowd. I will watch the third-base coach. When he signals, I will go. Until he signals, I will not go. For the time being, the game is none of my business. Batting and pitching are none of my business. Even if I am myself a pitcher, for the moment that does not matter. Selling peanuts to the crowd is not my business. Running the television cameras, keeping score, and getting the cars out of the parking lot after the game is over are all important matters, and somebody must attend to them. But my business is being ready to run. Oh yes, I can run if I am ready. But often, my only business is to watch for the signal from the third-base coach. I must learn to wait and watch.

Christendom is full of great runners. Their stride is beautiful, their technique is amazing, they slide with grace and beauty and style. But much of the time, they get tagged out and lose the game. They will not wait for the signal.

Today we have a marvelous parable to remind us of such things. We are to wait and watch as if waiting for the bridegroom to return. When the bridegroom comes, he will have the bride with him, as well as many guests. Of all times, he will want everything to be ready and wonderful. The bride and groom will consummate the marriage while the guests (many times, the whole village) continue feasting and celebrating. Then the party and feasting will continue for seven days. But there is no telling when they will arrive back at the groom's house.

The groom has walked, or ridden his beast, off to wherever the bride lives. There may be matters to discuss; he will gather with his friends; she will get ready. Then everybody will join in a big parade to

the groom's father's house, where the ceremony will take place. Who knows when they will all get back to the groom's house? It may be days.

There are no microwave ovens or refrigerators or vacuum cleaners. Keeping ready for the groom to bring his bride back to his house is no easy task. Jesus probably told this parable to refer specifically to the moment He would make His own bid for the Kingship – what we know as Palm Sunday. Over the years, it has come to refer only to the Second Coming. What a waste to keep this parable for one event in the past, or one event in the future. We do not have to take it away from either of those meanings, but let it also be instructions for your very next contact from the Holy Spirit – for the next guidance or instruction that will come to you from the Christ. Wait, and watch. Be ready! Do not let your life get so tangled up that you cannot respond when the next contact comes.

We do not get fresh messages every time we pray. Sometimes we just feel the presence and support. Sometimes it takes us a long time to complete the previous assignment. New revelation would only confuse us, or throw us off course. But new instructions *will* come, when it is time. That is certain. So we go on with what we are doing – and doing the best we can. But we also wait and watch for that other “phone” to ring.

Now the Good News: For us, the big wait is already over. We are not waiting to find out if we will survive. We are not waiting to discover if life has any meaning. We are not waiting to learn if Messiah will truly come. The agony and despair of the *big* WAIT are already over. He is risen! God is with us. The Gospel is proclaimed and revealed. Our salvation is already won, demonstrated, sealed, guaranteed. This is not a perfect realm, but the perfect God has made the plan clear enough, and we have God's presence already. The big weight is over. (You can spell that any way you like.) Sing *Hallelujah!*

The mop-up operation – incorporating it all into our way of thinking and feeling and doing and being – that is the phase we are in. Patience and peace must still be claimed and learned. I remember the first time it came clear to me that it had been eight or nine years between Paul's Damascus Road conversion and his first missionary journey. I was staggered! I was amazed. I was relieved. After the first flurry in Damascus and Jerusalem, he had been sent home to Tarsus. We did not hear another peep out of him until eight or nine *years* after his conversion. Incubation.

Paul was not what some people would call a patient man. But he was learning patience. And when he came out of that incubation, he truly knew how to wait and watch. He did not try to steal bases anymore without the signal. He was afraid the Spirit would send him home for another nine years! And frankly, we learn more about *patient endurance* from this once-impatient man than from anyone else in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, I think of Jeremiah, who waited, as far as I can tell, for close to forty years. Yet he KNEW: “*The time is coming, says the lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel ...*” (Jeremiah 31:31) He knew it. He could feel it. He had been told. But all of his life, his nation, and his people moved away from it. He could only wait, and point toward and live for a thing he would never see. This stuns me. If Jeremiah’s life could be like that, do I not get to rethink my own impatience? And he did it with the *big* WAIT still before him. Unbelievable!

Oh, I want you to be happy and prosperous and promoted, or whatever that would mean in your context – I truly do. I pray about it, and sometimes for it, when I can get permission. I have more ambition and eagerness for some of you than you have for yourselves. I know I am confessing sin. But what I hope for even more – for you, for myself – is that we will learn to be patient and content *where we are* ... UNTIL the Holy Spirit decides to move us.

We must concentrate on waiting and watching – watching for the signal – from where we are. And when the time is right, the Spirit is more eager than we are to move us. Do you know that? When we are impatient, not only do we mess things up, we also miss what is going on where we are. How do you know when you will be in the most important place of your whole life on earth? If you are impatient, you will *never* know, and you will surely miss the very reason you were sent here.

Now Jesus shifts gears in the parable. If no one is at watch, a thief could dig through the mud-brick walls of a dwelling (this would not make a lot of noise) and make off with whatever he could find. The larger the estate, the greater the possibility, unless someone is on watch.

But in the symbolism of the parable, what could the thief steal from *you* if you are not alert and watchful? That’s right! Your faith – your confidence in Christ’s love and presence. You will get busy and go off to

other affairs, intending to come back of course: Yes, of course. Soon. It will only be for a little while. Just this one project or interlude or relationship, and then we are coming right back to wait and watch and be faithful. He is risen! Hold that thought; I'll be right back.

But *time* is also a thief. How do you know when the bridegroom will come, needing you for a favor or a service? How do you know when the thief will come? And if he steals your faith, will your identity and destiny go with it?

Every Sunday is supposed to remind us – to keep us close to Easter. We are the Easter People. Rejoice! Remember the victory! Know that Christ's help is with you, and for you, always.

Only, we have noticed that sometimes we get tired of the truth and its disciplines, and the patience that is required. We do not like periods of incubation, or waiting, or watching. And Satan will steal the peace and power of the Resurrection from us, if we do not learn patience.

What is your hurry? Are you not already loved and accepted and saved? Have you not already been promised eternal life? What is your hurry? Our hurry is the most consistent mark and proof of our sin – our separation and alienation from God.