

THE TRIUMPH OF EASTER!

(03/31/2024)

Scripture Lessons: John 20:1-22

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:19-22)

This past week, as I was preparing for this morning’s service, the memory of a children’s message I gave one Easter Sunday in a church that I served prior to my coming here floated back into consciousness. When I give a children’s message, I often ask the children questions because questions challenge them to think. However, I am well aware that this pedagogical technique is more than a little dangerous because you never know what children are going to say. As Art Linkletter used to say, “Kids say the darndest things!” (I apologize; I know my reference was probably from before your time.)

That particular Sunday I began by asking the children, “What do we have to do to get to heaven?” In response, a third-grade girl said, “We have to die.”

It wasn’t exactly what I had in mind; I was thinking of sharing your toys with your younger brother or sister, respecting your elders, doing what your parents tell you to do; using good table manners, and saying please and thank-you. However, I had to admit that this little girl was not only right; she was actually thinking deeper than I was. If heaven is a place where we go (or where we hopefully go) after we die, then we have to die to get to heaven. In an even deeper sense, she is also correct. She is correct in relation to this life, the life we are presently living. A central message of the Gospel is that you can’t have a resurrection without a crucifixion.

We don’t always affirm the deep, powerful truth articulated by this little girl in our observance of Holy Week. We move from Palm Sunday, a day of triumph, to Easter Sunday, another day of triumph, without passing through the dark night of the soul that is a central part of Holy Week. It is tempting to think we can have a resurrection without a crucifixion, without a sacrifice, without a death, either in Jesus’ life or in our lives. This is why so few churches, and so few Christians, observe Maundy Thursday or Good Friday.

This past Thursday night, we met in this sanctuary. We broke bread with our Lord and with each other just as the disciples did at what we know as the Last Supper. Then, in observance of the ancient service of Tenebrae, which means “darkness,” we listened to the scriptural account of our Lord’s passion: his time in the Upper Room with his disciples; his time alone in the Garden; Judas’ betrayal; and Peter’s denials. We recalled the horror of Good Friday: the trial, the scourging, and the crucifixion. The readings ended with our Lord’s death and burial. After each reading, the reader extinguished a candle on our communion table until the

entire sanctuary was in darkness. Then, during the Prayer of Expectation, the Christ Candle was extinguished and then relit, symbolizing the hope of the resurrection.

Following Holy Saturday, when Jesus' body was entombed, we celebrate Easter Sunday. We celebrate our Lord's resurrection! It is true: Holy Week begins and ends in triumph! However, the triumph of Palm Sunday was a premature triumph. It was a worldly triumph, the kind that comes with popularity. As Jesus realized, that kind of triumph is short-lived. The triumph of Easter is different! It is a final triumph! It is a spiritual triumph: the triumph of the empty tomb, the triumph of life over death! It symbolizes our Lord's entry not into the city of Jerusalem, but our Lord's entry into eternity, into the eternity that we experience in our own hearts and lives when we, like Jesus, are in the kingdom of heaven.

Can you imagine how disappointed the disciples must have been as they watched the triumph of Palm Sunday devolve into Good Friday? Their Lord's crucifixion on Calvary must have seemed like the ultimate defeat. The One who had been born in a borrowed manger, who rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, was finally laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. The women disciples gathered early on Sunday morning for a last act of devotion: to prepare his body for burial. None of them believed they would ever see him again. None of them!

As the rising sun pushed back the mist and the gloom that hung over the entrance to the tomb, the message of victory rang out: "He is risen!" Their Lord was alive! Death had not defeated him! His love for them was so great that it could take Thomas' doubts, Peter's denials, and turn them into strengths! He could even build a church out of them! The message of Easter was the realization that their Lord continued to live on in the world, in them, and in the world through them!

Easter changed history! It changed the world! It transformed a martyrdom into a coronation! It changed the "No!" of Good Friday to the "Yes!" of Easter Sunday! It changed the disciples! It can change us! It can also change our world!

We live in a frightened and fragmented world, a polarized world. We live in a world where nation is at war with nation, where religious conflicts render the fabric of society, where the fear that leads to hatred reigns over compassion and love. It seems that in the Middle East, the place where Jesus was born, where he lived and walked, where he taught and healed, people have declared war on peace and feel totally justified in doing so. We live in a world where the cult of terrorism and the taking of innocent lives have been raised to the level of divine mission. We live in a world where millions of people are dying of starvation. We observe, with dread, how fascism is once again rearing its ugly head in many countries, including our own. The darkness of despair that hangs heavy over our world threatens to block out the light of the Christmas star, the rays of the Easter sunrise, the faintest flicker of hope.

To such a world, to such an age as ours comes the message of Easter! Easter reminds us that even in our darkest moments, the love of God shines through! I do not for a moment believe that the tragedies with which we struggle as individuals, as families, and as nations are the will

of God. These tragedies, which arise from our brokenness, our sin, must make God weep! But God cannot be defeated! The message of Easter is that God is always working for healing within us and in our world, and that the love of God is the deepest level of reality. The message of Easter is that what holds the universe together is not chemistry but spirituality, not blind fate but eternal purpose, not the darkness of death but the light of resurrection!

The women who go to the tomb find that the stone is rolled away. They discover that their Lord lives, that death has not defeated him. The women and the other disciples then begin to experience their Lord in different ways and places. They realize that, as the apostle Paul tells us, nothing, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! The triumph of Easter is that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven that Jesus came to teach and to incarnate is a living reality in us and in our world!

Let us go back to that little girl's answer which, I confess, took me aback in the moment. My question was, "What do we need to do to get to heaven?" Her answer (which was not only cute; it was insightful) was "We have to die." We know that Jesus had to die to be resurrected. As he told his disciples in the Upper Room, he had to die to his human form, his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, in order that we might discover him in a new way: as the Holy Spirit within us. We, too, as the apostle Paul tells us, have to die to our old self to experience a new life in Christ. We need to sacrifice our ego-centric life to enter into a Christo-centric life.

So, what the little girl said is true! In fact, it is profound! It is true not only of the historical event of Good Friday, of Jesus' crucifixion; its symbolic message to us in our lives is a central part of the Christian gospel. We note that our scripture lesson this morning tells us that when Jesus returns to his disciples following his resurrection, he shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. He shows them his wounds. This is a reminder that pain, sacrifice, and death are inextricably interwoven with resurrection and rebirth. You can't have one without the other!

However, what that little girl said that Sunday morning is not the whole story.

We commonly think that heaven is a place where we go after we die. Heaven is where God is. It is the realm to which Jesus ascended after he died. The problem with this way of thinking is not that it is false, but that it isn't the whole story. It is built on the assumption that heaven is separated from earth, that God is separated from humanity, that Christ is separated from us, and that we will be with God and Jesus only after we die. I think this misses the real meaning of Easter!

We know that heaven is the realm of God. To be in heaven is to be with God. If we are with God, if we are in God, we are in heaven; we are in the kingdom of heaven. This is what Jesus was trying to help us experience *in our lives*.

We also know from the testimony of scripture that we are always with God. The writer of the 139th psalm affirms his faith by saying to God,

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

The apostle Paul tells us that nothing in this life, not even death, can separate us from God!

We can, however, be separated from the consciousness of God. We can forget about God. We can fail to nurture our relationship with God. Then our lives become filled with other things, with stuff. The metaphor rings true: Jesus stands outside the door of our lives and knocks. All we have to do is open the door.

The message of Easter is that, despite what that little girl thought, we don't have to die to get to heaven. The triumph of Easter is that Christ lives within and among us! The triumph of Easter is that Christ has conquered death, not only the death of our body but the death of our spirit, the death before death from which so many suffer. The triumph of Easter is that we can be with our Lord not only after we die; we can be with our Lord right here and now, in our worship this morning and also in the week to come!

This is the hope that can sustain us when we are passing through the wilderness experiences, the difficult and painful experiences of our lives. It is the knowledge that we do not walk this path alone! Christ is not a memory, but a presence! Christ is always working within us to bring light out of darkness; to bring healing out of brokenness; to bring hope out of despair; to work a resurrection miracle in us and in our world!

As disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us become aware of the presence of the risen Christ that we might incarnate the heaven that he promised us right here on earth. Let us make the kingdom of heaven a reality both within and among us, in our lives, in our nation, and in the world. That's what Jesus did while he was with us, and what, as the risen Christ, he continues to do!

This is the message and the triumph of Easter!

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