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**Sermon for the
Great Vigil of Easter
Romans 6:3-11 &
St. Matthew 28:1-10**

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April 23, 2011 — Easter Eve

Someone asked me earlier this week what the purpose of Holy Week is. What's wrong with just observing Easter? Why Maundy Thursday? Why Good Friday? Why the Great Vigil? And I said that the point is to give those of us living today a chance to go back and walk with Jesus through the events of that bought us our redemption. We understand better what we've had a chance to experience, and while we can't go back in time to see the events that the gospel writers tell us about, we can take time every year to walk through the Scriptures ourselves and to recall the important events, getting a better and deeper understanding of them, and coming to appreciate more and more just what Jesus did for us during that first Holy Week.

So far we've been with the disciples as they marched with Jesus into Jerusalem, waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna!" and singing "All glory laud and honour, to thee redeemer King!" On Thursday we gathered with them in the Upper Room as Jesus washed their feet and as he took bread and wine, gave it to his disciples, and declared to them, "This is my body. This is my blood—given for you. This is the new covenant." We pondered the mystery of servanthood and sacrifice—that in God's kingdom,

to be the greatest is to be the least. Yesterday we followed with the disciples as Jesus led them to the garden to pray, we saw Our Lord's betrayal by Judas, we saw his sham trial before the high priest, we saw him dragged before Pilate, the governor, who saw no fault in Jesus, but washed his hands of the whole affair as the people shouted, "Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!"

Finally, we followed as Jesus was led by the soldiers to Golgotha, nailed to a cross, died in agony, and was buried in a tomb while the disciples ran and hid in fear of the Jews. The Jewish leaders had killed their master, how long before they came after his disciple and killed them too? The disciples didn't understand yet what was happening. I expect that while they were in hiding, they called to memory and thought about and discussed with each other all the things Jesus had said. "Did we miss something? How can he be the Messiah when he's dead? Is this the end? How long before they come for us? This evening we came and gathered in the darkness, just like those disciples. We poured over the Old Testament Scriptures that remind us of the sinful predicament we're all in by our very nature, and we read God's promises of redemption. And as we've been sitting here in the dark and with the Paschal Candle before us, giving us its light as we read those Old Testament promises—we recall that we can now understand the story of redemption because the light of Christ now lightens our understanding—the light and understanding the disciples didn't have during those three days Jesus was in the grave.

Yesterday's Epistle, from the book of Hebrews, sums up all those Old Testament types and shadows and promises that pointed to Jesus. It explains to us that what happened on the cross was the same sacrifice that Jesus told his friends about on Thursday night in the upper room. That whereas the priest under the old covenant stood before the altar each and every day to offer sacrifices for sin that could never atone in and of themselves, those priests and those sacrifices pointed to a greater sacrifice. Jesus Christ, our great High Priest offered himself as a once-for-all and perfect sacrifice for sin. Where the priest had to go back and stand before the altar day after day to make offerings for sin, Jesus did it once and now sits at the right hand of the Father.

And yet we can't stop at Good Friday. Yes, Good Friday is *good*, because when he died, Jesus paid the penalty of our sins. He bought our redemption. Whereas we all stood on Thursday condemned to an eternity in hell—an eternity apart from God—on Friday we stood as free men and women through the death of Jesus for us. But, brothers and sisters, God wants more for us than simply to save us from hell. Through the blood of Jesus he washes us clean from our sins and declares us righteous on Christ's merit. But the death of Jesus alone still leaves us sinners—justified sinners, but still sinners. And that's why the story doesn't end on Good Friday.

After three days of darkness comes Easter. The light of Christ comes back into the world as we read that Gospel lesson—of the women going to the tomb on that first Easter morning and finding the stone rolled away and the body

gone and the angel, who declared: “He is not here! He is risen!” He didn’t just conquer sin by dying in our place. He conquered death itself in rising back to life from the grave and in conquering both sin and death, Jesus gives us the ability to become new creations. And that’s where tonight’s Epistle takes us.

St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans is a wonderful exposition of the Gospel. As we read this letter, Paul takes us step by step from our position as condemned sinners through the new life we find by faith in Jesus, and as he explains the Gospel to us, he shows us what it *looks like* to actually live as a Gospel people. Paul says in Romans 6:3:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3)

And we say, “Yes, Paul. Of course we know that.” The problem is that sometimes we don’t go beyond this point. As Christians we have a tendency sometimes to live as “Good Friday People”. We’re redeemed by the death of Jesus. And, yes, we are; that’s very true. But there’s more. The Gospel isn’t just about being rescued from hell. We’re not called to be “Good Friday People”. No, we’re called to “Easter People”. Jesus redeemed us by his shed blood, but he *also* rose from the dead—coming back to life that he might give us new life. In a sense his death sort of leaves us in a neutral position before God: forgiven, but still the same old sinners. Jesus’ resurrection, though, give us new life—it turns those old sinners into

saints—it sanctifies. And that’s why Paul goes on in verse 4:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Paul reminds us of our baptism. The Sacraments are signs and seals of the grace God give us. The Lord’s Supper is the sign and seal of our continuing life in Christ as he feeds us with his Body and Blood. But before we can feed on Christ, we’re all baptised. Baptism is the sign and seal of our being washed from sin and united to Christ in the first place. Baptism is the funeral and burial of the old sinful self, and as we receive the external sign of washing with water, Jesus fills us with his own indwelling Spirit, who gives us a new life by regenerating our hearts and renewing our minds—baptism makes us dead to sin! Again, on Good Friday Jesus tore the veil that separates us from the Holy of Holies—from God’s presence—and that’s good news. We’re no longer separated from God. But on Easter he rose from the dead, and so long as we are united with him through baptism, that means that we too have risen from the death that sin brought into our lives. We’re freed from sin so that we can throw ourselves into a life of love and good works. This is what Paul explains in verses 5-11:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to

nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:4-11)

Paul makes it very clear: If we have been united with Christ in his death—if we’ve gone down to the grave with him on Good Friday—we will also *certainly* by united with him in his Resurrection on Easter too. Neither sin nor death has any dominion over us. Now, that doesn’t mean that you and I don’t still sometimes stumble into sin. Our sanctification is only going to be perfect when we reach the other side of eternity. But that’s why Paul tells us all this. Those Christians in the church at Rome struggled with sin just as we do, even though we’re dead to it because of the cross. And so Paul goes on in verses 12-14:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Paul goes on for the next couple of chapters in Romans to talk about the fact that even though we've been given new life, our old sinful natures are still with us. But here, before that, he tells us: "Because you are united to Christ in his death, and because you are united to him in his Resurrection, you are free from the dominion of sin. You're not its slave anymore!" And the practical upshot of that is this: "Don't let sin reign in you! You're free! So don't get caught up in its passions!"

You see, the evidence of new life in Christ—the evidence of the indwelling Spirit—is a desire to do what's pleasing to God. Paul says, "Don't present yourselves to sin as tools for unrighteousness—that's the old you. But instead, present yourselves to God, having been bought from death and brought to life, and be tools—be vessels—of righteousness. You no longer stand condemned by the law, but live in the grace of God!"

I'm convinced our problem—our struggle with holiness here—is that we too often take our eyes off of Jesus. Thursday we had a chance to renew our focus on his body broken and his blood shed for us. Yesterday we had the opportunity to reflect and renew our focus on the cross where his sacrifice was made for our sakes. And between yesterday afternoon and this evening, I hope that you've all had a chance to reflect on the Good Friday invitation that Jesus offers—an invitation to let him take you into the Holy of Holies—into the presence of the Father. Because it's as Jesus leads us and we remember that it's only through him, who died the death that we deserve, that we can come into

God's presence. And we also need to stand in awesome wonder in the holy presence of Almighty God to fully grasp our own unrighteousness and the weight of the grace and mercy we've been shown. That, friends, is what drives us to holiness. We give ourselves as living sacrifices, not legalistically and not out of duty. We give ourselves to God, becoming instruments of righteousness, out of *gratitude* for the great love that has been shown to us.

Please pray with me: Almighty God and Father, we come before you tonight to give thanks for the amazing work of grace that you did for us through your Son, Jesus Christ, when he gave himself on the Cross for our sins. But Father, by the work of your Spirit living in us, keep us ever mindful that our sins aren't just forgiven—you've taken away sin's dominion and called us to holiness. Give us the grace to live as Resurrection people: to walk in holiness, driven to serve and please you out of gratitude for the great love and mercy you have shown to us. We ask this in the name of Christ. Amen.