



Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter

1 St. John 5:4-12 &

St. John 20:19-23

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May 1, 2011 — Easter 1

When we were here together last week to celebrate the great Feast of the Resurrection, I stressed the point that as Christians we're called not to be just Good Friday people, but to be Easter people. There are a lot of people who are happy to claim the salvation Jesus offers at the cross on Good Friday and to then call it all good. "I'm saved now. Thanks Jesus. Don't mind me while I keep doing my own thing." I've met more people I can count who approach Jesus that way and then go through their lives with a false assurance that when Judgement Day arrives, everything's going to be just fine for them. As I said last week, real faith doesn't work that way. Real saving faith only *begins* on Good Friday. Real saving faith only *begins* at the cross. Real saving faith comes to full fruit on Easter as Jesus rises to life again and he takes all those who truly accepted his death on the cross and raises them—raises us—to new life with him. We need to remember that the Gospel isn't just that Jesus saves us from the penalty of our sins. The Gospel is *also* just as much that Jesus saves us from our sins themselves. In rising to life again he conquered sin and death and because of that, everyone who is in him and living his resurrection life, will be dead to sin too.

Think of it this way. In the Church's calendar, Good Friday is one day. Easter lasts for forty. It began last week, but we'll continue to celebrate Easter for five more Sundays—taking us up to the Ascension and to Pentecost. And on each of these Sundays, the lessons point us to what it means to live out new life in Christ.

The ancient Church made this lesson even more visible. We celebrate the Easter *season* for forty days, but Easter itself is just one day in our calendar. The ancient Church celebrated Easter for a whole week. And even though Easter is the most important of all our feast days, it was probably even more so in those times.

The church calendar started with Easter. That was *the* feast of the Early Church. It was only over the coming decades and centuries that the other holy days and feasts were added. And the focus of their week-long Easter celebration was on those who were newly baptised at the Easter Vigil. Those new Christians would wear white baptismal robes through that whole week, and their brothers and sisters would sort of vicariously live through them—remembering their own baptism and the joy of being newly in Christ. And then at the end of that Easter week, the new Christians would be gathered together with the Church and they'd take off the white robes—they'd be back in their everyday street clothes. But the priest or the bishop would exhort them, using St. Paul's words, "All you that are baptised in Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). The point was to remind them that even though they were taking off those white robes and going back to their normal workaday lives, even though the great festival of Easter was over, they were to continue to be an Easter people—they were to be faithful in living out their new life in Christ. And brothers and sisters, those are words that should inspire us to do the same.

It was on this first Sunday after Easter that the newly baptised took their place side-by-side with their brothers and sisters who were mature in the faith. They were fully initiated now and were expected to pull their weight as members of the Church—as members of Christ's Body. It was as if they had graduated from school and were now equipped and pledged to living out their new life in Christ—to persevere in the face of the world, the flesh, and the devil. But that's not just something for new Christians. We all need to be reminded of the pledge that we all took, the commitment we all made in our baptism. This is why in our collect this morning we prayed: "Almighty Father, you have given your only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification; grant that we may put away the old leaven of corruption and wickedness, and always serve you in sincerity and truth; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord." That's a prayer that we would truly be an Easter people—truly be a Resurrection people. The great feast of Easter may be over when it comes to the calendar, but it never ends when it comes to our lives. I like the way Fr. Parsch put it: "The high feasts of the Church should be more than occasions for

religious emotionalism. Every feast-day celebration should have a lasting influence, and Easter above all ought to effect in us rebirth of Christian fervour and zeal." Consider how excited we feel about celebrations like Christmas and Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, and how, once the day is passed—maybe as quickly as once we've left the church building that day—the excitement passes and we all but forget about the great Gospel truths we were just celebrating. Instead, we need to let the celebrations of the Church sink deeply into our lives, to let them grow our faith, and to let them lead us to better serve our Lord.

This is something that the Easter Vigil gets at directly. The Great Vigil is the central celebration of the Easter season; it's what leads us from Good Friday into Easter Sunday and it does that in part by taking us back to our baptism. As part of the Vigil, we read through the Old Testament to recall God's bringing about our redemption and then from there we gather at the font and renew the vows we took when we were baptised. When we were baptised we were asked—or our sponsors were asked on our behalf, "Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the empty display and false values of the world, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow nor be led by them?" And each of us answered, "I renounce them all." And last Saturday night as we prepared for Easter we were asked again, "Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil and renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?" And we each answered, "I do."

That's not a vow to take lightly, because it's a vow that is at the core of the Christian life—if you're going to follow Christ, you have to make good on it. Sixteen-hundred years ago St. Augustine preached this same message to the people in his care—people that were just as prone as we are to forgetting the vow we once took. He said:

"You did not renounce the devil in the presence of men, but in sight of God and the angels. Nor do you renounce the devil merely by words but by the works you perform. Never forget that you are at warfare with a sly and ancient enemy. One minute you are uttering long prayers in church; the next minute you are shouting shameless words along with the other spectators at the circus. What right

have you to be enamoured of the pomps of the devil, whom you have renounced?”

How many of us sing songs of praise on Sunday, come to the Lord’s Table to partake of his Body and Blood, committing ourselves to him, and then walk out those doors and go back to living unregenerate lives? Brothers and sisters, that’s not what Christ has called us to. In our Epistle St. John tells us very plainly:

Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4-5)

Our baptismal vows express the reality of the new life Jesus has given us and if we would remember those vows, if we would live by them, trusting in the work Jesus did at the cross to give us new life, we would truly be an Easter people—we would truly be different and we’d have a bright light to hold up when we’re out in that dark world.

This is why our custom when someone is baptised here is to give them a candle. That candle is lit from the Paschal Candle—from the Easter flame that presents the light of Christ in our midst—and it’s delivered with the words, “Receive this lighted candle and keep your Baptism above reproach.” This was one of the practices of the ancient Church and one that has been revived in the last century or so. We take that candle and let it burn for a minute or two and then blow it out as we go back to our seats as the service continues. When we get home we put it in a drawer and forget about it. We might even lose it over time. But friends, that candle is a symbol of the grace we receive in our baptism. It’s a symbol of Christ-in-us and it’s a symbol of the light of Christ that we should be taking out into the dark to draw others to Jesus. It’s something we can light annually on the anniversary of our baptism as a tangible reminder that we’ve been called to be lights to the world. Even though we can’t keep that physical candle burning forever, it’s a symbol of God’s grace in us that we should never extinguish. And yet so many of us come and celebrate Easter here in the church and then go back to our old rut of sin on Easter Monday and get stuck there until Easter comes around the next year.

So St. John goes on in today’s Epistle, exhorting us and affirming the reality of the new life Jesus offers. Maybe we fail to live as Easter people for the rest of the year because we doubt. It’s not always easy to have faith in something you can’t see or in something that happened two thousand year ago. But John goes on and says: God has given us witnesses to the reality of his grace.

This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. (1 John 5:6-8)

The Sacraments: Baptism, in which Christ comes to us through the water, and the Lord’s Supper, in which he comes to us through his blood, are signs and seals of God’s grace. They’re tangible reminders. But even more importantly, his most important means of grace is his own Holy Spirit, whom he pours into us in Baptism and who gives us understanding, witnesses the Truth to us, and transforms our lives. Our faith isn’t a blind faith. We’re not jumping off a cliff when we can’t see the bottom and just blindly hoping that it’s a short drop. When we step out in Christian faith, we have the full witness of God showing us the way forward.

Think about that. We have the full witness, the full testimony of God. How many things do we accept simply because someone has told us about them? We accept the authority of people who are knowledgeable. We accept the statements of people who have been direct witnesses to events. And St. John goes on and tells us: When it comes to our faith—on which our eternal life or death depends—we have much more than the mere witness of men. We have that, but we also have the witness of God himself. He says:

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is

the testimony, [this is what the water, the blood, and the Spirit witness to us] that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:9-12)

If we are in Christ Jesus, we have new life. Period. That’s the Easter message. But, again, Easter reminds us as I said last Sunday, not to live that life passively. Pursue it actively! Don’t squander the grace of God. That’s the point of the ancient Easter Epistle. We only read it anymore if we have two services on Easter Sunday, but listen to what St. Paul says there to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:6b-8 NASB)

Every year as the feast approached the Jews cleaned their house of leaven—a thing that became a symbol of sin. As Paul says here, it only takes a little bit of leaven to work its way through a whole lump of dough. It multiplies and grows and spreads. Sin tends to work the same way. I notice in my own life that all it takes is one little sin—often something I’m on guard for and step into deliberately and wilfully—and suddenly a host of sins cascades into my life without my even really realising it until it’s too late. We’re all like that. Passover reminded the Jews that God is the gracious Redeemer, but that redemption means a putting away of sin—a cleansing of our lives.

Easter is the fulfilment of that Old Testament type and shadow that was given to the people in the Passover. Jesus redeemed us at the cross. Jesus has washed us clean and because he’s given us his grace—as we hear his Word, as we receive his Sacraments, as we are united with and in fellowship with his Body, and most of all as his Spirit works in us to make us actually holy—he expects us to get rid of the leaven of sin, to get rid of the things that drag us down, that cause us to stumble, and instead to learn to be

obedient. Easter is the cleaning out of sin's leaven—and it shouldn't be something we do for a day each Spring, but something we do every day.

Think of it this way: When the Jews sacrificed that Passover lamb, they had to remove the leaven from their houses for a week. Jesus, the true Passover Lamb has now been sacrificed for us—a once-for-all-time sacrifice. Therefore let us keep the feast—the eternal Passover—not by living lives full of malice and wickedness, but by living in the grace of God every day so that we can feed and nourish ourselves on sincerity and truth. As we read in last Sunday's Epistle:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Colossians 3:1-2)

The Easter message is the Gospel—the Good News—itsself, and so Easter is the dividing line between the old man of the flesh and the new man of the Spirit. The man or woman of the flesh lives with his or her mind focused on the things of this world. He lives for today. As Pauls say in Philippians, “their god is their belly,” and his life is marked by covetousness, the lust of the flesh, and pride. In contrast the Christian who has received the Gospel message—the man or woman who lives as an Easter person—might live in this world, but his or her focus is on God's kingdom and on eternity. That's why Paul warns us: Examine your lives. If you find that your focus is centred on making money, hoarding up worldly possessions, or seeking after pleasure, then you know that Easter isn't having a lasting impact on your life. And the fact is that we all have room for improvement.

So let me close with this: We all need to make some renovations in our lives. And as we start pulling things down so that we can build them back up on the grace of Easter, there are two things we should keep in mind: we need to lay a strong foundation and we need to take advantage of the means of grace that God gives so that we can persevere.

The *foundation* is *faith*. Again, St. John said in the Epistle: “This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” If

we continued reading where our Gospel lesson today leaves off, we'd read Jesus telling St. Thomas: “Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29). And brothers and sisters, the Church tells us the same thing in our baptism: Treasure your faith, but not a faith that just accepts as true whatever God has revealed, but a faith that governs all your actions—your whole lives; not a faith that hides away in a church, but a faith that shows itself to the whole world. Think about it. What kind of faith is going to overcome the world? We all know Christians who don't practice their faith—it's just head knowledge with little or no impact on how they live. Some of us are like that. And yet we just accept it as if it's okay. It shouldn't be okay! A Christian who doesn't live his faith will never overcome a world—in fact, he or she becomes a scandal to the world and is him- or herself overcome by the world. They turn Easter upside-down.

How can faith overcome the world? It happens as each of us lets Easter—lets the Gospel—continually influence our life—as we daily renounce the devil, set our hearts on the things of heaven, love our brothers and sisters, and as we hide our lives away in God. That's how Christians live their faith and overcome the world. If, on the other hand, we imitate the methods and ways of the world, if we share the desires of the world, we'll never be the victors—instead, we'll be the vanquished—we'll be conquered by the world, instead of being an influence for good.

The problem is that we're all fickle. We're all prone to stumbling and falling back into our old ways. The good news is, as St. John tells us today, that the same God who has given us Easter grace at the baptismal font—who witnesses himself in the water—makes sure that we have the grace to persevere in our faith as he comes to us in the blood as well—as he invites us to his Table. In our baptism Jesus unites us to himself, to share his life, as he pours his Spirit into us, but every Sunday as we gather here at his Table, he reminds us again that it's his Body and Blood that give us life, that we partake of as living members of his Body. So friends, let us walk as overcomers, be refreshed here as Jesus witnesses his saving grace and exhorts us to live new lives through the

water, through the blood, and through the Spirit, so that we can go out in confidence to carry the light of the Gospel to the world.

Let us pray: “Almighty Father, you have given your only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification: grant that we may put away the old leaven of corruption and wickedness, and always serve you in sincerity and truth; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”