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Risen with Christ

Romans 6:3-11

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This past Thursday I saw a friend of mine post on Facebook saying, “It’s not *Monday* Thursday. It’s *Maundy* Thursday.” A couple of fellow priests commented that it sure *feels* like Monday on a Thursday. Maundy Thursday sets the Church on a marathon. I know I feel it as a priest and preacher, but I’m sure that you laypeople get a feeling for something of the marathon too...especially those of you who have been to the service we held the last two days, who are here tonight, and most of whom will probably be here tomorrow too! Holy Week is a marathon of sorts, but we celebrate each of these great commemorations of our Lord from Thursday through to Easter for a reason. It’s the same reason that the Church celebrates the season of Lent—a whole season, forty days long, that prepares us and leads us up to Easter, the greatest celebration and centre of the Church’s year of grace.

Easter is the celebration of the Resurrection and the Resurrection of Jesus is the single most important event that our faith hangs on, but the fact is that we can’t fully understand the Resurrection until we

understand who Jesus was, until we understand what his mission was, until we know that he came to create a people for himself—a holy nation and kingdom of priests; and we certainly will never understand the Resurrection without understanding his death: how he died, why he died, and what he accomplished in his death. We certainly can’t understand the resurrection until we understand that as men and women we have a sin problem, a death problem, and a hell problem and that we can’t fix any of those problems on our own. And so that’s we prepare for Easter with a season of penitence that reminds us of our need for a Saviour; that’s why we celebrate Maundy Thursday and recall that Jesus came in humility to be a servant and that he calls us, his people to be servants too; that’s why we celebrate Good Friday and recall his death as a perfect and once-for-all sacrifice for our sins; it’s why we spend Holy Saturday in solemn remembrance of his time in the grave. It’s after this walk through the Gospel story itself that we can now come to Easter and experience as walking out of the darkest night into the glorious brightness of a clear and sunny day.

That’s the point of the Great Vigil. We gather in darkness around the Paschal Candle—around the light of Christ—and we read the story of redemption from the Old Testament that reminds us how we got here.

Yesterday’s Epistle, from the book of Hebrews, sums up all those Old Testament pointers to Jesus and 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, but pointed to a greater sacrifice that could and would, Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, offered himself as a once-for-all and perfect sacrifice for sin. Where the Old Covenant 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 price of our sins. He bought our redemption. On Thursday we stood condemned to an eternity in hell—an eternity apart from God—but on Friday we stood as redeemed men and women through the death of Jesus for us. But, brothers and sisters, God wanted *more* for us than simply to be saved from hell. Through his death Jesus paid the price of our sins, but through the blood of Jesus he also washes us clean from those sins and declares us righteous before his Father. Jesus’ death justifies us, and it makes us right before God, but condemnation is only half of our

sin problem. That's why the story doesn't end on Good Friday with Jesus on the Cross or in the tomb.

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 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—what it looks like to live as the new creations he has made us. 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 be "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 has given 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* be 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.