

**He is Risen...and so are We**

Colossians 3:1-4 &

St. John 20:1-10

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The Lord is Risen!

He is risen indeed!

Those are happy words. Those are exciting words. I think we all know what they mean—they remind us that Jesus is alive. But as much as we rejoice in saying them—as much as I see a smile on every face on Easter Sunday as we say those words—do we really understand what those words mean *for us*? Do we understand their implication for our lives as Christians?

Think of our Gospel lesson. Even with the empty tomb, the disciples didn't yet understand. Jesus had taught them for three years—taught them that he was God Incarnate come as one of us to save us from our sins. On that Thursday before he died he gathered his disciples in that upper room so that he could teach them about his being a humble servant and a sacrifice for sin. On Thursday night and on Friday they saw the events he had foretold play out—his arrest, his sham trials before the Jewish and Roman officials, his being mocked and beaten, and finally his being crucified. Brothers and sisters, we gather for our solemn Good Friday service, but we know that Easter is coming. That's why we call it *Good* Friday. But the disciples didn't understand yet. For them it was the Worst Friday Ever.

The stories are so familiar to us that it's easy to forget what was taking place in the minds of those men and women as they went into tearful hiding that Friday—women like Mary Magdalene. St. John tells us that on

Sunday morning Mary got up early, before sunrise. Jesus was dead and she had work to do. When the Jews buried a body, they wrapped it up in a linen shroud with spices, like myrrh. Everything had happened so quickly that Jesus' friends hadn't had a chance to take care of all the burial rituals. They had taken him down from the cross, to a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and wrapped him in linen, but now that a day had passed and it looked like things might have calmed down, Mary was going early in the morning—before the crowds were out, before the time of day when she might run into trouble—so that she could finish the burial process. And from our perspective, we might ask “Why?” Jesus had said he would rise on the third day. She should be going on Sunday morning to greet her risen Lord! But she didn't understand any of that. None of them did. So I can only imagine the state of grief she was in as she travelled the dark road from Bethany to that place just outside the walls of Jerusalem where the tomb was. Jesus was dead; the man who had offered love and forgiveness to her, a prostitute; the man who had cast seven demons out of her; the man who had changed her life—was dead. She was going to finish the burial anointing because she was his friend, because she was his disciple, because she wanted to make this one last personal sacrifice to show her love for him.

No doubt she was distraught. Not only was her friend dead, but she and the rest of his disciples had such high hopes for what he had come to do. He was the Messiah, the King. He had spent three years telling them how God had sent him to establish his kingdom. How could any of that happen now? And so she made her way down into the valley below Gethsemane and below Golgotha in the pre-dawn half-light. St. Mark tells us that Mary the mother of James and another woman named Salome were with her. I expect there wasn't much conversation. But as they got closer they started asking each other, “Do

you think the three of us can manage the stone they rolled in place to seal the tomb? There are two Romans guarding it; do you think they'll help?”

And that's when they reached the tomb and stopped in surprise—maybe even cutting off their conversation about the stone mid-sentence, because there was the tomb and the stone was already rolled away! The soldiers were gone. And so they rushed forward to look inside the tomb. It would have had a very small door—you'd have to stoop down, almost on hands and knees to get through into this little tomb cut into the side of the cliff. And it was empty. I imagine they probably—at least one of those women—crawled into the tomb to be sure. It was dark. Maybe it was just that they had forgotten which side of the little tomb his body was on. It must be there! Who would take it! And yet the heavy stone had been rolled away, and when they went in they confirmed: Jesus was gone. Hadn't Jesus suffered enough indignities on Friday? The Jewish authorities or the Romans must have come in the night and taken his body away, as if they hadn't done enough to poor Jesus already. Why couldn't they let him rest in peace.

And so, hysterical, Mary ran from the tomb—probably all the way back to Bethany—to find Peter and John. No doubt they were just as shell-shocked over Friday's events as Mary was, and now she comes beating on the door of the house where they were staying, and when they opened the door, there she was crying and babbling about Jesus being gone: “They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know what they've done with him!” When they realised what Mary was saying, Peter and John were doubtful, but they immediately ran to the tomb. John tells us that he outran Peter on the way there, he looked down through the door. Sure enough: no Jesus. And then Peter caught up. And Peter looked too: no Jesus. But to be sure he got down on hands and knees

and crawled through that little opening to see for himself what was in the tomb. The sun was up by now and he could see more—and there on the stone shelf where Joseph had laid Jesus' body were the graveclothes—the linen shroud and the little cloth that had covered Jesus' face were there. Why would anyone who wanted to steal Jesus' body unwrap the shroud and leave it behind? And if they left it, why did they neatly fold it up? Peter backed out. I'm sure he was confused: "Take a look for yourself, John. She's right. He's not here, but the shroud's in there, all neatly folded." And John then stooped down and looked for himself. That's when John tells us that he himself believed, even though he didn't yet understand.

John *would* understand—later. In fact, they all would at Pentecost when Jesus completed his work of redemption by sending his Holy Spirit to create his Church, to knit his people together into his Body, and to give them understanding. It was then that all the pieces fell into place for Peter—he suddenly understood—and he preached the Gospel to those thousands who were gathered there—he preached that Jesus died for our sins, but that God didn't leave him dead, but raised him to new life so that we can have a share in his new life. Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection to life.

And friends, that's the Easter Message. As I said last night at the Vigil, the Good Friday message is that Jesus has died and paid the price for our sins. His blood has washed us clean. We can now enter the Holy of Holies, we can now enter the presence of God on the merits of Jesus—he's covered the filth of our sins by his own blood-soaked robes. And that's why we call it *Good* Friday even though it's the day that Jesus was killed.

But, brothers and sisters, as good as Friday is, Sunday is *better*. I like to think of it in terms of Baptism. The water of Baptism represents the blood of Christ that washes away our sins—the Good Friday part of our redemption—but that water in our baptism *also* represents the pouring into us by Jesus of his own Holy Spirit—his uniting us to himself so that, now being washed from our sins, we can actually start to live out holy lives. His *death* declares us righteous. But by his *resurrection*, he makes us *actually* righteous—not just declared righteous in a legal sense—because, when he gives us new life, he regenerates our hearts and begins the process of *sanctification*.

The danger is that we forget that Good Friday is always followed by Easter Sunday. Over the centuries, lots of Christians have so stressed the *cross*—so stressed the fact that through the shed blood of Jesus we are declared righteous—that they almost forget the *empty tomb*. I grew up in that kind of tradition. When I was in University I wrote a paper for an English class that I titled "The Death of Christ". It was my well-meaning, but naïve, attempt at evangelising my atheistic professor. I wrote all about Good Friday, all about the cross, all about the shed blood of Jesus, all about how that blood redeems us from the penalty of our sins. It was a five page essay. When I started I figured I'd better save a half page or so for the resurrection—because I knew that it was important. But when I got to that last page, I sat there for a long time trying to figure out *why* the resurrection is important. In the end, what I wrote was that Jesus' resurrection was important so that we can be assured that he is God and that, because he is God, his death was truly effective as a sacrifice for our sins. Now, that is true. And the resurrection is important for that reason, but the greater reason never even occurred to me—in fact, my atheist professor wrote a note on my paper to the point that I'd missed

something at least as important: "You forgot Colossians 3:1. Look up!" I was embarrassed, because my professor understood Easter better than I did. I was so focused on Jesus justifying me at the cross as he paid the penalty for my sins, that I'd hardly given a thought to Easter—to the risen life that was mine in Christ Jesus. Like a lot of other Christians, it was as if I took Jesus' last words as he died—"It is finished"—as if there was nothing more to the Christian life. Jesus died; now I'm saved; Good Friday is the greatest. It is finished. The end.

St. James warns about this in his epistle when he reminds us that faith without works is dead. His point is that sanctification—our being made actually holy—will always accompany true saving faith in the cross. If you are justified, you *will* be sanctified. It's not an either/or situation. And that's why in our Epistle from Colossians—that passage that my English professor wrote in the margin of my paper—that's why there, St. Paul tells us:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1)

You see, just a few verses before, Paul wrote that in our baptism we are buried with Jesus—and just as it was inevitable that when Jesus died and was put to rest in the tomb he would also rise to new life, so our baptism not only takes us with him to the grave, but also raises us to new life too. As Paul wrote in our Romans 6 Epistle from last night: "If we have been united with him in his death, we shall *certainly* be united with him in his resurrection!" Easter *always* follows Good Friday. We need to realise the reality of the resurrection of Jesus; we need to realise that we take part in it as much as we do his death; and we need to realise—maybe most importantly—that his resurrection has

practical implications for us—that it means a changed life on our part.

So Paul tells us: You've been raised with Christ! Stop living with your focus on the things of the earth, stop living as if this is all there is, stop living as if all that matters is what's happening today; and instead, focus your attention on the things of heaven! As my professor said, "Look up!" Now we're getting a little ahead of ourselves, but Paul reminds us that at the Ascension, forty days later, the resurrected Jesus returned to heaven to take his place as ruler of his kingdom. And friends, it's the heavenly throne of Jesus where we should have our attention focused. That's our real home, that's where our true citizenship lies, that's where we'll spend eternity after our short time here—forever in the presence of God. Paul says in verse 2:

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Have an Easter mind. Think like Easter people. Jesus has given you new life through his resurrection. Start living that life. Don't wait. Live it now.

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:3-4)

Paul points us to the future. Think about the Gospel we read this morning. John and Peter and the women stood outside the empty tomb wondering what had happened. It didn't occur to them that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. They thought his body had been stolen. As John said, they didn't yet understand. Understanding came gradually, first as Jesus appeared to them later that day, then as they stared up into heaven as he ascended, and finally as the Spirit was poured out on them on

Pentecost—finally, then all the pieces of the Gospel story fell into place for them.

Brothers and sisters, you I have all those pieces. You and I have the Spirit, poured into our lives and connecting us in a living relationship with the resurrected Jesus. We have no reason not to understand. St. Paul tells us that Jesus is going to appear again—that he's going to come back and that when he does we'll be with him in glory. And yet even with all this knowledge we still too often stand outside the empty tomb—like I did as I was writing that English paper—and we scratch our heads. Jesus is gone. Thanks to the evangelists and the apostles we know the story—we know Jesus wasn't stolen by the Jews or the Romans. We know that he was raised and we know that he now sits at the right hand of the Father, ruling over his kingdom. But we don't understand—we don't understand the practical implications that should have on our lives. We know we're saved—we're living in the redeeming love and grace of Good Friday. And because life in Christ inevitably follows our death with him in baptism, you and I are *truly* living that new life. But as long as we don't understand that, we may be living it, but we'll never consciously and actively *pursue* it. And that's the difference between Good Friday people who are merely justified—who are still focused on the empty tomb and wondering what the point is—and Easter people who know that a new and grace-filled life is theirs, who set their minds on the things of heaven where our King is, and who actively pursue it. The disciples had a reason to wonder. Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, they were truly still only Good Friday people—only justified. Jesus hadn't risen yet. And even after he rose, they were still justified in not fully understanding, because Jesus hadn't yet sent his Spirit to give them understanding. But brothers and sisters, you and I have no reason not to understand. We are

Easter people—and for that matter, we're Ascension people and Pentecost people too! Between Friday and Sunday the disciples were left wondering. We're now living between that first Easter Sunday and that last Great Day when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead and to take us to glory with him. Let us not wonder what's happened. Let us not waste the new life of grace God has given us as we wonder what all this means. Let us instead *pursue* resurrection life. Let us be living and active witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, by letting the grace it brings us shine out for everyone around us to see.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have conquered death through your dearly beloved Son Jesus Christ and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant us by your grace to set our mind on things above, so that by your continual help our whole life may be transformed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit in everlasting glory. Amen.