



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Set Free

Romans 6:3-10 &

St. Matthew 28:1-10

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March 30, 2013 – Easter Vigil

Over the last three days we've walked with Jesus from the Upper Room to the Garden, from the Garden to Pilate's court, from Pilate's Court to the Cross, and from the Cross to the Tomb. On Thursday we sat with Jesus and the disciples in the Upper Room as he took that last Passover meal and turned it into something new. He was going to the Cross as a sacrifice for our sins, that God might "pass over" us on that Last Day when he judges the living and the dead. Jesus took the place of the Passover lamb, the old imperfect sacrifice that had, for more than a thousand years, pointed the people to this day. In taking the role of the Lamb on himself, Jesus then elevated the Passover bread and wine to the place of central importance in the Sacrament; the bread and the wine now the Body and Blood of the true Passover Lamb, sacrificed for us.

And yesterday we saw the body of the Lamb broken for us; we saw his blood poured out as we stood at the foot of the cross with his friends, with the soldiers, with the priests. We stood with them as Jesus gasped out, "It is finished!" and died. He had accomplished the work of forgiveness. He had paid the price of our sins. And then we followed as his body was taken down from the Cross and put in the Tomb. For two nights he lay there,

dead. The Tomb was another proof of his death. People who are only sleeping or comatose aren't embalmed and aren't sealed in tombs. The Tomb tells us that the Lamb truly did die—truly did what he set out to do.

And yet we all know that there's more to the story. The first Passover lambs sacrificed in Egypt bought the firstborn sons of Israel from death, but they also saved those firstborn sons so that they might be freed from the slavery of Egypt. And as Jesus died in our place on the Cross, freeing us from death, which is the penalty of our sins, he also bought our freedom from slavery to sin. If the story ended at the Cross or at the Tomb on Good Friday, we would be forgiven, but we'd still be left mired in sin's slavery. We would be forgiven, but we'd still be living in rebellion as enemies of the very God who redeemed us at the Cross. And so there was more. We need more than forgiveness. We need freedom; we need new life.

In our Gospel this evening we read the familiar story. When the Sabbath was over and as dawn was breaking that first Easter morning, the two Mary's went to the tomb to finish the work of embalming Jesus. But as they approached, St. John says an angel appeared and there was an earthquake and the heavy stone that sealed the tomb rolled back. Seeing the angel, the soldiers set to guard the tomb, big tough guys, no doubt, collapsed in fear "like dead men." Mary and Mary were no doubt afraid as well, and so the angel reassured them in those wonderful words:

**Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he**

**has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.** (Matthew 28:5-6)

I'm sure both women were thinking, "What do you mean, 'as he said'?" The disciples were afraid and they were mourning, because they'd never quite grasped all those things Jesus had said about rising again on the third day. They didn't really understand what he was talking about in the Upper Room when he took the role of the Passover lamb on himself and gave them the bread and the wine as signs and seals of the forgiveness and life he was about to bring them. In fact, even after seeing Jesus alive, it still didn't "click" until Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Mary and Mary were no doubt still very confused—but no doubt also very happy—as they ran to tell the disciples what the angel said, and as Jesus met them on the way. But not half as excited as they would be on Pentecost when they finally realised what Jesus' resurrection had done for them.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus' resurrection was at least as important as his death. That's why the somberness of Good Friday is so quickly overwhelmed by the joy and happiness of Easter. It was important that Jesus complete his sacrificial work at the Cross. That's where our sins were forgiven, but Jesus forgives our sins, again as I said yesterday, *so that* he can lead us into new life. *So that* he can restore us to the eternal life that God intended for us at our creation. This is what this evening's Epistle from Romans 6 gets at. Had St. Paul been there that first Easter with the two Mary's and with the disciples as they wondered what this was all

about, he could have asked this question of them. Look at verse 3:

**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?**

Did you know that? In Baptism we are united to Jesus by faith. That means that through our Baptism we partake of the death the Jesus died on the Cross. Through our Baptism we partake of the three days that he lay dead in the tomb. Through our Baptism, our old man, our old woman, our old sinful self is put to death by Jesus. That's Good Friday. That's Jesus dying on the Cross. That's the Passover Lamb dying in our place. But then we ask, "But the Passover lamb was sacrificed and its blood painted on the doorposts *so that* death would 'pass over', not that the firstborn would die with the lamb." That's the first clue the disciples should have picked up: unlike the old Passover lambs, Jesus doesn't stay dead when he offers himself as a sacrifice. This time he takes us with him to God's altar. He dies there that we too might die. And this is where St. Paul gives us one of those "so that" statements.

Don't you know that everyone who has been Baptised into Jesus has been Baptised into his death?"

Yes, he says, in fact:

**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.** (Romans 6:4)

You see, the goal isn't just forgiveness; it's resurrection—it's new life. Good Friday happened, *so that* Easter could follow. If we

back up to verses 1 and 2 of Chapter 6 we see that what Paul's addressing here is the issue of holiness, of new life. He's been writing about God's grace and how it abounds to the sinner. And then he anticipates the question: "If grace is such an obviously good thing and if it abounds all the more where sin abounds, then why shouldn't we throw ourselves into sin in order to bring a flood of God's grace on us?" And so here in Chapter 6 Paul is saying, "No, no, no! The point of grace is that it overcomes sin. Once you've experienced grace, there shouldn't be room in your life for sin anymore." And we ask "Why?" Because, if we have trusted in the work of Jesus at the Cross, if we have trusted in his grace, our old sinful selves are dead and Jesus has replaced them with new life. If you're still a slave to sin, you need to ask yourself if you've partaken of the grace of the Cross, because new life *always* follows death. This is his point in verse 5:

**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.**

When it comes to life in Christ, resurrection follows death as certainly as day follows night. And what's the purpose of death and resurrection? Paul goes on:

**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.** (Romans 6:6-7)

Paul makes me think of the old Negro spirituals. They were songs

written by men and women living in slavery. They led miserable lives as slaves, but they knew that there was no slavery in heaven. And so they wrote songs that often looked forward to that heavenly hope of freedom. For them death was a release to something better. In Christ, death is our release, and yet Paul isn't talking about physical death and he isn't talking about physical slavery. He's talking about spiritually crucifying our fallen and sinful selves so that we might rise from that death and be free from slavery to sin. The new life of Jesus is a life free from sin.

Can you imagine a man who had lived his life in slavery, dying and then running around heaven with a set of manacles trying to get someone—anyone—to clamp him back into slavery? Of course not. And yet we do this spiritually. Jesus frees us. He takes us to the grave with himself and he raises us to new life and we run right back to our old sins. Paul's saying: No. You've been freed from that slavery. Don't go back to it. Live the new life Jesus has given you.

Of course the hard part in all this is the fact that our resurrection is only partial at this point. Our old man, our old woman has been crucified with Christ, the Holy Spirit has been poured into us to give us new life, but we're still tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil to dig our old bodies up and live through them. This side of eternity, we still struggle with sin. In fact, our struggle is often so great that it causes us to doubt the new life Jesus has given us. The difference is that we now have a choice. Before our sinful selves were crucified with Christ sin was

our master and we were its slaves. That bondage has now been broken. Now we have the power to choose holiness over sin. And the good news is that the better we get at resisting sin and walking in obedience, the easier and more natural it becomes. The more we daily take up our cross, the more we daily crucify the flesh, the more we will walk in newness of life. And so Paul gives us hope as we struggle:

**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 6:9-11)

If sin and death no longer have dominion over our Lord, then they no longer have dominion over us. This is our new reality in Jesus. We simply need to live it out. The best commentary on this is probably what Paul wrote to the Colossians. It's actually tomorrow morning'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. 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 3:1-4)

This is the call to new life. It's the call to be "Easter People". It's a call to live our lives not just in light of the forgiveness of Good Friday, but to actually live the new lives that are ours because Jesus rose from the grave. Again we have that question: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 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." Yes, we know that. But we need assurance of it. That's why we celebrate Jesus' Resurrection. And we don't just celebrate it once a year on Easter Sunday. We celebrate it every Sunday as we gather to give him thanks and praise for the forgiveness and new life he's given. This is why the first Christians, most whom were Jews and accustomed to worshipping on Saturday—on the Sabbath—deliberately chose to worship on Sunday. It was to celebrate their Lord's Resurrection. In fact, since the Jews simply numbered the days of the week rather than giving them names as we do, they came to call Sunday the "Eighth Day". Genesis recorded God's Creative work in terms of six days. The seventh day represented his Sabbath rest. And then Jesus rose on the eighth to restore life to his people who had fallen into sin. And of course they made the celebration of the Lord's Supper the central act of their Sunday worship—the Sacrament of continuing life in Christ.

We come to the Lord's Table this evening too, and doing so brings us full-circle to where we began on Maundy Thursday. We come back

to this "Christian Passover". There's no longer a lamb on the Table. The Lamb has gone to the Cross to purchase our pardon. Instead, here the Lamb offers us himself in the bread and in the wine. As we take them he reminds us of what he's done, but he also makes it a reality in our lives today. Here he gives us signs and seals of his grace—of the work he accomplished at the Cross, the forgiveness of our sins, and of the new life he brings us through his own resurrection. Grace abounds where there is sin, but dear friends, grace also abounds for sinners at the Lord's Table. As you come today, come for assurance of your pardon, come for assurance of new life, and come to be strengthened as you partake of the gracious life of Jesus, our Passover Lamb.

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 minds 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."