



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter Day (C)

God's Answer

[RCL] Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26 or Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18 or Luke 24:1-12

Alleluia! Christ is risen! But as today's Gospel begins, no one gets that yet. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb this morning, not to rejoice, but to weep and mourn. The man whom she believed to be the Messiah, the Eternal King, the Son of God, had been arrested, beaten, humiliated, and killed like the basest criminal. "How could it be," she must have asked herself, "that one so good, so wise, so holy and loving could have been so wrong about who He proclaimed Himself to be? Did Jesus suffer from delusions of grandeur? Were Jesus' claims to be the Son of God just metaphors? And if that's the case, then... of what exactly are we disciples?"

One might answer her that Jesus' teaching was the point, and it's true that, if the world one day woke up and took the teachings of Jesus seriously — if every single human began to love God with heart, mind, and strength and love their neighbors as themselves — then planet Earth would immediately start to look like paradise. If everyone followed commandments like "Give to all who ask of you," and "let someone strike you 70 times 7 times before striking back," hunger, violence, and poverty would become distant memories, unimaginable concepts from the bad old days. If everyone lived in a state of constant prayer, if everyone were aflame with the love of God, all lives would overflow with meaning and joy.

And yet, after nearly 2000 years of Christian history, after the Holocaust and Stalinism, after wars begun in Yemen and Ukraine, we humans seem to be more inhumane to one another than ever. If the innocent continue to suffer and die — even in an era in which the Bible is the most read book on the planet, and Christian churches can be found in every corner of the globe — then how successful has Christ's teaching been? Thus far, it seems that the only person who wholly took it to heart was Jesus Himself. If Jesus' ethical teaching were the entire point of His life, it doesn't seem to have changed the world very much.

The problem isn't that Christians haven't *heard* the teachings of Christ, but that we have a bigger, more pressing force pushing us away from obedience to Him. Behind every human decision to seek revenge, to hoard our wealth, to look out for number one, to never give a sucker an even break, lies fear — fear that perhaps I won't have enough for myself, fear that if I let others walk all over me, I'll be trampled. This fear of violence and privation is ultimately the fear of death. Our mortality looms over us and keeps us from

trusting in the words of Christ. In a perfect world, we would be selfless, but here and now, we tell ourselves, self-preservation must come first.

In today's epistle, St. Paul tells us that if Christ had not risen from the dead, our faith would have been in vain. If there were no Easter morning, if the resurrection of Jesus had not happened, then Christians would be, "of all people most to be pitied." This is not because the Resurrection was a personal relief for Jesus — this was not a disaster narrowly averted, like a patient who dies upon an operating table but is resuscitated by doctors. Nor is this because the Resurrection is a display of Jesus' great power or proof that He is indeed the Son of God.

Instead, if the Resurrection had not happened, Christians would have been the most pathetic bunch of all time, St. Paul says, because the Resurrection of Christ *is* God's answer to all human suffering, *is* God's solution to injustice, *is* God's destruction of all of the evil and horror of the world: for in the Resurrection of Jesus, every single one of us is freed from the power of evil and death.

The wisdom of the ages, from Plato down to *The Lion King*, would tell us that life is a circle: death is a natural part of life, and at death, the soul merely begins a new journey. For Christians, however, these are nothing but platitudes and lies. From the Biblical perspective, death is not natural, it is the enemy of life; death is nothing but the ruin and destruction of human beings. Humans, as God created us, are spiritual animals, embodied spirits — body and soul together — and to separate the body from the soul is to tear our humanity asunder.

Nearly two thousand years ago, a kind, loving rabbi named Jesus died. He bowed His head, His body went limp, and His soul descended into the darkness of death. It was the same tragic destruction, the same horrific rending of body from soul, that millions of humans had suffered before Him, but on that day, something astonishingly new also happened. For death, as St. John Chrysostom famously says, "took a body, and received God. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen." At that moment, the darkness of death received not only another dead human but also the fullness of God. The darkness of death was suddenly illuminated by the blinding light of Christ's divinity, the coldness of death was set aflame by the heat of God's love, the emptiness of death was filled by Him who is the source of all that is, and death simply could not hold Christ. This was not a victory for Jesus alone, for, at that moment, death itself was blown apart, reduced to ruin, utterly vanquished. That moment began what St. Paul in today's epistle refers to as the defeat of the last enemy of God: the destruction of death itself.

There are ancient icons of the Resurrection which show Christ bursting forth from the tomb with the gates of death shattered at His feet. In these images, Jesus is not alone; He holds the wrist of a withered old man in one hand and the wrist of an ancient woman in the other: it is Adam and Eve — symbolic of the whole human race — whom He pulls from their tombs. In the resurrection of Christ, *all* human nature is redeemed, is freed, from the power of death.

Before the resurrection of Christ, the reality of death lay behind every suffering and sadness, but after the resurrection, suffering becomes a temporary tragedy. Before the resurrection of Christ, the fear of death was the most rational thing in the world; after the resurrection of Christ, we are freed to give ourselves fearlessly to others. Before the destruction of death, heroism was foolishness, self-sacrifice was insanity, but now, in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we are free: free to share with Him in His perfect love for others, His perfect forgiveness of others, His flagrant self-disregard, as he gives Himself in love to friends and family, to annoying co-workers, to people with tiresome political perspectives, to the poor and suffering, to enemies and those who hate Him.

Easter is the greatest of all Christian feasts because, in it, human nature is transformed, we are freed for total love, total goodness, total generosity. On Easter morning, we are invited to accept this reality, to allow it to actively transform our lives: to start fresh, to begin anew. In the resurrection of Christ, we are offered the gift of eternal life, freed from the burden of fear, and invited to share in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

And so, St. John Chrysostom proclaims to Hell and Death, “Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.”

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