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Year B

Easter Day, April 4, 2021

THE PROMISE OF THE MORNING

During this past year when we have had our lives turned upside down and we have faced the challenges of the pandemic, many people have had significantly more time on their hands. Some people have used it to be creative, get healthy and start new projects; others have been rather unproductive. I have a friend who has used the last year to sit in front of a computer and email me more times than I can count. Most of his emails have been meaningless and unimportant, but one I received recently got me thinking. It goes like this:

"WHAT IS MORE EVIL THAN THE DEVIL? WHAT IS GREATER THAN GOD?
THE POOR HAVE IT, THE RICH NEED IT, AND IF YOU EAT IT, YOU WILL DIE."

This riddle was presented to a group of kindergartners and a group of students at Stanford University. They were given one minute to give their answer. 80% of the kindergartners got it right, but only 20% of the Stanford students.

Why the radical difference in the results? The answer is rather simple. The Stanford students spent way too much time analyzing the riddle, examining each and every part looking for the hidden meaning, trying to string together the different components of the riddle into a clearly defined answer.

The kindergartners, on the other hand, dealt with the riddle directly, honestly and without letting extraneous issues get in the way. So often in life we let extraneous issues get in the way of what is, in the end, the true meaning of a situation.

On this glorious Easter Day, as we gather among the worries and tensions and struggles of the human family, despite the daily pressures in your life and mine, let us take a few precious minutes to focus our hearts and minds, our eyes and ears on the message of this day. For a minute or two, let us strip away the extraneous elements of this world in order to etch into our beings the true message of this day, of which there are two parts.

The first part is pure fact: that on this day some 2000 years ago God raised up Jesus from the dead. The second part of the message is that on this day around 29 A.D. life and death, heaven and hell, God and the Devil advanced into a full scale, all-out war. And the prize, control of your heart and mine and the salvation of the world. On this day we are reminded that God won.

world. On this day we are reminded that GOD WON!

I had a parishioner in a former parish who, on Easter Day each year would come out of church and greet me with a big smile and a strong handshake. He never said, "Happy Easter" or "Good morning!" No, his proclamation was always, "It's victory day!" Today is indeed victory day for you and me!

There is a story of a young man who lived in London during the horrific bombings that city incurred during World War II. This young man saw nothing but tragedy and pain and the horrors of humanity's dark side everywhere he went. The result was his questioning the value and presence of God.

One night, in the midst of some severe bombing the young man's faithful grandfather took the young man from his safe surroundings to his jewelry shop. The young man was baffled why his grandfather was taking him upstairs to a dark, cold room in the middle of the night.

With the brightness of one candle the young man stood by and watched as his grandfather took some ugly, unpolished, seemingly valueless stones and sprinkled them with dust from polished diamonds. He placed the stones in a special machine for a period of time. At the proper moment he took the unpolished stones out of the machine. Diamond dust had been grinding on other diamonds; the hardest substance in the world had been grinding against the hardest substance in the world, and in the end brought forth the beauty of glorious recreated diamonds.

His eyes wide open with surprise, the grandfather remarked to his obviously excited grandson: you see, this is exactly what has happened. The two hardest substances in the world – good and evil – came together on Good Friday and...guess what? On Easter God proclaimed victory!

With that the grandfather opened the black curtains behind him, and there the young man's eyes were mesmerized by the London skyline, now experiencing the brightness of the rising sun. In the distance he could see the dome of St. Paul's cathedral with its majestic cross standing high. "You see," said the grandfather pointing to the cross, tears now running down his cheeks, "last night it was dark and cold and you were frightened, but now you have the promise of the morning."

If Jesus' story ended on Good Friday there would be no need to talk about Jesus. There would be no Christianity, no Church, no resurrection faith, no hope for tomorrow. THERE WOULD BE NOTHING! And that is exactly the answer to the riddle – nothing. What is more evil than the devil? NOTHING! What is greater than God? NOTHING!

But thanks be to God that Jesus was raised from the dead, that Jesus did become our new glorious, recreated diamond, our promise of the morning. That despite the dark, cold, scary nights that invade your life and mine, God fulfills his promises.

There is the true story about two brothers, ages 14 and 21 respectively. Though separated by seven years they were as close as brothers could be. One

late summer day the elder brother started coughing. The cough increased in volume and severity. After some tests, the diagnosis was devastating – advanced Hodgkin’s disease.

For the next nine months the elder brother spent much of his time in the hospital. His younger brother was right next to him, sacrificing friends, sports and other enjoyable activities in order to care for his best friend. By March the doctors discovered a new tumor in the lung and deemed the situation hopeless. This valiant 21-year-old was going to die.

On Easter morning the younger brother went to Church to pray for a miracle. After Church the younger brother entered his brother’s hospital room to smiling faces. The doctors just reported that the tumor had disappeared! It looked like the older brother was going to make it after all.

The next day, my brother died. His heart just couldn’t take it any longer. Nothing can or will remove that tragedy, that loss from my life and the life of my family. But because of Christ’s resurrection I didn’t stay in the darkness. I had the promise of the morning, of new beginnings. I’ve seen it in my family; I’ve felt it in my heart. Without it I could not stand in this pulpit today.

Because of this day, the greatest day heaven and earth has ever known, we need not fear the trials and tribulations of this world, for our God is indeed a God of hope. On this day God has conquered all of our dark nights.... and with daily faith in the living Christ, we can conquer them as well.

Some might still believe Easter is all about nothing, but through eyes of faith we know this love, this hope is the ultimate transforming force of this world and the world to come. In other words, by the event of this day 2000 years ago, we can discover God's promise of the morning which is indeed the world's EVERYTHING.

Readings

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-17

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; * his mercy endures for ever.

GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, FOR HE IS GOOD, HIS MERCY ENDURES FOR EVER.

2 Let Israel now proclaim, * “His mercy endures for ever.”

14 The Lord is my strength and my song, * and he has become my salvation.

15 There is a sound of exultation and victory * in the tents of the righteous:

16 “The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! * the right hand of the Lord is exalted! the right hand of the Lord has triumphed!”

17 I shall not die, but live, * and declare the works of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.