

The Salutory Gift: The Lord's Supper Feast of Victory

(this sermon is a slightly modified version of the sermon in the CPH Lenten series, The Salutory Gift: The Lord's Supper, written by Rev. Paul Biesel)

When Jesus died on the cross, all looked like it was lost. For the disciples who had believed in Him, all hopes were gone. To the mortal eye, it looked as if God had lost and the devil had won. There hung the world's great Redeemer—dead, defeated, and humiliated.

If the story had ended there, then we would be a pitiable bunch of people, wouldn't we? Two thousand years of Baptisms, confirmations, sermons, Communions, and ordinations into the pastoral office would mean absolutely nothing. And worst of all, we would all still be dead in our trespasses and sins. You would have no hope of eternal life. Death would hold just as much terror for you as it did for everyone else.

Opponents of traditional Christianity know how essential this piece of the puzzle is. They know that without the resurrection of Christ, the whole Christian house of cards falls down. And that is why they do everything possible to call into question the truthfulness of this event. They do whatever they can to put Jesus back in that tomb, to say it was all a lie invented by later followers of Jesus to preserve His memory.

Today we rejoice that this is not where the story ended. That age-old enemy death had done its worst on Calvary. It had its way with the Son of God. It sank its dreadful teeth into the author of life. But its victory was short-lived. Its dominion over the souls of men was brought to an end on the first day of the week, when early in the morning our Lord Jesus rose from the dead.

This is where we find the two Marys in the Holy Gospel today. Mark's Gospel tells us that these two women had gone to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning on the first day of the week to anoint the body of Jesus with spices. Matthew picks it up at the point where they come to the tomb and explains how the stone had been rolled away from the tomb: "And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it" (Matthew 28:2).

The women, still in shock from the events of Good Friday, are now faced with the sight of a glorious angel, whose appearance was like lightning and whose clothing was white as snow. The guards are frightened half to death, but the angel says to the women: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified" (28:5). And then come those simple, yet joyously beautiful words: "He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay" (28:6).

All was not lost! Death did not have the last word! Their faith was not in vain. The humiliation and death of the Son of God was part of God's plan to reconcile sinful men to Himself. It was necessary that the Christ should suffer, be crucified, and be raised again on the third day. Over and over Jesus had told His disciples these words, trying to prepare them for what was coming.

But it was not until He rose from the dead and appeared to them alive that they finally believed in Him.

Good Friday was God's answer to sin. It was about God making restitution for sins by punishing them in His Son. Easter is God's answer to death. Easter is about God proving to the world that He had accepted the sacrifice of His Son as payment. Together, Good Friday and Easter mean that your sins are forgiven in Christ and that through Him you now have the victory over death and the grave.

And what better way to celebrate God's victory over sin and death than to have a feast? What better way to celebrate the Lord's triumph over the grave than to dine at His holy Table? Indeed, the Lord is good. He has risen! He is not in the grave, but here, with us in the salutary gift of the Lord's Supper.

The prophet Isaiah foretold God's victory over sin and death, as well as a celebratory feast that God Himself would prepare: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And He will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of His people He will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 25:6-8).

God kept His promises and destroyed our greatest enemy of all in the death and resurrection of His Son. And in His rich grace, He has also given to us a feast of "rich food" in the Supper of His Son's body and blood. For what can be richer, what can be more satisfying than the very bread of heaven Himself?

Martin Luther's great Easter hymn blends together these two themes, the triumph of our Lord over death and the grave and the participation in that victory through Holy Communion: "Then let us feast this Easter Day On Christ, the bread of heaven; The Word of grace has purged away The old and evil leaven. Christ alone our souls will feed; He is our meat and drink indeed; Faith lives upon no other! Alleluia!" (*LSB* 458:7).

In this feast of victory, it is no imagined Jesus that we dine with. It is no mere symbol of a far distant Savior. It is the risen Christ Himself who steps into our midst and feeds us with His own crucified and risen flesh and give us to drink of His own blood for the forgiveness of our sins, life, and salvation. What a marvelous antidote this is to our fear of death and judgment! What glorious comfort this is for Christians on this holy day. Not only do we hear the news that our Lord has defeated death, we also get to celebrate that victory by feasting on His flesh and blood.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that from the very beginning the Christian Church gathered on Sunday to hear the teaching of the apostles and to break bread? After all, this is the day that God put the breath of life back into His Son for us and for our salvation. This is the day that Christ appeared to Peter and the other disciples who had been chosen by God as witnesses, "who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41). One can easily see why Easter is

the chief festival of the Church Year, and why every Sunday is a mini celebration of that first Easter.

On the one hand, this validates and gives meaning to everything that our Lord said and did during His earthly ministry. Now there can be no doubt that His words were true. Now there can be no doubt that He was the Son of God. Nor can there be any doubt that God has forgiven all our sins.

On the other hand, the same could be said of the Church and all the works done within her. If the Lord is risen, then our faith is not in vain. There can be no doubt that Baptism truly is a washing away of sins. There can be no doubt or uncertainty that Holy Communion is truly a life-giving feast of forgiveness. There can be no doubt that the Absolution spoken in the name of the triune God is truly the word of the risen Christ sounding forth from the lips of His called servants to comfort frightened sinners.

That is perhaps the best part of Christ's triumphant resurrection—all doubts flee. All uncertainty about God, about His attitude toward us, about the extent of His love, or about the truthfulness of His promises must depart. And for anyone who has borne heavy crosses, for anyone who has thought, in moments of difficulty, that God had forgotten them, or that their faith was in vain, or that their lives were utterly futile – to such people, no news is more welcome.

If we are facing death or severe illness, if we have lost wives or husbands, parents or children, if we have suffered ridicule or mockery for the sake of Christ, we do not need to despair.

Christ is risen!

He won the victory over death!

Yes, crosses must be borne, but today we rejoice that death did not have the final word for Jesus. Nor is death the final word for you.

We give thanks to God for preparing for us a feast of victory in the salutary gift of the Lord's Supper. Amen.