

Devotional Commentary for Easter Sunday's Biblical Readings

April 12, 2020

Overview – Alleluia! Christ Is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! ... *Hidden with Christ*

Easter turns the world upside down. It defies our expectations not only with surprise, but also with hiddenness and bluntness. In our Easter Gospel, Mary does not recognize the resurrected Jesus. Were we to use the Easter Gospel from Matthew instead of John, the good news that “Christ is risen” is heralded by an earthquake and terrifying angels. It is brought to the women of the church first, rather than to the Twelve (*Matt. 28:1-10*). The radical reversals prophesied in scripture and revealed in Jesus’ life and ministry culminate in the good news we proclaim today: Jesus Christ, through death, has triumphed over death. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone”.

Today offers to us the mystical possibility of transformation in every moment of our lives. In this Easter Season 2020, in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic, what is dying and what is being born? For each of us? For our families? For our community? For our world? What is breaking open like a seed to die (*see Jesus’ words in John 12:24*) so that new life might thrive?

This theme – *Hidden in Christ* – is framed candidly in Colossians: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (3:3). In this 2020 season of Easter, we are invited to allow old husks to fall away so that Jesus’ new life may emerge in us as individual children of God and as two small congregations who are looking for Jesus’ Spirit to lead us into a new future. This part of the Easter resurrection story is strange, isn’t it ... even a bit unsettling. But we are invited, after all, to share fully in Jesus’ death as well as in the joy and victory of his resurrection (*look up Roman 6:5 and Second Corinthians 4:10-11*). This can be frightening, yes, terrifying, but in the mystery of the Holy Spirit’s work in us, for us, and through us, we receive it as hope and promise (*see First Peter 1:3*) as we look forward.

On this Easter Sunday, let’s try to be open and honest about how God is stirring us – you and me, Christ and Good Shepherd – to transformation. Definitely, we may well lament the letting go of what has been. Almost simultaneously, however, as we embody Jesus’ resurrection and new life in the present, as look forward following in our good shepherd’s footsteps, we celebrate today with great joy. In our desire to be *hidden in Jesus Christ’s abundant Easter life*, we pray for the faith to even name seasons of suffering as evidence of Jesus’ resurrection emerging (*take a look at Philipians 3:10*). **Yes ... Alleluia! Christ is risen!**

The Prayer of the Day:

O God, you gave your only Son to suffer death on the cross for our redemption, and by his glorious resurrection you delivered us from the power of death. Make us die every day to sin, that we may live with him forever in the joy of the resurrection, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The First Reading: Exodus 10:34-43 ... *God raised Jesus on the third day.*

³⁴Peter began to speak to the people: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how 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. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the

third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not 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. ⁴²He 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. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Commentary: In the book of the Acts, the second part of a two-volume work, St. Luke extends the power of the Holy Spirit, who was first encountered in the angel’s announcement to Zechariah in Luke 1, to the apostles’ preaching of the cross and resurrection, first in Jerusalem in Acts chapters 2–8, then in Judea and Samaria in chapters 8–9, then to the Gentiles in chapters 10–15, and finally to the ends of the earth in chapters 15–28. St. Luke’s story demonstrates how, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the church expanded throughout the Greco-Roman world, especially through the efforts of St. Peter at first and then through St. Paul. Acts described the church in a positive light. Acts is basically 28 sermons and speeches by which St. Luke conveys his message to his readers. In today’s reading from chapter 10, Peter’s testimony to the Roman centurion Cornelius, Luke includes a brief summary of the Christian proclamation, concluding with his customary emphasis on the forgiveness of sins.

Throughout the fifty days of Easter, from today through Pentecost, our First Readings are from Acts. The central message is that the Holy Spirit extends the power of the resurrection from the empty tomb to the whole Christian church, spreading this amazing good news throughout the Greco-Roman world. In this way, we can think of each Sunday’s reading from Acts as another telling of the resurrection story. In today’s reading, St. Peter refers to the witnesses of the resurrection who “ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” Well, we believers today see ourselves as among these witnesses ... every Sunday we gather together around his table. Thanks be to God!

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 ... *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!*

¹Give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good;
God’s mercy endures forever.

²Let Israel now declare,
“God’s mercy endures forever.”

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

¹⁵Shouts of rejoicing and salvation echo in the tents of the righteous:
“The right hand of the Lord acts valiantly!

¹⁶The right hand of the Lord is exalted!
The right hand of the Lord acts valiantly!”

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

¹⁸The Lord indeed punished me sorely,
but did not hand me over to death.

¹⁹Open for me the gates of righteousness;
I will enter them and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰“This is the gate of the Lord;
here the righteous may enter.”

²¹I give thanks to you, for you have answered me
and you have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³By the Lord has this been done;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Today's psalm is a song of thanksgiving for victory. Although it's cast in the singular, the setting is after a battle, in which "the right hand of the Lord," presumably brandishing a weapon, has conquered. Christians understand that Christ has conquered the powers of sin and death, and medieval art depicted Jesus rising from the tomb holding up a cross-shaped standard. The "rejected stone" is Jesus, the Christ, now the cornerstone of the church, on whom the baptized build their lives. Today, this resurrection day, is "the day that the Lord God has made", and "it is marvelous in our eyes!"

The Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-4 ... *Raised with Christ to seek the higher things.*

¹If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Commentary: Because of its rhetoric and theology, many biblical scholars believe this letter to the church in Colossae, a city in what is now western Turkey, was written about the year 75 by a disciple of St. Paul, rather than by Paul himself. Opposing a current teaching in the Colossian community that believers ought to experience angelic visions, the writer argues that baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ is enough for salvation. Colossians 3 repeats the foundational Pauline theology: you have died and have *already* been raised to life in Christ.

It is appropriate that two millennia after Jesus' earthly life, we hear from Colossians on Easter Sunday: we ought not think that seeing angels – or any other ecstatic and/or special spiritual experience or encounter, for that matter – is necessary for us to have faith in Jesus' resurrection. Rather, our baptism has brought us all into the full benefits of Easter.

The Holy Gospel: John 20:1-18 *Seeing the Risen Christ.*

¹Early 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. ²So 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." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’”¹⁸ 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.

Commentary: We always have a choice of two Easter Sunday gospels ... the Easter story from the Gospel of the year (*this year, Matthew 28:1-10*) or St. John’s story. Pastor Swenson and I decided to choose St. John’s account, mainly because during Year A of our 3-year Lectionary cycle (the Year of St. Matthew), so many of our Lenten gospel readings have been from John.

St. John’s Easter account shares some details with Matthew, Mark and Luke, for example, the empty tomb, a role for Mary Magdalene, and the disbelief of the disciples. As we expect of St. John, he uses the Easter morning story to proclaim the divine identity of Jesus – the Word made flesh; the Son of God revealed in dramatic, miraculous signs; the obedient, suffering Son who finishes on the cross the work given to him by his Father – this Son is raised by his Father and is now going back to the Father, as he tells Mary. In accord with this theme and pattern, St. John has Mary first addressing the man she sees in the garden as “sir” (v. 15); and then, after having recognized the risen Jesus, Mary finally testifies that he is **Lord** (v. 18), thus granting Jesus the divine title.

In John, from Jesus’ death comes life: thus Jesus was buried in a garden. St. John carries through Jesus’ words and imagery in chapter 12 about a seed needing to die to bring forth new life.

Although he is not at first recognized by Mary, Jesus reveals his identity to her and announces his ascension to God. Especially during medieval times, Christians treasured the mental picture of this resurrection account for the tenderness suggested between Jesus and Mary. The baptized life of the Christian was described as just such an encounter with the risen Jesus in a well-watered garden.

For Spiritual Reflection from a TV Show: According to the Dictionary, the expression “retcon,” short for “retroactive continuity,” is “a piece of new information given in a film or television series that changes, or gives a different way of understanding, what has gone before.” A classic example of “retcon” is the final episode of the situation comedy Newhart, in which the protagonist, Dick Loudon, played by comedian Bob Newhart, wakes up to discover that he is actually Dr. Robert Hartley, the lead character Newhart played in a previous show, and he has dreamed the entire 184 episodes of the series! The new revelation changes the meaning of all the past stories.

How does the Easter Story of Jesus’ resurrection “retcon” our own stories, both personal and congregational, in light of God’s intended future for us? What does God have in store for you? What does God have in store for us, for Christ and Good Shepherd?

A Second Prayer of the Day –

God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of life. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

A Closing Prayer –

Dear God of resurrection and new life, as we give you praise and thanksgiving on this Easter Sunday ... as we celebrate the victory over sin and death so graciously given to us in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus ... we humbly and confidently pray for your loving care on the people of our world as we struggle with the devastating sickness of this coronavirus pandemic. Be with those who are sick; grant them your healing, we pray. Be with all those caring for us and our sick – the medical people, the first responders, the people whose work is essential for all of us – and protect them from illness and danger. Be with all who are mourning the loss of their loved ones; comfort them with the Risen Jesus’ promise to welcome their dear ones into heaven. Be with us in our fears and anxieties; strengthen us to support

and care for one another as best we are able. Be with all our leaders; grant them the wisdom and courage to point us through this pandemic and into a brighter future. And when all of this is over, fill us with joy when we are able to come together again for worship, fellowship and service as your family of faith. All this we bring to you in trust and hope in the name of your beloved Son, our crucified and risen Lord Jesus. Amen.