



The Easter Life

1 St. John 5:4-12 & St. John 20:19-23

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March 30, 2008 – Easter 1

Just two weeks ago we celebrated the feast day of a British teenager, who in the early 5th was kidnapped from his home by Irish pirates. His name was Patrick. Those pirates took him back to Ireland where he was sold as a slave. When he escaped he travelled to France where he entered the priesthood, following in the steps of his father and grandfather. He studied and about AD 432 was appointed to be a missionary bishop to Ireland. His great desire was to return to the people who had kidnapped him and who had made him a slave so that he could share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them.

As word of Patrick's ministry spread people began to seek him out. One of those people was Findcath mac Degeo, one of the Irish kings. Patrick shared the Gospel with this pagan king and with his whole entourage of warriors and druids. The king and his men took the message of Jesus Christ to heart that day and were baptised by Patrick. His instruction to the newly baptised men went something like this: "Today you have put on Christ. You have bound him to you like the armour on a Roman soldier's chest, a *lorica*, is tied to him. Now you belong to Christ. As you have been washed in the well of washing and poured and sprinkled with water from above, so have you received the Spirit from Heaven. You are surrounded by Christ as the waters swelled around you in the regeneration of new life." Patrick's parting advice to the King was this: "My King you now belong to Christ and Christ belongs to you; go and live your Baptism."

Martin Luther described Findcath when he left Patrick that day as going out "to swim in his Baptism." I think Luther's words describe our new life in Christ very well. We're to go out and swim in our Baptism. The Sacraments are the outward and visible signs of the grace that God has worked in us through his Son. Next time you go to a Christian bookstore, look

around you at all the books that aim to tell us how to successfully be a Christian. Some of those books are good and lots of them are trash, but how many of them start where Patrick started – with the Sacramental sign of our being grafted into the Body of Christ? It shouldn't be any surprise to us that Jesus forever linked Christian discipleship to the sacrament of Holy Baptism when he gave his Great: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." One of the great errors of the modern Church has been to separate the very Sacraments that Our Lord ordained from his call to discipleship and our sanctification. Too often the Sacraments have become something optional. You get baptised if and when you feel like it. Holy Communion has been taken from the main gathering of God's people on Sunday morning and has been moved to a small, optional, and poorly attended Wednesday or Sunday evening service. Jesus didn't give us a whole lot of direct commands, but he did tell his people to do these two things: to be baptised and to receive his Supper until his coming again. These two Sacraments should be the starting point of our faith, but they aren't just ceremonial points in time with a beginning and an end. Our baptism marks a new life – one that continues. Baptism isn't a "been there, done that" sort of thing. It's "been there, *still there.*" It's done that, *still doing that.* The same goes for Communion. It's not just something we do on Sundays. What we do on Sunday is to be a reminder to us that we live our lives in perpetual Communion with Christ. He is our spiritual nourishment. As we go down the road of discipleship, we start with our baptism and continue in Communion with our Lord as we make the journey.

As modern people we want to segment or compartmentalise our lives. We go to work and live in the "work sphere." We go home and we live in the "family sphere." We go to church and live in the "church sphere." A lot of us have a hard time putting it all together and realising that they're all ongoing and part of *one* life. We tend to look at things as isolated events.

Easter tends to be that way. We celebrate Easter one Sunday and the next we're on to something else. But the Church knows better than that. That's why we celebrate

Easter for fifty days. It's a reminder that Easter is the reality of the Christian life – that every day is an Easter for each of us as we celebrate and live in Christ's resurrection. The Resurrection is supposed to have a lasting effect on us. In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul writes, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

We need to rebuild our lives on the grace of Easter and that means building on a solid foundation of faith. The Sacraments are signs and seals of God's grace. As they communicate God's promises to us they confirm and strengthen the faith that God calls us to live daily. Our Epistle lesson tells us that the victory that overcomes the world is that faith. In the Gospel lesson Jesus says to Thomas, "have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Our faith is what gives us the desire to put into action what God has taught us. Faith should never stop with head knowledge or intellectual assent – our faith has to go into action. The problem is that our human nature is inconsistent. We stumble and fall. But God knows we're prone to getting weak as we journey with him. He knows that and he gives us the grace to persevere. In the Epistle we're told that Christ comes to us in both water and blood and by the Spirit. All three are there to encourage us. Our baptism is a reminder that we are not of this fallen world – we're a part of Christ's Body – and the Holy Communion reminds us that we receive our life from Christ. These are what give us strength to persevere when we're spiritually tired.

In Romans 6, St. Paul tells us that all who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. As Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we, too, should walk in newness of life. Last Sunday our focus was on the Resurrection. But it's important that we remember that the resurrection isn't something that just relates to Jesus – it related to us too. St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "If we have died with him, we shall also live with him" (2 Timothy 2:11). So we need to ask, "What does it mean that we partake of Christ's resurrection too?" Look at our Epistle lesson, 1 John

5:4-5:

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The power for the risen life comes from union with our risen Saviour. We know that we're citizens of God's Kingdom, but until we either die or Jesus comes again, we all have to spend our earthly lives living in a sinful and fallen world. If you remember back a few weeks, the lessons of the first three Sundays in Lent put our focus on how we're assaulted by the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. We might be God's children, but that doesn't mean we don't still face very real temptations and struggles with what we've been called away from. The only way that we can overcome the ways of our old lives is by a life and an energy from a higher source. The Christian must be "born from above." It's not enough to have head knowledge, as I said earlier. It's not enough to accept Christ as a teacher who came to show us a higher and better way for living. If that's all we do, then all we have is a higher standard than others, but no real power to rise to it. The difference comes when we believe that our Teacher and Master is the Son of God who was resurrected and has triumphed over sin and death. We can find the grace and power to live according to his commandments when we understand Jesus is the Son of God. Through faith we receive the grace of God. Our old selves are buried with him in the grave and we born again through his Easter Resurrection. Because he has already conquered sin and death, he gives us the power to do so to. As citizens of his Kingdom, living under his victorious reign we live the new life that he gives – we overcome the world.

The bringer of life is Christ. Look at verse 6:

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood.

Christ came by water and by blood. First, he came to cleanse us from our sins by the washing of water. The baptism that he commanded is the outward sign of the remission of our sins and his relieving us

of our guilt and punishment. In him every sin we have ever committed is washed away. Because of Christ's cleansing us, we can stand before a holy and just God and not be condemned. Jesus received our condemnation. He is our life. Because of that, every remission of sins after our baptism is only the renewal of the grace that has been given to us. St. Paul also wrote to Titus about baptism being the washing of regeneration the means by which we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, which then works in us to renew our hearts and minds and make us fit servants of God (Titus 3:5). Baptism incorporates us into the living Body of Christ. It grafts us into the living Vine and makes old dead wood that could produce nothing to be alive with the Spirit so that it can bear new fruit. We are taken into a new covenant with God, being baptised into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Because Christ died for us – he took our punishment on himself – we have a new standing before God. When the soldier pierced Jesus side as he was hanging on the cross "there came out blood and water," to signify the cleansing power of his blood. Secondly, St. John emphatically adds: "Not with water only but with water and the blood." The blood is the life. Remember all the way back to Genesis: God warned Noah "You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" (Genesis 9:4). God taught his people over and over that blood is life. The old sacrificial system taught that blood – life – had to be shed to cover sins. When a sacrifice was made in the Tabernacle of the Temple, the point wasn't to symbolise an offering of death. The shedding of blood on the altar was a symbolic offering of *life* to atone for sin. The whole point of the Old Testament sacrificial system was to teach God's people that innocent blood must be shed to cover sins. Those imperfect sacrifices of dumb animals pointed to the perfect sacrifice that Christ made for us in his own death. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). He gives us that abundant life through is blood. Jesus also said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in

me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever" (John 6:53-58). We are grafted into his Body and we receive our nourishment from him. The Holy Communion is the outward sign and seal of that grace. Through his blood we abide in the living Christ and he abides in us.

Finally, look at verses 7-12:

And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has borne witness to his Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life.

St. John's train of thought is plain. The life given by the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood is the ongoing and perpetual witness to the Son of God. The Holy Spirit creates new life in us, which is seen outwardly in our baptism, and then the Spirit feeds and strengthens that life through our communion with Christ as we receive his body and blood, our heavenly food. The very fact that we live – and when we're all gathered together, that the Church lives – is the evidence of the claim that Jesus has made to be our Lord. This isn't the testimony or witness of men; it's the witness of God the Holy Spirit living *in* men. It might come through men and women, but that's because each believer lives again in Christ and can witness him. Life comes from life, and the risen Christian proves a risen Christ to be the source of our Christianity. In fact, the growth of the Church – of the Body of Christ – is the ongoing growing and strengthening witness to Christ in the world. St. John Chrysostom wrote: The Church consisteth of these two together, and those who are initiated know this, being regenerated by water and nourished

by the Blood and Flesh. Hence the Sacraments take their beginning” (Homily 85). The Church fulfils her mission and grows *as she abides in Christ and he abides in her*. To be the Church means that we stress this new life above all else.

In our Gospel lesson this morning we see Jesus giving his divine commission to the disciples. They were laying low and hiding out from the authorities when Jesus appeared in the room before them. And yet Jesus gave these men calm assurance. He came into the room and simply said, “Peace be with you.” They saw his pierced hands and his feet and that was all they needed. St. John says that they were glad to see their risen Lord. But notice that Jesus didn’t just come to give a little bit of reassurance to a group of men who feared that the authorities might come for them next – to crucify them the same way their Lord had been. No, Jesus reassured them and gave them a commission:

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Think about it. Those disciples were scared. When Jesus was before the Sanhedrin Peter had been identified as one of his followers. They were afraid to show their faces in Jerusalem. Jesus came to give them reassurance, but that’s not all – he and call them to go out and boldly proclaim that the Kingdom of God had come, just as he had spent the last three years proclaiming that same Kingdom. They just wanted to hide and Jesus said, “No! God out and boldly proclaim the message I gave you!”

You see, too often we as Christian are happy to receive Christ’s comfort. We’re happy that we’ve been saved from our sins. We’re happy to leave sin behind and live our lives, by the help of the Spirit, in ways that are pleasing to God. But does that involve actually going out into the world to use those Spirit-given gifts to proclaim the Kingdom of God? The Father didn’t send the Spirit just to make us feel warm and fuzzy. He sent the Spirit to empower his people for service and ministry. Pentecost wasn’t about feeling warm and fuzzy or about having nice feelings about God. It was about boldly proclaiming a message of salvation

through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The early Christians understood what it meant to be Easter people – to be people united with Christ in his Resurrection. But Jesus breathes on each of us too. To swim in your baptism, as Luther used to put it, means to live the Spirit-filled life. God fills each of us with his Spirit just as he did those disciples he breathed on as he commissioned them. Jesus empowered his disciples and said to them, “I send you.” And he does the same to each of us. Take those words in our Gospel lesson as if they were spoken to you.

This is where we start. We find our risen life in our risen Saviour. We have been joined with him and we find our spiritual food in him. When Christ died and rose from the dead he crushed the head of the Serpent. St. John described in his vision, how the angel chained that old Serpent, the Devil, and threw him into the pit. On the cross, Christ bought not only his victory, but our own, and now he sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he reigns over his Kingdom. His disciples huddled fearfully in that room with the doors and windows shut, fearing the world outside and what might happen to them if they showed their faces in Jerusalem. They didn’t realize that they had nothing to fear. Our Lord and Master is ruler over all and has won the victory for us. Too often we’re just like the disciples. Jesus says to each of us, “I send you,” but we’re afraid. We just need to remember that he reigns and that we have nothing to fear when we go out in his name. That was what drove those early Christians, even when they suffered martyrdom. They understood what it meant to be an Easter people. They understood what it meant to be citizens of God’s Kingdom. They knew what it meant for their Lord to have already won the victory. I’m reminded of the chorus of a popular hymn – it’s not a typical Anglican hymn – but I think the words really sum up the life we find in our risen Saviour:

O victory in Jesus,
My saviour forever,
He sought me and he bought me
With his redeeming blood;
He loved me ere I knew him,
And all my love is due him,
He plunged me to victory,
Beneath the cleansing flood.