

Scripture Readings & Sermon for Easter Sunday April 12, 2020

FIRST READING: ACTS 10:34-43

34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, **35** but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. **36** As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), **37** you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: **38** how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. **39** And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, **40** but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, **41** not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. **42** And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. **43** To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

EPISTLE: COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

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

HOLY GOSPEL: Matthew 28:1-10

28 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. **2** 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. **3** His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. **4** And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. **5** But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. **6** He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. **7** Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." **8** So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. **9** And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. **10** Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Sunday of the Resurrection

“As Above, So Below”

Colossians 3:1-4

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our epistle lesson for this day is short, sweet, and beautifully fitting. The contrast here is clear as day: The difference between things above and things below, that is, the difference between heaven and earth, the life of this world and the life of the world to come. The question is, what is above, what is below, and is there a relationship between them? The answer is yes, but its a strange one, unsurprising given how we Christians are and how we experience reality in a place like this. We are here, Jesus is there, but the tantalizing promise of Easter is that this separation, this sense of *dislocation*, will not last forever.

The epistle comes from Colossians, a letter which Paul writes to reassure people of the wisdom, foreknowledge, and power of God. If all of those things seem terribly obvious to you, you're right, they are. Our faith reassures us of God's power, we hardly need to be *convinced* that God is pretty smart, all powerful, and so on. But Paul isn't doing this because he thinks we – or the Christians at Colossae for that matter – don't know it. He's doing it to reassure the Colossians that God is strong enough to confront their numerous problems. Colossians is primarily directed at a specific heresy, but its kind of a weird zygote of a heresy, it doesn't really have a comparison with the modern era, so its hard to describe exactly what the heretics in question were getting wrong. The epistle deals with this, but it wasn't just heresy that was a problem for the Colossians. The church at Colossae was stuck in a town on the outs. The trade routes of the time moved away from Colossae, and the town was in sharp decline as a result. Think of all those towns that sprung up along the American railroads, before they pulled the tracks and moved elsewhere, and you have a good idea of the problem. Or those old stopovers on the blue highways before the

Interstates moved in. You get the picture. This was a stopover town that no one passing through anymore. The church wasn't doing well.

Here's what it says: **“3 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”** Again, this begs a question. What things? Well, Paul doesn't answer that question here, but we are not uninformed children of God, we Christians. Life and the Scriptures have taught us many answers of this question. Things above. Heaven and the joys of God's presence. Being free from sin, and the temptation to always go the wrong way or say the wrong thing. Freedom from the ambiguity of a world that loves its lies. No longer fearing death, the final lingering of it, and the separation that it brings. Going beyond *things*, we can think of numerous people. All the beloved brothers and sisters that lived and worked among us for so long that God has called to glory over the years. Parents, grandparents, friends... those that went ahead of us, the ones that are waiting for us in glory. They are, make no mistake, with Christ at the right hand of God.

Paul says that Christ has freed us to do just that. That's what Jesus came to do, to liberate us from slavery to the here and now, to this world. If it seems kinda harsh to call living in this world slavery, that's exactly what Paul calls it in Galatians, and indeed what Jesus Himself says to the Jews in Matthew. Sin is such an overpoweringly *limiting* thing, it restricts our view to today, tomorrow, here and now, these people and those people. We lose sight of the bigger picture when we work to earn our bread, raise our families, or try to enjoy the fruits of old age. This life demands so much of our time and attention its hard to listen to anything or anyone else. God knows this, and Paul says Jesus freed us from having to do that. We still have to do the things we do in this world, but we are free to hope, to yearn, for better. A better life. A better world. More than the everyday drudgery of wrestling with right and wrong, true and false, more than the loneliness of everyone we've lost and are mourning. We don't have just this to look forward to, we have something far better, and we can seek those things. Chase them. Work for them.

Working for salvation isn't exactly the Lutheran way, we all know that, but we can hope. We can try to do better. We can miss the people we've lost and feel frustration at the sins we still have to wrestle with. Jesus is such a relief because all of those things are tough enough, and Jesus spares us the need to have to worry about what our ultimate fate will be. Furthermore, Jesus is the one who creates the new, righteous Christian that lives inside us all. He is the one who lifts our eyes to look at the horizon, who yanks us out of our problems and promises us that better is coming.

“2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” This is an expansion on the promise, and the best intersection with Easter. Jesus died, and so have we. We died at the Baptismal font, drowned in a flood of God's grace. One day, our bodies will follow that death, and we will truly live. Jesus lives and the victory's won, but that victory is our victory, and one that He gives to us anew every day. All of this seems abstract, but it is not only true right now, it is in force right now. What I mean by that is that not only do you not have to be afraid of death, not only do you have heaven to look forward to, you have Jesus to remind you that He is still with you and that His promises are still real. Again, sin limits us so much. If we don't see it now, it isn't real to us. Jesus makes it real in us despite the fact that it isn't even here yet, and this starts with Easter. He dies so that when we die, we live. And that isn't only a fact we can be reminded of, it is something we re-do every time we hear His Word or eat and drink His Supper.

If this viral epidemic reminds us of anything, it reminds us of the incredibly brutal truth that this world that we love so well is not our true home. This world is so much a part of us that we're made from its raw material, God took the dust of the earth to build us. This world is all we know. But it isn't where we belong. We belong in the world to come. This world, we love it, but like an abusive lover, it keeps hurting us and killing us. Sin is the reason that is, and this virus reminds of all of that. It's so hard to imagine anything beyond our family, our friends, our community, our country, our life and work here. Jesus dares

us to imagine a world in true holy *glory*, a world of shining righteousness with no sin, no death, no pain, no sickness, and no fear.

That's our home, that's our world, you and I. That's what Jesus makes possible on His rising, and that is the end of the story that He writes for us both in shedding His blood and bursting free from the tomb. That world seems so far away, so impossible, sometimes it even seems dull and alien and foreign to us. But that world is given to us through Jesus' own flesh, we are part of it by being a part of Jesus' own kingdom. In setting our minds on things above, we aren't dolts walking around with heads in the clouds, like they used to say. We aren't cowards who can't handle how hard the world is, like the more hateful of our critics say. On setting our sights on things above, on the world to come, we're setting our sights on our true home. This world's pleasures and pains all pass away, but that world is eternal.

But we're still waiting, aren't we? Even worse now, we must wait alone, cut off from every measure that God Himself put in place to give us that support. But Christians have been waiting, alone and together, for a long time. We've been waiting for justice, waiting for sanity, waiting for everything we know is right to shine out again. We've been waiting to be proved right for a very long time, and it is entirely likely that we will wait for a long time to come.

But we do not wait alone, and we do not wait in vain, and Easter is proof positive of that. No matter what the skeptics hurl at us, no matter the indifference of so many people, no matter how little people seem to pay attention to the things we have to say, no matter what presumptuous scientists going way beyond their purview publish in their fancy books... no matter *any of that*, Christ has risen. Nothing can change that. No skeptic can explain that. No science can study it. Christ has arisen and He is alive, and we will give the glory, alleluia. If Christ has been raised, than everything we've trusted isn't a delusion, a pretend, it is real and it is coming and we just have to wait and pray and see what comes.

There's better out there. There's a better world than this. We will appear with Him in His glory, escorted by Him to our real home. This is a fancy hotel, and it has aching beauty, lots of fun things to do, and occasionally competent staff. But it isn't home. There is no substitute for home, I have found, and I call on you to remember that He is our true home and He is coming and it will be glorious. Christ has arisen. He will return. Wait for it. It'll be really something.

Amen.