

The First Sunday After Easter 2017

“Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” (1 St. John 5.4.)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Gospel does not say what the exact time was on that first Easter Sunday night. It simply states that it was evening. But we can imagine the scene: the followers of Jesus were assembled behind closed doors in fear. Naturally, they were afraid of being arrested and tortured and killed too. The chief priests had succeeded in getting permission from the Roman Governor to crucify Jesus; so, it only stood to reason that they would be next. It looked to them like the world – the world power of that day, the Roman Empire, and the world’s way of jealousy and lying and hatred – would win after all. There had been so much good, and so many signs of God’s Presence and authority, grace and truth – so many miracles – was it all for nothing?

It’s hard to say what the disciples were doing during that fearful time. No doubt some were praying; maybe others were just sitting quietly; maybe others were trying to connect with their families – we can only wonder; and, in the end, it doesn’t matter, because suddenly the Risen Lord appeared. He appeared, not as a vision and not as a ghost, but He appeared to them in Person. He took time to show them the wounds in His hands and side where the nails and the spear had been. In St. Luke’s version of this appearance, Jesus said, “Behold my hands and feet, that it is I myself: handle Me and see; for a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see Me have”.

But in addition to this evidence and assurance, the Lord spoke a very powerful Word to the disciples. He said, “Peace be unto you”. “Peace be with you”. Of all the things He could have said, that was it: “Peace be with you”. He did not say, “Pack your stuff, I’m going to get you out of here”. Nor did He speak about His experience in Hades, the territory of death. He simply said, “Peace be with you”. Then He added, “As my Father has sent Me, even so I send you.” He was definitely not there to organize an escape; on the contrary, He had come to assure them and to send them out with Good News: “The Christ was risen from the grave! Death had been overcome! And sins could now be cancelled!”

When you stop and think about it, that first meeting after the Resurrection, was like a spark that started a fire that has never gone out. The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, His appearances to the disciples over the next forty days, His Ascension into Heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – these mysterious, albeit true and powerful events have changed the world. Death has been changed from an ending to a beginning, from a pit to a door; Hope beyond Hope is real, and we are not alone in this world. God the Everlasting Trinity has come to dwell in each one of us, and in His Church, Himself, by the Holy Spirit.

The same man – St. John the Apostle – who recorded the Easter Sunday evening encounter in this morning’s Gospel also was inspired to write today’s Epistle, which begins like this: “Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world”. What does that mean – to be born of God? Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader, also asked that question. After Jesus told him that he needed to be born again in order to see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus asked, “How can a man be born when he is old?” Jesus said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. So to be born of God means to a spiritual birth – a birth by the Holy Spirit.

In his sermon on today’s Epistle, Martin Luther made this helpful comment: “Physical birth...answers for everything in the way of temporal possession and achievement, everything great, powerful, rich, wise and learned; in short, every exalted and desirable thing of earth. But all such possession and achievement serve only the physical existence; it is swept away by death...Hence becomes necessary a new and different birth, a birth more significant than that of the natural man....The demand is for a divine birth, a birth in which parentage is wholly of God: a birth signifying the operation of God’s divine power in man, a power achieving something beyond the attainment of his natural capacities and effecting in him new understanding and a new heart”.

That makes a lot of sense to me: death sweeps away all the material things we accumulate – even our greatest accomplishments are nothing after death. We need a new birth – a birth unto or into everlasting life – into the Way of God the Eternal Trinity and His perfect and holy Life. But as Luther goes on to say, “This is something impossible to our natural powers. You cannot make yourself of other parentage than you are. God must begin the work in you, communicating His seed

– His Word – by virtue of which the Holy Spirit operates in you, enabling you, by faith, to cling to the promise”.

“Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world”. You were born of God; you were born of water and the Holy Spirit when you were washed in the precious Blood of Christ in Baptism. Then, the Lord adopted you as His own child. Then He grafted you into His Body. Then His life became your life; His breath, your breath. Then, you began to live in Hope and by Faith. But for some, that new life – that new birth – is only lived briefly before they lay it aside and go back to the world. In order to continue in this new life, we must exercise faith. “This is the victory,” wrote St. John, “this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith”. And so St. Paul told the Church in Corinth, “We walk not by faith, not by sight”.

The emphasis today – just a week after Easter Sunday – is about the new life of the Resurrection which is ours to live now. Yes, Jesus’ rising from the grave gives us hope and promise for the future -- eternal life; but His Resurrection means something to us now. Through Him, we have been given new life – a different set of priorities. By His victory, Grace and Truth and Sacrificial Love are proved to be everlasting. No longer must we worry about conforming to this world. Our life is in Christ. We belong to God and our hope, our meaning, our purpose is in Him.

At the end of this morning’s Epistle, St. John says, “God has given to us eternal life; and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.” “Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith”.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!