

Easter Vigil
April 23, 2011

The story of salvation is sprinkled with momentous moments. There was the moment, lost in history, when a God who needed no one shaped a man and a woman in God's own image. There was the moment, captured in the Old Testament, when God chose for Godself a special people through whom "all the families of the earth would be blessed." There was the midnight when the very Son of the living God took our bone and blood from a Jewish girl. There was the dark afternoon when God-in-flesh "uttered a loud cry and breathed his last."

But marvelous as all these were – creation and covenant, crib and cross – they pale in comparison with this blessed night. They are preludes, acts in a divine drama that reaches its climax now. "He is not here. He has been raised." What is the Easter faith Matthew proclaims? In essence, it is surprisingly simple: Our Lord is alive. "He has been raised." Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are witnesses. They bear witness, not now to a dead Christ, not only to an empty tomb. They bear witness to a Christ who is alive. Jesus "meets them on their way and greets them." He touches their hearts, compelling them to proclaim to one and all, "He is alive!"

From then to now. What is the Easter message that 2000 years of Christian tradition have drawn from the Gospel? St. Paul says it clearly: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain... your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins." What our faith professes is a truth as thrilling as it is profound, a truth Jesus summed up at the Last Supper: "Because I live, you will live also."

"Because I live...." Across the centuries Christians have had to struggle against all sorts of efforts to water down the Easter gospel. We are told that Jesus is indeed alive, but only in our memories, or as a living example, or as a timeless inspiration, a powerful reminder of what we can be at our best. True, but not true enough. To be a Christian, you must take Matthew literally: "He has been raised." The Jesus who had died in agony on Friday was alive again on Sunday. Without so risen a Christ, without so living a Lord, Christianity is a sham and a scam.

“I live.” But that is only half the Christian story. “Because I live, you will live also.” The paschal mystery, the dying/rising of Jesus, is not simply something that happened one long weekend in the Middle East. Today’s reading from Romans puts it tersely in the context of life: “The death Christ died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

“Alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Only this makes sense of Calvary and Easter. That is why water is poured over three children tonight: that they might become Paul’s “new creatures,” transformed into the likeness of the risen Lord, alive with the very life of the risen Christ. That is why oil anoints their foreheads – in the shape, significantly, of a cross. To feed that very life, the Lord of life gives us the Bread of life. For “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” To pass that life on to another generation, husband gives to wife, wife to husband, the wedding gift of grace. And when our work is done, priestly hands anoint the senses to ease our passage, not from life to death, but life with God in time to life with God forever. “Because I live, you will live also.”

What might this blessed night say to us right now? One answer brings us back full circle to the Gospel. The two women hurried back to tell “his disciples.” They became apostles themselves, sent by angels to spread the good news, to share the glad tidings, to bear witness that the Lord Jesus had not only died but had been raised to life again.

And so for us – those newly born in baptism and those grown old in our faith. Baptism is a breath-taking gift. Baptism sends us out on mission, commissions us to bear witness, to testify to a whole world around us that is looking for the living among the dead: “He is not here.” As risen Christians, our life should bear witness to the risen Christ. He is with “the poor, with the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Examples are many, but time is pressing.

And so, my Easter prayer for all of us this sacred night: Live every hour... *every* hour. Live it “to God in Christ Jesus.” “Let Jesus Easter in us!”

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