

“He Will Swallow Up Death Forever”

“He will swallow up death forever” (Isaiah 25:8).

Christ is Risen! *He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!* Today, we stand together on this confession of first importance: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, (and) that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (I Corinthians 15:3-4). This is what we celebrate today! This is the heart of the Gospel! This is our hope for the future. This is the reason for our joy: Christ is Risen! *He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.*

After such a dramatic introduction, I have a confession to make. I spent the last week in Puerto Rico. For a pastor, spending the last week of Lent with your toes in water creates a certain level of cognitive dissonance and even a touch of guilt...but it was AWESOME! We were visiting my oldest daughter who has been studying in Puerto Rico all semester and she had full week planned for us. We explored historical sights and museums, we hiked through a rain forest, we shopped our way through old San Juan, and we hit four different beaches. Pretty rough, I know.

One of the beaches we visited is a well-known surfing beach called Crash Boat. It sits on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean and was used during World War II by the United States Air Force as a port for rescue boats. And the beach was beautiful! Vibrant blue water, tropical fish visible from the dock, and, just down the coastline, there were natural caves cut into the side of the rocky shore. The caves were about half-a-mile from our spot on the beach and so, after a few hours of soaking up the sun, we decided to check them out. As we drew near to the first cave, we came across a massive wreck sticking out of the water. Judging by its huge, rectangular, frame, it looked like the remains of a barge. We waded out to the rusty wreckage to get a closer look and what we saw made a profound impact on me. You see, over time, the constant pounding of the waves had completely smoothed out the rough edges of the iron frame. In certain places the iron had become paper thin and holes were beginning to form in the metal. This industrial behemoth was been transformed, almost as if nature was slowly swallowing up what man had made.

And this is what happens in nature. Things decay and decompose. We feel it in our bodies, and, every day, we see it in the world around us. There is nothing permanent in this life, and everything, even the most impressive and durable structures created by man, will someday be reclaimed and devoured. This is the way of the world. And this is exactly what the women expected to see as they made their way to the tomb.

Jesus had died. They heard Him speak his final words, they watched Him take his dying breath and they wept as His lifeless body was pulled from the cross and rushed into a tomb as the Sabbath began. Now, with the Sabbath over, they had come back to anoint the body. One last gesture of love, one final attempt to stay the course of decay that nature had already started. But death did not greet them. And decay is not what they found. Instead, the women were greeted by a young man; an angel sitting in the vacant tomb as if he had been waiting for them...and they were terrified. And you would be too! This is not what they expected to find. This was not the natural order of things. There was supposed to be a body, dead and decomposing, and instead they were met by a vision of life and this unbelievable message: “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen” (Mark 16:6).

No one saw this coming! As shocking as His death had been, *this* revelation attacked everything they knew to be true of the world. How could this possibly be? Their minds raced to make sense of the angel's words, and, even as he sent them away with a message for Peter and the other disciples about the Risen Christ, the women "fled from the tomb" trembling and astonished, and "they were afraid" (Mark 16:8).

Today, we need to recognize the extraordinary nature of the Resurrection of Jesus. *And it should astonish us!* It should shake us to the core and leave us quaking in our boots, and yet, in our limited and sinful minds, even as people who profess to be Christians, we rationalize and reason, we measure and minimize, we lean on metaphor and wax poetic, and, in all of our well-meaning attempts to define Easter, we turn the Resurrection into nothing more than a staid theological concept. The truth is, when we miss the physical and tangible, supernatural and miraculous aspects of the Resurrection of Jesus, *we miss everything!*

Writer, John Updike, expressed this danger in a poem entitled, "Seven Stanzas at Easter." He writes:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all / it was as His body; / if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules / reknit, the amino acids rekindle, / the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers, / each soft Spring recurrent; / it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled / eyes of the eleven apostles; / it was as His flesh: ours.

Updike understood that the physical, bodily Resurrection of Jesus stands as the foundation of our faith, or, as St. Paul said, it is the teaching of *first importance*, because here, in the historical, literal Resurrection of Jesus' body from dead, we see our future. Here, in the open and empty tomb, we place our hope. Here, in the angel's unexpected and inexplicable greeting, death has lost its power.

The Lenten season began on Ash Wednesday with the haunting proclamation: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return." This is God's word, taken straight from the curse in the Garden of Eden, and this word from God tells us the truth that "the wages of sin is death." This word from God affirms what we see in the world: that a wrecked ship disintegrates into the sea, that relationships end, that bodies break and die and decay...*but this is not the last word from God!* Today, God speaks to us again, and the word He speaks from His creating mouth is a word that heals; a word that justifies; a word that sanctifies; a word that saves; and it is a word that will one day raise us from the dead.

Without Easter, there *is* no meaning for our lives. Without Easter, we simply do the best we can and then turn back to dust. My friends, without Easter, we are, "to be pitied more than all men" (I Corinthians 15:13-14, 19). "But" Paul writes, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, (and He is) the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:20-22).

The Resurrection of Jesus means that death is not the end. The Resurrection of Jesus means that we too will rise! The Resurrection of Jesus means that, contrary to my experience on the beach, when we die, we will not simply be swallowed up and reclaimed by nature. Instead, we will have a future, and death will be no more. Or, as Isaiah writes, "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 25:7-8). And, my friends, today, this is the word the Lord has spoken: Christ is Risen! *He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.*

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold

Seven Stanzas at Easter

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.
It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.
The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.
Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.
The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.
And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.
Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

John Updike, 1960.