

THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

Mark 16:1-8

Christ Is Risen!

Christ is risen, and our sins are dead. Christ is risen, and death is buried. Christ is risen, and the dying are born again living. Christ is risen, and joy rolls away sadness. Christ is risen, and the cross is bronzed. Christ is risen, and hell is afraid. Christ is risen, and fear is cast into hell. Christ is risen, and tears of sorrow are converted to joy. Christ is risen, and the end becomes the beginning. Christ is risen, and the long-fruitless tree is ripe with figs. Christ is risen, and the Body of Christ is whole again.

"When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus." Do you see it? It mattered to them, even as their pastors sat on dour clerical derrieres trying to figure out how everything had gone so wrong, how Holy Week had been such a disaster. Their Master was dead, stinking dead, dead as dead can be, dead as the nails that pierced Him, and still, still they go, they go to anoint the lifeless Anointed One. They go "very early on the first day of the week," in other words, as soon as they could.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us, "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (6:19). That anchor is Christ. And just as the anchor must be thrown off the ship to steady it, so Christ had to be thrown into the grave, His death our life. When the anchor is lost, the ship drifts, not always quickly, but further and further nonetheless. And the slow drift is the most dangerous, because we notice when things move quickly. Everything seems fine at first. We still seem close to the coast. The winds seem manageable. But before we know it, we are in the deep waters, easy prey for the storms always looming on the horizon, drowning in our decisions, tossed by the waves of guilt, betrayed by the shifting winds of the moment. And suddenly, perhaps too late, we learn why the anchor matters. And the less we're in a habit, the easier it is to get out of it, the more oblivious we are to our drifting. The women weren't going to let go of that anchor no matter what, even if it all didn't make sense yet.

"And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed." They women never expected it. They went to see a dead Messiah, not an angel. They went to weep with sorrow, not joy. And isn't that how it happens? We don't expect much, and, bam, God smacks us upside our thick heads. He converts our tears, even as He converts our hearts. He grabs that guilt slowly eating away at your guts and throws it at the foot of the cross. He points out the danger you hadn't even considered and promises deliverance. He rolls over your doubts with the stone that sealed His tomb. He puts heaven on your lips, and for once you see what faith receives and not just what Pastor has in His hand, and you hear, "Given for you"—for you, precisely when you are keenly aware you're the last one to deserve it.

For once in Scripture, an angel sits. The angel, who had rolled away that imposing stone like a five-pound bowling ball, sits with nothing else to do. The war was won. The crucified was glorified. He sits on the right side, the side of the sheep, of the saints, of the repentant thief now residing in Paradise. He sits and waits for those who know what matters.

"Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him! But go, tell his disciples and Peter." The tomb offers that hard-to-find mulligan, the restart button of our time grace. The tomb, like the font, stands as a constant call to renewed repentance, to fresh grace. And so Peter, who had especially let down his Lord, will run especially quickly to the tomb, to receive anew with reinvigorated vigor what he had foolishly taken for granted before. Whatever had kept Peter from the tomb before, whether shame or fear, a second chance with a risen Savior set him to a sprint, because, just as the cross kills our sin, the tomb brings a new man to life. And why should we be too far behind old Peter?

"There you will see him, just as he told you." The Father told you so in the very beginning. Abraham told you so. Moses told you so. Joshua told you so. Job told you so. David told you so. Isaiah told you so. Countless others told you so. And Jesus told you so. He couldn't have been clearer. He

would be crucified and rise again. Nothing here is a surprise, even if it is surprising. None of this should come as a shock, even if it is shocking. He told you so, and He doesn't lie, and there is nothing that can stand between Him and His promises. Jesus' words are money in the bank, so invest in them. Jesus' words are good as done, so never be done with them.

Clovis was the King of the Franks during the fifth and sixth centuries AD. At that time, they were still considered barbarians, and rightly so. He and his warriors were known for their brutal effectiveness. They turned rivers blood red, faces deathly white, and cities charcoal black. The story goes that, when Clovis, a pagan at the time, was first told of the story of the crucifixion of Christ, he clutched his battleaxe, rose in astonishment and anger, and vowed, flush with emotion, "If I had been there with my Franks!"

And it is easy to feel that way. It is easy to assume Christ was some helpless victim. But He wasn't. He was an innocent Victim, but He was not helpless. No one took His life from Him. He laid it down of His own accord. Had He wanted, He could have summoned legions of angels to His side. Christ was not vanquished. No, He was the Vanquisher sent to set the vanquished free, to turn the tree of His humiliation into the very sign of our exaltation and His triumph.

It is interesting that one of the reasons why Clovis had at first been reluctant to convert to Christianity was that he had listened to his wife, and, well, we all know how that works out (☺). While still a pagan, he allowed his wife, who was already a Christian, to baptize their son, probably not much different than those indifferent husbands that shrug and let their pious wives have their way to avoid an argument or nagging. Unfortunately, the child died eight days later. What God would let those baptized into His name die in such a way? Yet, as Clovis sulked and raged, his wife, Clotilda, rejoiced that God had allowed her to carry a son who would so quickly see the joys of heaven.

While we may not get any good ideas for names from this account, we do have a wonderful Easter lesson. Sometimes loss is gain. Sometimes defeat is victory. Sometimes weakness is strength. Sometimes death is life. Sometimes, that is, when Christ is at the center, on His cross and not in His tomb. Isn't that why we call what seemed to be the worst Friday Good Friday? Isn't that why we sing of death at Christian Baptisms and life at Christian funerals? Isn't that why we don't cringe at the wounds of our crucified King, but, rather, take refuge in them? Isn't that why we commemorate the martyred saints, not on the day they were born, but on the day they lost their heads to gain a crown? Isn't that why we put crosses in cemeteries full of tombs that will one day be emptied?

When Clovis was going to be baptized, he entered the church with the local bishop as the Psalms were being chanted. Clovis turned to the bishop and asked if they had entered already the kingdom of heaven. The bishop replied, "No, but it is the beginning of the way to it."

This is the beginning of the way to heaven. By the cross, "It is finished." The angel sits casually, the war being won. By the empty tomb, "It is begun." The angel announces new life and a new start for those who had abandoned Jesus. By your Baptism, these events have become your events. Dead to sin through His death, this is your new day, the first day of eternal life. It is begun, and let us not be finished until we reach the finish line, "pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3).

We need not wish we'd stopped Christ's crucifixion. He was not losing His life. He was gaining ours. We need not be alarmed at Christ's resurrection. He had told us it would happen, and made sure the stone was rolled away that we might see it. Do not be afraid. Do not be alarmed. Do not mourn death when you can celebrate life. Do not hold tight to sins when you can take hold of forgiveness. While this is just the beginning, you are on the way.

Jesus lives, and He lives just as He died: for you. "This joyful Eastertide Away with sin and sorrow! [Our] love, the Crucified, Has sprung to life this morrow. Had Christ, who once was slain, Not burst His three-day prison, Our faith had been in vain: But now is Christ arisen, arisen, arisen; But now is Christ arisen" (CW 160, v. 1). Amen.