

Words to Remember – Words to Believe

In the name of him who conquered death for us, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Today we celebrate what is for all Christians the highest of the high holy days: the day of Jesus' resurrection. His rising again to life after his violent and bloody death and three days in a tomb is the proof that his sacrifice was accepted and that full atonement for our sins was accomplished on the cross. His resurrection is God's own stamp of approval on what Jesus did for us to obtain our salvation. It shows that we who believe and trust in him now stand in his righteousness before God. And it also is our guarantee that when we pass through the gate of death, it will not be able to hold us, and that we too will rise and live again forever.

Because of all this, the death and resurrection of Jesus is the single most important truth of Christianity. St. Paul says exactly that in today's Epistle reading when he writes: "*If only in this life we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*" Some of the members of the church at Corinth were saying that being a Christian was all about the here and now – about living the good life in this world. They didn't believe in the resurrection from the dead. They didn't believe Jesus rose, and they didn't believe they would either. Paul is telling them, "If that's what you think, then people ought to pity you for being such a fool; because the Christian life in this world means carrying a cross, it means suffering, it means looking out for the good others more than for yourself. That's just dumb if there's no resurrection from the dead. You might as well live it up now and sin to your heart's content." But then he says, "No, in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." He means, "Jesus did rise, which means you certainly will too."

And the reason I want to emphasize this is that these days there are a lot of people who want to deny this most basic truth of the faith. Now, some of them are outspoken critics of Christianity—and to be quite frank, I really don't care what *they* think. I rather expect them to be opposed to fundamental Christian truths. Between them and us there is a great gulf fixed (in more ways than one). But at least the lines are clearly drawn: we believe Jesus rose from the dead; they do not.

What concerns me far more are those within the Christian Church who insist that it's necessary for us to rethink our understanding of what the death and resurrection of Jesus really means. These are people who, like some of the members at the church at Corinth, say they are committed to the teachings of Jesus, and the ideals of love, forgiveness, and peace he proclaimed. But they also believe that it's not reasonable to expect the enlightened, scientific mind of modern man to adhere to the silly notion that the brutally mangled, cold corpse of Jesus returned to life. They say that for the teachings of Jesus to continue to have an impact on today's increasingly more educated and sophisticated people, we must discard ancient myths about a physical resurrection.

They teach that we must understand instead that those poor, ignorant, early disciples of Jesus were completely devastated by his execution by the Romans. But they were so moved by his enlightened teachings that they had to come up with a way to speak of how the things he said and the life he lived continued to inspire them in the present. This influence was so profound that they lacked an adequate way to express it,

and so they began to speak of him as if he were still among them. In that sense, they started to say that he had risen from the dead—indeed, that he could never die again as long as his people remembered the wonderful things that he taught them.

Unfortunately, the story goes, even though all the first Easter Christians understood that Jesus had not *really* risen from the dead in a physical sense when they spoke of him as if he had, later generations of Christians became confused. They started actually believing the story *as it was told* instead of the shadowy true meaning behind the story. And then, much later, after this mistaken idea had become a widely held dogma, in order to make sense of the whole event, why Jesus died and came back to life, they came up with the whole idea of a sacrificial death to atone for sin—which, of course, is clearly nonsense, and far removed from the true message of Jesus which was about “doing unto others” and “loving your neighbor” and so on. And so, we’re told, as twenty-first century Christians, it’s precisely to keep the true Jesus alive that we must forget about his bodily resurrection, because if we continue to insist that the scientifically impossible happened, Christianity will not be taken seriously, and the teachings of Jesus will soon be forgotten. When that happens, they say, Jesus will really be dead.

And how I wish I were speaking of a few small, obscure, and insignificant breakaway cults that are promoting these ideas; but that’s not the way it is. My friends, this is what many so-called “mainline Christian” denominations are teaching right now. And the trend is moving increasingly in that direction. It is, at least in part, what the battles in our own Synod were about in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. And to be fair, we have to admit that those who promote such views sincerely believe that they are helping to preserve the church by making it relevant to the modern mind. They believe that they are keeping Jesus alive. Nevertheless, we pray that God will deliver us from those who take it upon themselves to save Jesus from dying again. Somehow, I’m pretty sure he can manage it all by himself.

And in this morning’s Gospel reading we find that the first century disciples of Jesus were not as ignorant, unscientific, or unsophisticated as some today would have us believe. It’s true that there are things about the way the world works that they didn’t know, or that they thought they understood and had wrong. This has been true of all people of all ages—including today. It’s also true that some of the things they believed were pretty strange: we would find it hard to believe some of the things that were taken as common-sense facts back then. Then again, most modern scientific minds believe that the universe in which we live sprang suddenly out of nothingness on its own accord, and that somewhere along the line it caused all the complex circumstances, interactions, and functions that grew into life purely by accident. It makes me wonder if we are getting smarter or more stupid. No, strike that. I don’t have to wonder: the answer is pretty obvious. In any case, the point I’m trying to make is that the idea of a body coming back to life three days after having been brutally tortured to death was as difficult to believe in the first century as it is today. Doubting the physical resurrection of Jesus is nothing new. The record is clear: disciples did not believe it either—not at first, anyway.

We read that the women went to the tomb very early in the morning. It was important for them to do what had to be done to finish the rushed burial the Friday before while it was still cool. That’s because yesterday was the Sabbath and they were not allowed to do such work then. If they waited too much longer today, the task would be made substantially more unpleasant by the increasingly strong smell of decay: it was, after all, the third day, and Palestine has a very warm climate. What it means though is

that these women were expecting to find a body that had begun to decompose. The notion that Jesus could be alive never entered their minds. They went to the tomb to finish burying the body of a friend.

And we know that it was a very fine tomb: one freshly hewn out of the solid limestone. A very wealthy man who intended it to be his own family tomb had commissioned the work. And let me tell you, the ancients knew how to build tombs. The Greek word for tomb used in the Scripture is one derived from the same root as the word “remember” or “memory”; and that’s what a tomb was for: to help people remember a person who has passed away. Some of the most spectacular structures that survive from the ancient world are the tombs of very important people—at least, people who were important in their own day. A lot of remarkable tombs stand as memorials to people we know nothing about—proving that a good tomb is much more durable than the human memory. Makes you wonder, though: if the first Easter Christians were really interested in keeping the memory of poor dead Jesus alive, as the modern theologians insist, why didn’t they build a magnificent shrine on the place where he was buried? Surely that would’ve been the best way to ensure that he was remembered.

Why not? Well, it’s because when the women got to the tomb, they didn’t find what they were expecting. There was no partially decayed body lying buried in the carved-out chamber. No, they were surprised to find the tomb open. And when they looked inside, they found that it was *empty*. They were mystified. They didn’t know what it meant. Had his body been stolen? Did some of our people take it? Had the religious authorities who called for his death taken it to further desecrate it? Did the Romans take it for some unknown reason?

They weren’t left in the dark very long. Two angelic messengers appeared, their presence beaming glorious light into the gloomy tomb. The women’s confusion gave way to terror. They fell to the ground in fright; they lie there on the ground trembling. The angels have a mild rebuke for these women: “What are you doing here? Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Don’t you remember what he told you ...?” There’s some beautiful irony here. They were here among the “memorials” to “remember” their fallen teacher—but they didn’t remember the very things he had taught them. What good does it do to remember Jesus if you do not remember what he said? It’s a good question for all those modern Christians who don’t believe in the resurrection.

“He told you weeks ago when you were still in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again’.” This was part of Jesus’ plan. He had told them this was going to happen several times; but their own preconceived notions about how things could and should be kept crowding out the true meaning of what he kept telling them. Their own very practical and scientific minds couldn’t accept the resurrection of Jesus. Sound familiar?

“And then they remembered his words.” “Oh yeah ... he did say all that, didn’t he?” And when they remembered what Jesus had said, it all made sense. It was when they looked back on what had already been said that they believed in the resurrection of Jesus. It’s fascinating to me that Jesus himself does not make a physical appearance in the readings chosen for this Easter morning. Did you notice that? The women who went to the tomb believe in the resurrection not because they saw him (they didn’t!), but because they *remembered* what he had told them. It’s equally fascinating that as Luke’s Gospel continues from this point, Jesus *does* show up in the flesh—but the people who

see him do not recognize him. I'm speaking of the Emmaus disciples. They too think Jesus is still dead, and even though they are looking right at him and talking with him, because their minds are closed to the possibility of his resurrection, they do not really see him. Nor does Jesus reveal himself to them by saying, "Hey, cheer up fellows, it's me! I rose from the dead." Instead he takes them on a tour through the Old Testament Scriptures to show them what had already been written about the Christ. He caused them to *remember* what the prophets had said: how it was for the very purpose of dying for the sin of mankind and rising again that he came into the world. It was only after they *remembered* what was written that they believed in his resurrection. And only then did Jesus reveal himself to them.

And so, based on all that has been said, on this day that we celebrate the resurrection of our living Lord and Savior there are two points I'd like to highlight. The first is that the search for the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection cannot be found in modern, scientific theories. There is simply no way to make the truth of what happened fit comfortably within the realm of human experience or expectation. What happened was out of the ordinary. It was not expected—not even by those who were told what to expect. The true answers lie in the ancient promises of God who created the world and, when it fell into sin and death, began to disclose his plan to redeem it by sending his own Son to pay the price of atonement. That's where faith in the resurrection of Jesus begins: The Old Testament understanding that we were sinners who were condemned to die, and that God himself planned, prepared, and executed a great salvation for us. To understand and believe in Jesus, we must do it according to the Scriptures, otherwise, like the disciples who heard the women's report, and enlightened skeptics today, the whole story will seem like nonsense to us.

The second point is that Jesus did rise from the dead just as he said he would, and he lives today. And he reveals himself to those who believe in his death for their sin and his resurrection for their justification. He shows himself to us in the words he spoke. It's by remembering what he said that we see him here among us. Through his words also he appears to us in the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. These appearances of Jesus come through faith in God's Word—which is much more certain than anything you might see with your own eyes. Your eyes can deceive you, as the Emmaus disciples found out; but God's Word never can.

And to those who do remember his words and see him by faith, Jesus has promised to appear again in glory. We eagerly look forward to that day; but while we wait, we continue to focus our attention on the words of Jesus, remembering what he said; and we boldly proclaim to the doubting world that very much needs to hear the truth: Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

Soli Deo Gloria!