

Delivered from Death

In the name of him whom the jaws of death could not hold, dear friends in Christ: Well, at long last we've come it: the celebration that sets Christianity apart from – and I'd say head and shoulders above – all the other religions in the world. It's the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus, the unshakable truth that on the third day after his brutal death by crucifixion, the tomb of the Lord Jesus was found open and empty, angels announced his return to life, and he himself was seen and touched by, and even dined with, his astonished disciples. There's no parallel in any other system of faith the world has to offer. Other religions can give certain advice for coping, maxims to live by, rules that lead to stability, vague hopes for a brighter tomorrow – some of which can actually help their adherents manage to get by on a day to day basis; but they don't deal honestly with the biggest issue we all face: death. The grave. That looming shadow on the horizon we're all heading for – or maybe that's coming for us unexpectedly, for you never know when it may strike. Our Christian faith meets that threat head on and points to the risen Lord Jesus and says, "There's the answer. There's the proof. There's the guy who beat death and showed his victory by rising again in the flesh" and then tells you how you too can be delivered from death by your relationship with this living Lord Jesus Christ. I can't speak for anyone else; but in this world so full of sorrow and confusion and strife and fear and conflicting claims, if nothing else I want to take my stand with the guy who demonstrated his mastery over death and promises to deliver me from the same. That's the guy I want to listen to. That's the guy I want to learn to know better.

I expect that you do too. So let's do that – let's learn to know him in the way that he taught us to. You may remember that when the risen Lord Jesus journeyed with the two disciples who were headed to Emmaus on the afternoon of that first Easter Sunday, he didn't walk up to them and say, "Hey Fellas, look: it's me, Jesus! I've risen from the dead!" No, instead it says "their eyes were kept from recognizing him". They didn't know it was Jesus. They were unable to identify him by sight. That isn't how Jesus chose to show himself to them. Instead, he takes them on a tour of the Old Testament Scriptures, revealing to them how his life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection were all laid out in minute detail in the writings of Moses and prophets. All along he'd been there right before their eyes in the pages of Scripture – they'd just never seen him before. But when he opened the Scriptures to them by explaining how it was all about the Christ, it was like the scales fell from their eyes. And that's how Jesus reveals himself to us even today. Not by walking up and showing himself like he did to the eye witnesses of his resurrection that are listed in today's Epistle lesson; but rather in the writings of Moses and the prophets and, in our day, in the writings of the apostles too.

And this is precisely what we've been doing on Wednesday evenings in this year's series of Lenten devotions. We've been learning to see the life and ministry of Jesus specifically in the writings of the prophet Daniel. And we've seen many direct connections between the lives of these two men. Just in a general sense, we saw how both were caused to suffer because of the sins and unfaithfulness of others, how both were made to be servants, and how the suffering and service of both ultimately made things better and more secure for the people of God who would later follow in their footsteps.

But to be a bit more specific, the other evening, on Good Friday in particular, we saw a number of uncanny parallels between the trial, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus and the events that led to Daniel's being entombed, as it were, in the den of hungry lions. Both men were the

objects of the jealousy and resentment of their enemies. The enemies of both sought and failed to find grounds to have them condemned by legitimate means. No one could find fault with either man. Both were then subjected to sham trials on trumped up charges, and they were condemned because of their faithfulness to the Lord and his truth. Neither man spoke in his own defense, entrusting themselves completely to the hands of God. In both trials, the judges fought hard to have the accused released and failed to do so. In both trials, the accused were ultimately convicted (falsely) of high treason. Both men were sentenced to death. Both at sunset on the days of their trials, were placed inside dark caves whose openings were closed with heavy stones and official seals to keep them inside. And the enemies of both men were glad when it was done; they thought they'd forever done away with the man they hated so much. In all these details, we see how the life and ministry of Jesus is pictured and prefigured by Daniel.

And as I'm sure you've noticed by now, the parallel trail of connections continues in this morning's readings; but there are some surprising contrasts as well. Both accounts begin in the early morning. People are heading to the respective "tombs". In Daniel's case it's Darius the king, the man who was so reluctantly forced to condemn his faithful servant. After suffering a long night in guilt and mental torment, he's hoping against hope that Daniel is still alive – that the God in whom Daniel placed his trust was able to deliver him from the jaws of death. The irony of it is that Darius himself is a pagan who worships idols. He doesn't know or trust in the God of Israel. And then we have the women heading to the tomb of Jesus. They too have been suffering mental anguish. They do believe in the God of Israel (well, kind of). But even though Jesus repeatedly told them that he would die and rise again on the third day, they don't believe that. They have no hope. Their certain expectation is that Jesus is still very much dead. So isn't it interesting that it's the pagan man who shows more faith than the believers – even if it isn't very much?

Both parties then receive the good news. Daniel, still very much alive, calls out to Darius from inside the lion's den, "My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me because I was found blameless before him." Darius, for his part, receives the good news with great joy. The women also hear the good news, which is delivered by an angel, "Don't be afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples ... that he is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him even as he told you." They receive this happy message not with great joy; but rather with fear. "They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

And then in both accounts comes the great reversal. Daniel's enemies, once so proud of their triumph over their adversary, have the tables turned on them. They are cast to the lions along with their families, and there aren't any heavenly angels protecting them. They're Persian lion chow now. They and their lines of descendants are cut off forever. And while it's not explicit in this morning's Gospel text, what this is illustrating is how Christ by his resurrection overcomes his enemies, namely Satan, the power of sin, and death. By his death for sin, these become clawless lions whose mouths are forever shut. They can no longer harm him. And eventually they too will be cast into hell forever.

But the thing I really want to stress is that both men, Daniel and Jesus, have been delivered by God from death – and that in neither case is it only an individual victory. Let me give you a little history here to explain what I mean. Fairly early in the lifetime of Daniel, the nation of Judah was completely destroyed by the armies of Babylon. For over 40 years, God's people had no land of their own. Because of their unfaithfulness, the Lord had cast them out of

the Promised Land. The only survivors were a group of some 20 thousand or so exiles who had been relocated into penal camps in what is Iraq today. They were prisoners. They had no prospects. They had no ability to free themselves; and even if they did, they had no homeland to which to return. It had been handed over to others. But they couldn't even think about it, because the mighty empire that held them in captivity had no intentions of ever letting them return. And so it was only a matter of time before they became assimilated with their pagan surroundings and they were lost forever as a separate and discernible group of people. As a nation, they were as good as dead.

But something changed that. In God's providence the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians, who established their own empire in its place. And the king of Persia, whom we know as Cyrus or Darius the Mede – the same man who had Daniel cast into the lions' den – issued a decree in 538 BC that called for the rebirth of the Jewish nation. He sent the exiles home with the authority to reestablish their own country and rebuild the Temple of the One, True, Living God. He even supplied funds to help pay for the project. Nothing like that had ever been done in world history. And I ask you, why would a pagan king like him ever do such an unprecedented thing? The answer is simple. He knew Daniel. He saw him delivered from death. It made a powerful impression on him. And no doubt Daniel used his vastly heightened influence with Darius to convince him that this was the right thing to do. But after seeing what happened to Daniel, how his God rescued him from the lions, my guess is that he didn't need a lot of convincing. The point is, though, that Daniel's "resurrection" led directly to the resurrection of the entire Jewish nation.

And like so many other details of the life of Daniel, this was a picture of things to come that would be fulfilled in a much greater sense by Jesus Christ. His resurrection from the dead is not for him alone. No, it's for us and for all the people of God. Just as his death was for our sin – to pay the debt we all owed – so also his resurrection is for us. And just as God the Father accepted his sacrifice on our behalf and delivered his Son from death and the grave, so also we who trust in Christ will be delivered forever from the bonds of death. Christ defeated death for all of us: some, like him, will be raised from their graves; and others, who are alive at his coming, will be changed to immortality without ever having tasted death. But either way, he will deliver us all from death. And we will live forever with him in the eternal Promised Land. It was prefigured by Daniel, and it will be fulfilled by Christ. And that, my friends, is reason to celebrate; which is why we say:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed. Alleluia!] Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!