

Isaiah 25:

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 •

Acts 10:34-43 •

John 20:1-18

Sermon for Easter Sunday, 2021

AN EASTER MESSAGE OF PRAISE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

What is the most important thing that ever happened to you? Was it some physical trauma, was it getting married, was it getting divorced, was it having children, hitting the lottery, recovering from cancer, writing a novel, being elected President, graduating from college, winning the Super bowl, learning to read? The answer to all those suggestions is no, none of them is the most important thing in your life or anyone else's life. The most important thing that ever happened to anyone and everyone is being born, because without being born, nothing else could ever happen.

As being born is the most important element of anyone's life, so the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most important event of the Christian religion, the religion established and tasked with the responsibility to convey the Gospel truth to the world. It is the cornerstone upon which the earthly kingdom of God is built, and every one of our Biblical authors bears witness to that fact. Our lectionary selection this morning from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians bears ample witness to the centrality of the resurrection to that early preaching. Let me repeat part of it:

15:3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,

15:4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,

15:5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

15:6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time,

most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

15:7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

15:8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

The book of Acts records what was probably a template for the message that Peter would deliver to his audiences as he carried the Gospel around Israel and then to the rest of the known world, culminating in Rome. Here's the relevant portion:

10:36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all.

10:37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:

10:38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

10:39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;

10:40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,

10:41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

10:42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

It is the same message we preach today, and we can be grateful to those early ambassadors of Christ for establishing that model, because without them and their example, none of us would ever have heard of Jesus.

And why did they make it the central assertion of their proclamation? Because it was the single event that changed them from what they had been, lost and frightened and hopeless, and changed them into what they became, the first enlightened and fearless and gloriously confident children of the earthly kingdom of God.

Our psalm reading for today is taken from psalm 118, and you will have recognized that selection from the psalm with which we often open our Sunday service in salutation:

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The Psalmist in this beautiful passage gives us a representation of the risen Christ when he speaks of the gate of the Lord, for the resurrected and living Christ Himself is that gate, the narrow gate we may enter through and give thanks to the Lord, the gate that has become our salvation. The resurrected and living Christ is our entryway into the inner sanctum of the temple, into the holy of holies, into the presence of the living God. The resurrected and living Christ is the Way, the truth and the eternal life of God. He is our Alpha and Omega, our Song of Songs, the house not built on sand, the river of living water, the rock of our salvation. He is the bread of life and the wine of our salvation. He is the everlasting arms of our loving God.

To the author of the fourth gospel we owe the great record of the very first person to see the resurrected Christ, and that episode really contains the very essence of what that resurrection means for us and for the whole world.

Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb very early that first Easter morning, bringing the ointments to consecrate the dead body of Jesus in its tomb, because there had not been time to provide a proper burial on Friday after the crucifixion. To her astonishment, she discovers the circular stone that had sealed the tomb had been rolled away, and she runs back to the upper room to tell the other disciples, who are gathered together in fear and despair in the upper room. Peter and another disciple, almost certainly John himself, run to the cave and discover it empty. Not knowing what that means, they return in confusion to their homes.

Mary, having followed after them, thereupon arrives alone at the tomb. She looks inside and sees two men who tell her that Jesus is no longer there. She thinks they are telling her that the body has been removed and taken elsewhere, and she turns away in tears because she doesn't know where to go now to provide the final honor to her crucified master.

And now we learn of perhaps the most poignant moment in all of scripture. She sees someone standing in front of her, but blinded by her tears, she assumes it is a graveyard worker. They exchange a few words, and then she turns back to the tomb in despair. And then the man behind her says her name: Mary. She turns, and

this time sees him clearly. “Teacher,” she cries out, and now all her fear and hopelessness are gone, because she sees him, her Lord, her Savior, the fulfillment of all her hopes and the living proof of eternal life.

That exact movement, that turning away from hopelessness and despair to the joyous recognition of eternal life, is the experience of every Christian since that fateful morning.

Hear again the words of the Apostle Paul, in his description of that moment, of that meaning, in the life of every Christian. Still writing to the Corinthians, Paul says:

1Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, and in which you stand firm. 2By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

3For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5and that He appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve. 6After that, He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8And last of all He appeared to me also, as to one of untimely birth...

... if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is worthless, and so is your faith.... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19If our hope in Christ is for this life alone, we are to be pitied more than all men.

20But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.(1 Cor. 15)

That, my friends is what we receive and what we preach on this Easter morning. Death is not the end, death has no dominion. We turn from despair to joy, we turn from worldly loss to heavenly reward, we turn from the barrier of the earthly stone to the gate of our righteousness, from defeat to victory, from the dark gloom of the tomb to the bright and shining star of our salvation.

For Christ is not dead, he is risen. He is risen indeed.

And so our Easter prayer this morning, like our Easter message, heavenly Father, is a prayer of gratitude. We thank you for the testimony of those first witnesses; we

thank you for the joyful assurance with which they went out into the world to proclaim the good news; we thank you for the multitudes of saints who have carried that witness down through the ages, even unto this morning. And we thank you for this blessed little church in Gaines, where we today join their number in celebrating the resurrected life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose precious name we offer this prayer of grateful remembrance. Amen.