

"From the First Easter to the Last Day"

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

November 23, 2014

Last Sunday of the Church Year

The concentration camp at Dachau was liberated on a Sunday in April 1945. It is said that one week later, Greek and Serbian Orthodox prisoners celebrated Easter in the camp barracks. Priests wore makeshift vestments over their blue and white striped prison uniforms. They sang the liturgy, read the Scriptures, and even recited a sermon by St. John Chrysostom – all without written texts, all from memory. During the long years of suffering and anguish in this hell on earth, these prisoners had never forgotten Christ's resurrection victory over death and that it had set them free from death. No matter how bad their situation got, they were confident that Easter meant something more was coming for them. Today, a Russian Orthodox chapel at the Dachau memorial houses an icon of the resurrected Christ leading the prisoners out of the camp gates.

For us, every Sunday is to be a celebration of Easter, of Christ's glorious victory over sin and death. This is especially true on this Last Sunday of the Church year because this Last Sunday, pointing us to the Last Day, shows us where that first Easter was heading.

While our situation, as bad as it might be at times, is nowhere close to being the same as those prisoners in Dachau, there are similarities. We, like they, were headed in the same direction – toward death. Our text for today explains why, "By a man came death....in Adam, all die." Adam brought death and corruption into God's perfect creation by his sinful rebellion. This not only affected Adam and Eve. Our text says that all who are "in Adam", that is, connected to Adam, share in his sin and its punishment of death. Well, that includes everyone because every single person, by virtue of his or her physical birth, is connected to Adam, shares in his sin, and is, from the time of his or her birth, marching from the cradle to the crypt. All are headed to death.

Easter has turned it all around. Having died as a once-and-for-all sacrifice, sufficient to make payment for all sin of all people for all time, Jesus did not remain dead. To those in Corinth who doubted the reality of life after death and to those today who do the same, Paul is very emphatic when he says, “But *in fact* Christ has been raised from the dead.” This is an accomplished fact. We need never doubt this. This is great good news!

But in what way? Sometimes, I think we view Jesus’ resurrection as good news for him. “Way to go! Good for you, Jesus! You died, came back to life, and live forever! That’s great!” Is that where the first Easter is headed? Toward the celebration of a personal accomplishment on Jesus’ part?

Not at all. Our text is not really about Jesus’ resurrection. It is about what this first Easter means to us and where it is leading us. Our text calls Jesus’ resurrection “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” In ancient Israel, “firstfruits” were the first crops to come out of the ground. And while they were the first to grow, they were by no means the last to grow. The people of Israel were to offer the first crops to come out of the ground as a sacrifice to God, knowing that these were only the first crops. Even though they couldn’t see the other crops yet, they knew for sure that an entire harvest was yet to come.

When Jesus’ resurrection is called the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”, it means that, while Jesus is the first one to be raised from the dead, he is by no means the last. Jesus is not alone in the resurrection of the dead. There is an entire harvest yet to come. Jesus was raised from the dead as a promise that those who have “fallen asleep” (that is, have died) will be resurrected, too.

Who is this crop of “resurrectees”? We must answer that question carefully. All people will be resurrected. That’s the Last Day, Judgment Day, the focus of this Last Sunday of the Church Year. You heard about it in our Gospel reading: all people who have ever lived gathered before Christ for judgment. Some will receive eternal life in heaven. Some will receive eternal death in hell. What makes the difference?

Paul says, “By a man has come the resurrection of the dead..in Christ shall all be made alive.” Those who are “in Christ” – connected to Him – will be made alive. Just as all people who are connected to Adam and his sin by virtue of their birth will receive death, so also all people who are connected to Jesus and His righteousness by virtue of their new birth will receive life.

In your baptism, you were born again. You were joined to Christ. And, while your connection to Adam means your body will die, your connection to Christ means your body will be resurrected to life forever. The wicked, the unbelievers, all those who are not “in Christ”, will hear Christ say to them on that day, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” But you, who have received forgiveness for all of your sins by Jesus’ death on the cross, who have received the gift of faith by the working of the Holy Spirit, who have been united with Christ in your baptism, will hear Christ say to you, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

THEN will come the end. Jesus will destroy all of the evil enemies who have plagued us throughout our earthly lives and made life miserable for us. What a day that will be for us! Jesus has already defeated sin and its grip on us when He died on the cross. When He comes again, Jesus will destroy every rule, authority, and power, both spiritual and physical. The devil and all his demonic forces will be defeated once and for all. They shall never have power over us again. Finally, “the last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death is the “last fruits” – the final and ultimate consequence of and punishment for sin. Christ, the firstfruits of life has changed the end of this story. In His resurrection, we are resurrected to life. At that point, death is done, over, destroyed, never to touch us or any other Christian ever again.

Is this where the first Easter is leading us? Almost. Christ will turn over the kingdom to God the Father. The mission, begun in the Garden of Eden with a tree – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and a promise to Adam and Eve and finished on a tree – the tree of the cross – with the death of the Son of God and a promise of life and salvation, is now completed in the resurrection.

Every need of God's people in a fallen world has been met. Every enemy in the universe has been conquered and destroyed. Christ will lay it all at the Father's feet.

Then all things will once again be as they were in the beginning in the Garden of Eden. God will be all in all. Will we need food, clothing, or shelter? No, we will have God. Will we need love, comfort, or relationships? No, we will have God. Will we need protection, healing, or deliverance? No, we will have God. And having God will be enough.

This is where the first Easter has been leading us. From the grave of Jesus Christ to His resurrection. From our graves to our own resurrections in Him. From the first day of perfection in the Garden to the Last Day of perfection again in Paradise. From temporary death to eternal life. All of this because of Jesus. He is the firstfruits of all those have fallen asleep. His victory over death on Easter gives us certain hope in our own resurrection and eternal life with God on the Last Day. May you never see Easter only as a spring holiday to be celebrated and then to be put back on the shelf for another year. Instead, see Easter as an ongoing way of life now which will be joyfully fulfilled on the Last Day. Therefore, we can say, as we do on Easter and as we will on the Last Day: Christ is Risen! (He is risen indeed, alleluia) And we, too, shall be raised! Amen.