

Sons and Daughters of the Eighth Day

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: April 9, 2023

Readings

Matthew 28.1-10

Opening

Many of you know that watching documentaries is one of my favorite pastimes. Within this genre, I have a particular interest in sports documentaries. Emily gets lured in, as well, especially when we're talking about ESPN's 30 for 30 series.

I've noticed a pattern in featured stories of American sports' most decorated champions. When the most successful coaches, players, and teams reflect on their careers, their bitter defeats, few though they be, loom larger than their victories. It's a strange psychological response. A coach or an athlete may have led a team to a dynasty of championships, but ask them about critical losses in other seasons, and they will say 'it still gnaws at me to this day.' After the confetti falls and trophies are raised; after the ticker tape parade down Main St. and the vacation to Disney World, most are far more haunted by 'the one that got away' than the victories they achieved.

Today is the day of victory for all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Christ Jesus has triumphed, trampling down death by death, bestowing life on those in the tombs. And yet I wonder: will Christ's victory over death and evil transfigure my mind, my words, my attitude, my worldview? Will Easter faith bring lasting change within? Or has Easter, in practice, become another holiday whose traditions we enjoy? Or like a needed vacation, a rejuvenating long weekend before we return to the daily grind? Has Easter become for Christians, in the words of Fr Alexander Schmemmann, a story we affirm behind closed doors, 'an inner escape into a mystical and secret celebration,' only to return to daily life *stilled* and haunted by the realities of this present darkness?¹

Every Visit to the Empty Tomb

When I was a younger man, I remember placing a lot of hope in the *experience* of Easter Sunday, especially in my 20s (for the 20s are one of the most difficult decades). Amid the trials and pressures of my life, just waiting for *something* to happen, could I have a grand Easter Sunday experience that would overcome my present pain? And so I looked to those external things to save me. Would the church be filled? Would we sing my favorite songs? Would the sermon be life-changing? I was looking for an Easter *feeling* more than an Easter faith.

¹ Schmemmann, Alexander. *The Church Year: Sermons*. Translated by John A. Jillions. Vol. 2. Celebration of Faith. Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012. 126

With age and experience, I recognize that I was seeking some kind of Easter adrenaline. And for every spike of adrenaline, a crash awaits. Which is why I have no use for spiritual euphoria. We do not live by spiritual adrenaline. Easter is no mere anniversary and Easter faith is anything but temporary and shallow. Perhaps we need to search anew in the depths of this familiar story.

For Easter is not only the story of Christ rising from the dead. *Never forget that Easter is a story of Christ coming back from hell, harrowing hell, and taking the keys of hell with him.* ²St John Chrysostom preached that when we descend into the waters of baptism, it is not only a descent into Christ's death, it is a symbol of descending with Christ into hell, inheriting his victory, and rising in resurrection life.

Perhaps this is the faith we need when we come to Easter Sunday bearing the turmoil of intractable family conflicts; when we bear the heaviness of a long grief; when we witness the devastation of tornados leveling towns and homes; when we stand speechless and bereft at yet another school shooting and the slaughter of innocents. In this present darkness, spiritual euphoria and adrenaline get you nowhere. But in this present darkness, the two Marys in Matthew's Gospel give a witness of hell's defeat.

Consider Mary Magdalene, the very same Mary, who, before she met Jesus of Nazareth, was consumed with hell inside her, possessed by seven demons. No longer possessed by hell, she follows Jesus, her Deliverer, all throughout Galilee and then all the way to the cross. What use was her deliverance, her exorcism, now that she would be haunted by the brutality of the cross? She who had been seized by hell on the inside, now viewed the spectacle of hell on earth, the Son of God nailed to a tree. Grief for her Lord's suffering and death was only one form of her suffering. Now she is seized by a trauma so severe that her soul lies in the grip of another brutal tyrant—the tyrant of fear.

Consider Mary Magdalene in the grip of grief, fear, and trauma, walking to her Lord's tomb, when the ground shakes beneath her feet. In her former life, Mary had only encountered angels of hell, but now she sees the mighty angel of heaven, whose very descent from heaven shook the foundations of the earth, seated on the stone which he had rolled back himself from Jesus' tomb.

What is the first word he speaks to the two Marys? 'Do not be afraid.' The unbinding of fear is not the whole Gospel, but it is where the Gospel begins for all who are seized and frozen by fear. To loosen the stronghold of fear, we hear a proclamation, 'He is not here, for he has risen.' It is a proclamation requiring a response: we must gaze on the victory of Christ: 'Come, see the place where he lay.' A proclamation is a personal address, an invitation requires me to take action. Go in. Gaze on the place where he lay. Gaze there and see Death's emptiness, its weakness in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Moments later they will encounter the risen Lord himself, but first they must become eyewitnesses that Death has lost its sting. Death reigned over the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve until now, but now Death has been dethroned. This is where the Gospel of Easter morning begins, but the Gospel is not simply the removal of anguish or pain, it is an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory.

And note well how St Matthew narrates that encounter: 'And behold, Jesus met them and said 'Greetings!' And when they saw the risen Lord they came up and *took hold of his feet* and worshiped him. They *took hold of his feet*—the very feet that were pierced, the feet that descended into the deepest hell, the feet that trampled down death by death, the feet that walk again in a body that can

² Revelation 1.8

never die. Take hold of him and worship the risen Son who comes back, not only from the dead, but back from hell.

Hear the power of the Gospel through the words of an ancient desert father:

The Lord descends into the souls of those who seek Him. He goes into the depths of the hellish heart and there He commands death, "Release those captive souls that seek after Me, those that you hold by force in bondage." He breaks through the heavy stones that cover the soul. He opens the tombs. He truly raises the dead person to life and leads that captive soul forth out of the dark prison.

Christ Rose Again For You

And by leading us out of the dark prison, Christ leads us onward to live by the power of his resurrection. Not simply on the Last Day, the Final Resurrection. Eternal life is not deferred until the second coming of the Lord. No, he leads us into freedom *now*. Eternal life begins *now*. As St Gregory of Nyssa said, 'With his return from death, our mortal race begins its return to immortal life.' And that return to immortality begins *now*.

I don't know how many times I've heard someone ask, whether personally or in church, 'Do you know that Jesus died for you?'; a vital and holy question. I do not recall anyone ever asking me, 'Do you know that Jesus rose again from the dead for you?' And maybe that's the question we ought to engage, first in our own souls, and secondly in the souls of those who do not confess Christ as Lord. 'Do you know that Jesus rose again from the dead for you?'

Do you know that he rose again so that you would no longer be captive to the fear of death? Do you know that he rose again so that you would become who he created you to be?

Yes, Christ's death on the cross makes atonement for our sins, but the redemption of our sins is only the beginning of our salvation, not its end. Why would God send his only Son to be atonement for our sins, to set us free from the power of sin and death? Was it to set us free from the curse of Adam? Most certainly. But once the curse of death is lifted, then what? Is life just biding time while we wait for our eternal reward, just making it through the week, living for the weekends, trying not to become too dismayed or too callous by the news cycle? There must be more. You and I were *made* for more.

You and I were made to live and flourish in the power of the Eighth Day. What is the Eighth Day?

When the earth shook and the stone rolled away, time and creation were transformed. Ancient Christians believed that Christ's resurrection on Sunday signified God's second creation of the world. St Gregory of Nazianzus said, 'as the first creation began on Sunday ..., so the second creation began also on a Sunday.'³ In the Old Creation, the week ended on the seventh day, the sabbath. Well, Christ rose *after* the Saturday sabbath, on Sunday. And Sunday doesn't just begin another week in the old world. No, eternity invaded the old world when Jesus rose on Sunday morning. That's why we speak of the day of Resurrection as the Eighth Day. We're in an entirely new eon. The Eighth Day has surpassed the awesome glory of the first Sunday of the Old Creation when God said 'Let there be light.' For today, the Word of God made Flesh, Jesus Christ, is the firstborn from the dead. And being the

³ Vigen Guroian, *The Melody of Faith: Theology in an Orthodox Key*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 21.

firstborn from the dead means that many, many sons and daughters of the resurrection are born anew after him.

The gravitational pull of the old world can be fierce. Like moths to a flame, human beings can ruminate on their failures, their defeats, their despair. But you no longer belong to that old world. 'For you have died and you are raised with Christ; your life is hidden with Christ in God!' You are sons and daughters of the Eighth Day.

So live and flourish in the power of the Eighth Day. On the Eighth Day, hell has been conquered and our ancient tyrant—Death—has been dethroned. When tyrants are dethroned, a new age begins.

What do nations do after a tyrant is overthrown? First, they celebrate their liberation. They dance and sing. And after the celebration, they get to work, began building a new world. They build homes and neighborhoods. They educate their children. They create parks and gardens. They begin new businesses. They write new songs, new poems, new stories. *They resurrect the vision for their land that had been suppressed when they lived under tyranny.*

And that is precisely what has happened outside the Garden Tomb. In the first creation, God commissioned Adam and Eve, 'Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth.' Essentially saying 'fill the whole earth—not Eden only—with the knowledge and glory of God.' That is your work in my world! Work with me and find joy and fulfillment in that work! And yet they lost that holy vocation, subjecting creation to futility, living under the tyrant of Death.

But what was lost in the Garden of Eden has been resurrected outside the Garden Tomb. Jesus Christ, the second Adam, has inaugurated a new creation. In the same moment he removes their fear, he commissions the two Marys with a new creation task—go tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee. And what will the risen Christ say when he meets them in Galilee? Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. 'Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with the knowledge of God.'

You are sons and daughters of the Eighth Day. Take your place in God's new creation task. God sent his Son not only to rescue us from the hell we endure, not only to save us from our sins, he saved us so that we would flourish in his New Creation; that we would build up his Kingdom and find joy in being fully human in Christ. This is your inheritance: to live and be filled with joy unspeakable and glory, no matter the circumstances.

Because of his great victory, no longer do we live for ourselves—for our pleasure, our comfort, for our own name. No, we have been set free and none of us lives unto himself or herself. Today, we live and we live to the Lord, for we *are* the Lord's. So take your place in Christ's New Creation Kingdom, for we all have a commission, just as the two Marys and the disciples were commissioned: fill the earth with the knowledge and goodness of God. Renounce timidity, walk in boldness, unafraid of death, and get to work! With a heart set free from fear and despair, build on the foundation that is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And wherever the days ahead take you, walk in the light of the Eighth Day. Take hold of the the joy that Christ makes all things new, a joy in Christ risen that no circumstances, no trial, no suffering can take away. And most of walk in love and wonder of Jesus, the risen Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, unto ages of ages. Amen.