

Easter Vigil and Easter

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2015

- Today Christian voices ring out all over the world: “Alleluia, The Lord is risen, alleluia!”...the word “*Alleluia*” meaning “Praise God”.
 - Our joy comes, of course, from the Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb...from death itself.
 - A singular event in history, yes...but why is it so important? Why is it so celebrated?
 - Because Jesus is God—the second person of the Holy Trinity—who yet condescended to take on human flesh as one of us...to be all mankind’s representative—their mediator—before God the Father.
 - As we hear in the letter to the Hebrews: “...*he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance...*” (Heb 9:15 RSV), and St. Paul writes to Timothy: “...*there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*” (1 Tim 2:5)
 - All of our prayers...all of our good works...all the good that we do...are presented to the Father through Jesus.
 - Even when we speak in prayer to our brothers and sisters, the saints, asking them to pray for us as we ask anyone to pray for us...the saints’ prayers, too, are presented to the Father through Christ.
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- Why did Jesus come? To give us the fullness of God’s Word by His own teaching—God Himself teaching us God’s Wisdom by His Word and His example of life.
 - He also came to give Himself up as a ransom for all...to take upon Himself the punishment that OUR sins—our offenses against both God and each other—deserve.
 - He is like the loving older brother who takes upon himself the consequences of the crimes of his foolish and delinquent younger brothers and sisters.

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- That is what Jesus does for us...except infinitely more so. That IS the crucifixion—His giving of Himself to save us.
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- The debt is paid, so what is next? What is our expectation and hope?
- Yes, we have the terrible prospect of deserved punishment taken from us—a great, great gift. But then what? Oblivion? A sort of passive existence without purpose...a wandering soul?
- And after three days in the tomb, Jesus gives us the answer: He comes to new life in rising from the dead. Not simply re-animation to die again as Lazarus, but rather with a new, glorified body which will see eternal life.
- But is it for Himself alone? No. As St. Paul writes: “*He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead...*” (Col 1:18 RSV)...and St. John also emphasizes this...that “*Jesus Christ [is] the first-born of the dead...To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father...*” (Rev 1:5-6 RSV)
- This is our cause of rejoicing today—not only that Jesus has risen, but He calls us to rise with Him! As “first-born from the dead”, He shows us that this is God’s promise to all who follow Him and live according to the way He has shown us.
- St. Paul affirms that in at some future culmination: “*...the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command...And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall [also rise]...and so we shall always be with the Lord.*” (1Th 4:16-17 RSV)
- And Paul also writes: “*What is sown [buried] is perishable, what is raised is imperishable...It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body... and this mortal nature must put on immortality.*” (1Co 15:42-44, 53 RSV)

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- These are the core and kernel of our faith. As Paul wrote: *“If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’”* (1Co 15:32 RSV)
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- But is it all real? Why do we believe?
- We have the testimony of the witnesses to the events—the apostles and others—who went to their deaths proclaiming this Good News.
- We have the Word of God in the scriptures—prophecies which are proven true by later events.
- We have the existence of Jesus’ Church which has grown and thrived for 2000 years despite wars, scandals, and hatred of the world.
- And, as many authors have noted, if Jesus were not God, what He said would make Him either a cheat or a madman!...saying things like *“no one comes to the Father except by me”*, and *“unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.”*
- Why would anyone follow that, even in Jesus’ time, unless they had actually witnessed the reality of the events?
- The only viable explanation is that the faith is truth...that God has sustained our Church—the teacher He has left to us—these two millennia by His grace.
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- Jesus opens the doors of Heaven to mankind, conquering even death...and by doing so allows us to conquer death as well.
- But as we seek to follow Him in our death, we must follow Him in our life...for all paths other than His will not lead us to where He has gone.
- Each day we come to innumerable forks in the road—and we must decide whether to follow the world...to follow what my passions may urge me to do even though it may be against the way of Christ—or to follow Him. And He has given the Church His Spirit to guide us on the way.

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- As we read in the book of Sirach: “*Before a man are life and death; he is given whichever he chooses.*” (Sirach 15:17)
- Because God is real, Christ is real, and the resurrection is real. Therefore, Heaven and Hell are also real...because Jesus taught us about both.
- And for one to believe that he can escape them is to believe that he can escape death itself. Good luck with that.
- And Jesus reminds us: “...*the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. [But] the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*” (Mat 7:13-14 RSV)
- His way is hard because it entails being one’s own person...doing the right when the world is against you...having the courage to follow Christ when all around you will not.
- And Moses foreshadowed Jesus by saying: “*I set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life...*” (Deu 30:19)
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- Yes...at the fork in the road, we see a wide and easy path...and we see a rocky, difficult path.
- Will we choose our road by the ease of travel...or will we choose our road because of where it leads?
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- As Robert Frost so wisely foresaw:
 - *I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*