



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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An Easter Sermon

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"First Things"

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For 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, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

There is a story about a teacher who asked her Sunday School class if they knew what Easter was all about. One young lad raised his hand and said: "I know what Easter is. Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the last supper and He was later deceived and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans took Him to be crucified and was stabbed in the side, They made Him wear a crown of thorns, and He was hung on a cross. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder. Every year the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out, and if He sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter."

He almost got it right. Most of us know the story to the point of the stone being rolled away and the tomb being empty. We know the story... but what does it mean? Six more weeks of winter? What is the meaning of this day and why all the fuss? We know the story... but there are three pertinent questions with which we should struggle: 1) What does it mean? 2) What difference does it make? 3) How can it be our own story?

I

What does it mean? Victory! Total victory! There is nothing more to fear!

Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, proclaimed that the resurrection was the final victory: the "last enemy" of humanity was defeated. He went so far as to proclaim that, Easter, is the event "of first importance." The empty tomb is the first in a series of events that are beginning to unfold.

Ultimately death itself, *our last enemy* will be defeated. Easter is the *first thing*, the first event in a new history. It is the beginning.

It is a beginning as fresh as the moment, as near as your next drawn breath. It impacts upon every moment and it points to the future that is in God's hands. It is an event that orients our lives to look and anticipate the future, not with fear, not with dread, but with hope. The temptation of Easter is to only look back at the first Easter and become stuck in that moment. We become caught up in the arguments about what really occurred and whether it happened it all. Sadly, when we get caught up in these debates, we lose sight of any meaning of Easter for our lives and for the world in which we live.

We need to re-orient our view of Easter, not merely looking back upon history, but looking forward to the future and the fulfillment of history itself. The empty tomb is the first marker, the first fruits. We look forward with hope, anticipating the promise that the last enemy, death itself, will be defeated.

The 17th century preacher-poet, John Donne struggled with the meaning of death's defeat in his sonnet, *Death Be Not Proud*:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so

He poetically described how death, (the last enemy), is the power of tyrants and evil ones, used by them to inflict fear. It is the source of neuroses and even addiction. In short Donne acknowledged that our lives are often controlled, not by our love of life, but rather, our fear of death. This fear is often primary in our lives. It is often the first thing.

What does the resurrection mean? Not six more weeks of winter...no.. it means that you and I need not fear death. The last enemy of humanity is defeated. In Donne's final line: "And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die!"

What does it mean? Victory! Total victory! There is nothing more to fear! The first thing... is life!

II

What difference does Easter make? It means we can live fully and joyfully in the moment. One of my favorite pictures from the old *Life Magazine* is the picture of a sailor kissing a woman in a white dress. It was taken on August 14, 1945 by the famous photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt and was entitled "V-J Day in Times Square." It was part of a larger spread of pictures taken throughout the country under the title "Victory". The picture is legendary and radiates the pure exuberance our nation experienced at the end of WWII.



The woman in the picture was a nurse working at Doctor's Hospital near Times Square. The sailor was on leave and watching movie at a theater when he heard the noise and commotion outside. He rushed out into the street and heard, "The War is over! We won!" In sheer joy he ran down the street, kissing every woman, young old that he could find.

This was a celebration of victory. The sacrifice was over. Millions perished in that holocaust of evil, and many more would carry the wounds of that conflict, some even today. But it was over and victory was announced. Victory.

The picture became a national icon because of the powerful sentiment that it captured. The horror of war was over... Victory was won! We can return home and rebuild our lives! People danced in the streets!

The woman in the picture was identified as Edith Shain, a former nurse and teacher, living in Los Angeles. She died at the age of 91, five years ago. In an interview before her death, she described the end of the war as "a wonderful experience" and said the photo represents so many feelings about it: "hope, love, peace and tomorrow."

Easter is V-J (Victory) Day for all of creation! The powers of evil and death have been defeated! The conflict is over! Victory is declared! We should be celebrating and declaring our joy to the world about "hope, love, peace and tomorrow." We should dance in the streets, hug and kiss, shouting Alleluia!

III

How can this be our own Story? Paul saw himself as part of the story... we are too. You are, I am.

The challenge for disciples today is understanding our own lives in the context of the Easter story. The challenge is recognizing that the victory secured on the cross and declared in the empty tomb is first in our lives.... That it is the foundation upon which we live. This is our response to the defeated powers of death that still haunt our lives.

Paul, in the 15th chapter of his epistle to the Corinthian congregation wanted to establish his authority as an apostle. He listed the post resurrection appearances of the risen Christ to 500, the apostles and James... and then added himself. "Last of all, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle" This was the amazing grace of God that is declared in the well-loved hymn: "He saved a wretch like me."

The risen Christ also enters our lives, claims them, and declares to us the victory of life over death, hope over despair, and love over indifference. He appears to us,

- to some in dreams or visions,
- to some in a hymn,
- to others in a book,
- to others in a moment of quiet,
- to some in a sermon or worship,
- to you perhaps in this moment... on this very day.

He comes to us, whether we are worthy or not... and declare the victory of life. The first thing: the foundation upon which we are called to live. The challenge for us, is to respond, "Yes."

- Yes to life!
- Yes to hope!
- Yes to justice!
- Yes to love!
- Yes to all that is good and right!

Yes..... but also no.

- No to hate!
- No to injustice!
- No to illness!
- No to pain and hurt!
- No to death!

This is the difference that Easter makes. Victory! Life Triumphs over death.... Christ lives. The last enemy has been defeated!

*The strife is o'er, the battle done;
The victory of life is won;
The song of triumph has begun: Alleluia!*

*The powers of death have done their worst;
But Christ their legions hath dispersed;
Let shouts of holy joy outburst: Alleluia! * Amen!*

**from "The Strife Is O'er" Hymn #236, Glory to God*