

Victory That Lasts

Ah, Golgotha! unhappy Golgotha!
The Lord of Glory here beneath a curse is lying
He hangs upon th' accursed tree,
Who shall the World Redeemer be;
The Lord Who heaven and earth created.
By earth is now reviled and hated:
The sinless, lo, for sin is dying;
With stricken soul the sight I see.

J.S. Bach
Passion According to St. Matthew

The heart-breaking Friday finally ends; nothing goes on and on without at least an ending. Then for the disciples, the lonely days of failure and regret settle over them. On the first day of the week the women gather at dawn to arrange for as decent a burial as their money would allow,

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but what they found at the graveyard on that early morning was to be told by men to one another and to their children throughout all of the centuries: the tomb was empty. The heavy stone at the doorway was rolled back. The small Roman guard was asleep, and a young man, a total stranger to the women, was there. He announced to them that Jesus Christ was alive. They did not believe even that the grave was empty, let alone the report of Christ's triumph over death! After all, why should they?

Death has the last word over the great as well as the small. But the fact is that within a few days of that first day of the new week of man, these disciples, even Thomas, were sure enough of the victory of Jesus Christ to risk their lives on it. They told the world that Jesus had challenged the two foes that we men cannot handle—our sins and our death—and that he had conquered each.

Though the battle won on Easter day is dramatic, the resurrection of Jesus as an event is a quiet one. Our Lord's victory over death bears the same reserve about it that marks his whole ministry. The encounters of Christ with his disciples after the resurrection are brief and few. What Jesus does not do after that decisive day is to prove himself to his contestors: neither the leaders of the Sanhedrin nor the Roman officials, nor the wealthy Herodians experienced any embarrassing encounters with the risen Christ.

Apparently, as far as they were concerned, their coalition against Jesus had been successful. The only hints of possible danger to them arise in the unaccountable rumors, the fearlessness on the part of the disciples, the spreading joy and excitement among crowds of people who listened to the bold message of Peter, James, and John. And there was the fact of the empty grave.

The truth of Christ's victory over death is affirmed by the disciples through the New Testament documents and preaching; it is attested by what happens in the lives of the disciples. They witnessed to the resurrection in various ways, some direct and some indirect. What happens in the lives of the family of men and women who will wager their lives on the message of the gospel of Christ is remarkable. Their total lack of interest in building shrines, their boldness, their confidence in the Word of Life, the moral straightness of their message and the contagiousness of the faith as indirect evidences are profoundly impressive.

Our accustomed methods of proving a thing one way or another are here confronted with a staggering and new event, an event where our primary technical evidence is so uninteresting. One empty tomb is like any other empty tomb. Christ's actual victory over death is only proven in any lasting way by the authentication of God himself. This confirming of the witness of the first century disciples is the result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in men and women's lives. The triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ is a fact that we are called by God to wager on, and it is God who makes the triumph concrete, personal, universal, and actual to us.

If the event of Easter is true, then what are the results for us today? I want to point up two implications: first, the way that I look at the world and my own self as a part of the world is permanently altered. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, death has lost its terrorizing grip over the created order, and I no longer need to be preoccupied by it. Not only that, but in a positive sense, the world and my own life have a new source for meaning now. Christ has validated this existence of mine.

Christ asserted a finality more lasting and more important than fear, sin, despair, inky black hollowness, grey endings, and death. These old fears and dangers are not as final as we once thought. The result of a new finality becomes the basis for my life now. There is a greater power at work. The freedom to live is stronger than the coalitions of sin which destroy. Love at work is greater than the wrath of man. The Lord of love and life is more durable than the forces we once thought were so complete and unending. Therefore, on this side of Easter I look at the world in a whole new way. When the value of my daily existence is confirmed, I am set free with a motivation and a mission to live out the implications of Christ's death and resurrection in every direction.

Second, Easter has confirmed the meaning and authority of the ministry of Jesus Christ. The word and work of our Lord are validated once and for all. This is of decisive importance because it means that when Jesus makes the promise of forgiveness to a thief on the cross, when he promises forgiveness to us, when he pronounces hope, and when he calls men to follow him as the way, the truth, and the life, I know that because of the victory of Easter, his promises, his pronouncements, his authority will hold. His words are not the kindly sentiments of a good but ultimately powerless man, but rather the words of the Lord. Otherwise, do I dare build upon his promises, wager on his character? Do I dare spell out his ethical challenges to my life in a world like ours? Do I dare to believe that in the twentieth century Jesus Christ knows my name? Do I dare believe that Jesus Christ could possibly be contemporary to me?

Because of the actualness of Easter, the answer is yes! Go right ahead and build upon the words of Jesus Christ

as if they are true, as if they hold ultimate weight, as if they still work, as if when life depends upon their trustworthiness they are worthy of that dependence. Go right ahead, because Jesus Christ, who made the promises, is alive!