

CHRIST IS RISEN, PARADISE OPENED!

Texts: Acts 10:34,37-43

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (Series B. Resurrection Sunday) Psalms 118:1-2,16-17,22-23;

John 20:1-18

I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures.

Prayer:

When I lived in Europe several years ago, I spent my past time visiting great many Churches large and small. Especially I liked walking slowly through the burial grounds, reading the inscriptions on tombstones.

"These engravings were sincere, and deeply touching, I must say! "But I was amazed to see how many epitaphs managed to avoid the plain word, **"died."** Here are some of the words and phrases used instead ...

Left this life. Fell asleep. Departed this life. Forever at rest. Taken by the hand that is Divine. Entered into rest. Passed to a fuller life. Now reunited. Taken to his holy home, Home with Jesus, Jesus called her away, Free at Last, Fought a good fight, Served others, Bring me sunshine, We will be with you in spirit, Our lives are poorer without you, I'll see you on the other side of the stars. Tak for alt.

Isaac Asimov tells the story of a fire-and-brimstone preacher looking down decisively at the worshippers in the pews and saying, *"What a fearful thought it is that every member of this congregation is going to die."*

His statement brought a somber-looking expression from everyone – with one exception. A man in the front pew had a disbelieving smile on his face. The preacher's face grew red as he looked squarely at the man in the front pew and said, "I repeat! Every member of this congregation is going to die!" Again, a disbelieving smile came over the man's face. Now the preacher addressed the man directly.

"May I ask you, what do you find so amusing in my statement that everyone in this congregation is going to die? To which the man replied, **"I am not amused pastor. I am relieved. You see, I am not a member of this congregation."**

We may try to cover up the reality of death with synonyms, but, sooner or later, members of this congregation and non-members alike, are going to die. Regardless of whatever else we may choose to believe. Jesus knew He was going to die. And die He did! And so, today's Gospel Lesson begins at the place where He was buried.

Picture the mood of the disciples on Easter Sunday. They had loved Jesus. They had left everything to follow Him. In Him, they had experienced God's Presence and God's Love as never before. Have you ever find yourself wondering, if only for a brief moment, whether there really is life after death?

If you do, it's a common experience. Most people want to know what happens when we die. What will it be like? What sort of body will we have? What will we experience at the moment of death?

All of us are faced with the question from time to time as we see loved ones die or hear of other people dying in tragic circumstances. It's a question that has intrigued people for thousands of years.

When you consider the human life and how it ends, you wonder, what's the point of it all? What's the point in creating a garden, or a painting, or anything that's beautiful? What's the point of anything you do or achieve if ultimately it dissolves into black oblivion, if, at the end of our days, we are just dust and dust we return.

Have you at some time thought like that? Have you asked similar questions about the purpose of life and death when grieving the loss of someone through death?

At one time or other most of us question why a person who is full of life and who still had so much to offer suddenly drops off into oblivion like stone that sinks into the bottom of the ocean.

The disciples and their friends must have wondered this very same thing when they saw their master nailed to a cross, he was only 33, in the prime of his life. They must have wondered what was the purpose of his death, when there was still so much to be accomplished.

In fact, God must have got it all wrong when the most wonderful man, the most kind and caring person who ever lived is suddenly yanked away from among them. What a terrible waste! Struck down when life still held so much for him, disappearing into oblivion like stone that sinks into the ocean. When Jesus died so did their **hopes**, their **convictions**, and their **faith**. They huddled together behind locked doors confused and afraid.

The women who went to Jesus' tomb went there not with the expectation of seeing Jesus alive, but rather to finish the job of burying him. No one expected the resurrection. In spite of what they had heard Jesus say about dying and rising 3 days later, the last thing they expected to find was an empty grave.

The message of the angels who were sitting where Jesus' body had been laid, "*He is not here – he has been raised!*" was totally unexpected. Something illogical, unthinkable, unnatural, and incredible has happened. The one who had been certified dead has come alive.

The last person Mary Magdalene expected to see in the garden was Jesus – the gardener yes, but not the resurrected Jesus. The disciples on the road to Emmaus talked to a stranger as they travelled, they did not expect to meet the resurrected Jesus.

Behind locked doors and Jesus appeared to the disciples, they thought he was a ghost. The last person they expected to see was Jesus. They had seen him died, buried in a cave but miracle of miracles he was now standing right there amongst them in the flesh.

In fact, the resurrection is the most important thing we believe in as Christians. The resurrection is of first importance to us, not because it is a nice ending to the story of Jesus, but because it is the centre of our faith, it is basic to our lives as Christians, it is the thing that we all look forward to.

I will like to say this: Easter is Bigger than Christmas. In our society there are two great religious holidays-Christmas and Easter. For most of us Christmas is the bigger and greater season of the year.

It's the time of year when we gather with family and friends to sing carols, decorate the tree, and exchange gifts. Christmas is the climax of the whole year. Easter? Well it is different story, for most people it's just another long weekend, another chance to get away in to the cottage country for a few days.

Even Christians view Easter as a second-rate holiday! Somehow we've gotten it backwards. If Easter had not happened, Christmas would have no meaning. If the tomb is not empty, the cradle makes no difference. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then he really is just a misguided Jewish rabbi with delusions of splendor.

If Easter is not true, then Christmas is only the story of an obscure baby born in a village, in a forgotten land some 2000 plus years ago. It is Easter that gives Christmas its meaning. Christ was born to die, and we were born to live.

You want proof? In all the *New Testament* no major doctrinal point is ever built upon the virgin birth of Christ. Not one. It's true. It is true that Jesus was born by a virgin. But it's never discussed or mentioned. In fact, two gospels don't even say anything about it.

But the resurrection? That's a different story, it is all over the place. In every part of the *New Testament*, it comes up again and again. We read in the book of Acts 4:28. When the first Christians preached, they didn't mention Bethlehem, Wise men from the East; they talked about the *Empty Tomb*.

They never got over the fact that on Easter Sunday when they went to the tomb that Easter morning, Jesus wasn't there. He is Alive for death couldn't hold him down. In the shadow of the cross, we come to God covered in our own filth, and yet God cradles us to his chest, holds us tight, and wipers into our ears in our suffering and waiting. In the light of our salvation Christ says, we were born to live, Easter the greatest gift of all time. Alleluia He is risen death couldn't hold him in the grave.

It is the thing that gives us **hope** and **comfort** as we stand at a grave of someone dear or face the day of our own dying. There are those who scoff at the whole idea of the resurrection of Jesus, and those who believe that when this life is over that's all there is. There is nothing else to look forward to.

And then there are those who believe that there is a heaven, a life after this life death. I'm sure you are as glad as I am that the central part of *our faith* is the fact that after we have taken our last breath and shed this early this tent, we will go from this life to our eternal home to be with God. This is my belief.

We will not only experience the joy of being welcomed by Jesus on the other side of death but we will also experience the joy of being among all the faithful who have gone home before us. That is the confidence that we can have because of Easter Day.

Death is not the end of us, but it is the beginning of a *brand new life*. We will rise from the grave and be given a new life. St Paul says, *The truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in Him, in death will also be raised" (1 Cor 15:20)?*

What can be definite than that. Today we are celebrating a victory. Christ has won the victory over the grave and assures us that death will not hold us down.

To be sure, we will have pangs of fear and anxiety shoot through our minds when we think of our own death and the thought of leaving everything we know and love in this life and being placed in a grave alone.

It is just at those moments when we think of ourselves as doomed human beings that is when the meaning of the word "Saviour" has full impact. Jesus has saved us. Without his *death* and *resurrection* life would be pointless and death completely final. Jesus has saved us.

He chose us. He gave his life on the cross for us and on Easter morning we hear the cry, *"He is risen!"* Because he is our Saviour and we will rise from death to life, a glorious new life. In this we are sure. *Christ Is Risen, and Paradise Opened to All believers.*

Christ was born to die, and we were born to live! We are Easter people, therefore encourage one another with these words, We are Easter people. Sing Hallelujah to our God and King. Amen.