



A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, *Rector*

The Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord
17 April 2022

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb”

Good Morning and Happy Easter Again!

Ever since we were little kids we all knew what Easter was – by the time we were about ‘yay-tall’ we knew that Easter was all about fluffy bunnies and colorful eggs, peeps and candy baskets, and brunch with the family! Of course, by the time we were about “yay-tall” we realized that Easter was much, much more – there were tulips and daffodils and spring blossoms of all sorts, song birds and spring showers; and there was still brunch, of course, but now it’s brunch with mimosas!

Of course, that’s the secular side of Easter. Turn to the Church and we’re equally aware of what Easter is: An empty tomb, new life beyond the grave, eternal salvation.

But what if there is more? What if Easter is than what we learned as children?

Now, don’t get me wrong, to stare confidently into the dread face of death and ask, “where o death is your sting?” is no small gift. For that confidence not only soothes the grieving human heart, but has so buoyed the hearts of women and men through the years so as to move mountains here on earth.

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Surely Saint Paul speaks the truth if the fundamental teaching of Christian faith offered no hope or promise beyond the ordinary span of our mortal lives.

And yet, what if there is more? In fact, what if the inverse of Paul’s words is also true? Shouldn’t we also be pitied greatly if the hope we have in Christ is only for our death? Wouldn’t it be a tragedy of faith and of God’s love if the truth of Easter offered no hope or promise *for this*, our mortal lives. If all we can do on Easter is wistfully hope for a better life in heaven while trudging along on earth, we would be wise to ask ourselves, what’s the point? Is God so unconcerned with our lives, this present



suffering that we may endure or the great joys that we might celebrate, as to care nothing at all about our earthly, human, existence? Is all that matters about us only our “spiritual” reality which might, for the lucky few, endure beyond our final breath?

Now, don’t chastize yourself if you have asked such pointed or probing questions – you are not the first and you certainly won’t be the last. Women and men of faith, raised in the hallowed walls of churches such as this, have been asking these same questions for years because the prevailing framework of Christian salvation has become the afterlife, such that the central proclamation of our faith now fails to address the central questions of *our lives*, that is our life *before* death.

This wasn’t the case for the first Christians, however. In fact, from the first they understood that the story of Jesus’ Resurrection wasn’t simply a story about an empty tomb and life after death. From the first, Christians have understood that the Easter story wasn’t simply a new or more important story of a spiritual life meant to replace or supplant all that preceded the grave. Rather, for the early Church, the light that burst forth from the darkness of death – the light we celebrated last night in the darkness of the great Vigil and whose glory shines all around us this morning – was the *summation* of the account of God’s unwavering love and life which accompanies us from the moment of our creation through our last waking hour.

You see, a theology of God’s love that focuses only on the moment of our death, actually *reduces* God’s love. It turns the eternal and passionate love of God for you and for all of creation into a momentary, fleeting love concerned only with the state of one’s soul at the time of one’s death.

But scripture – and especially the life and love of Jesus – tells an entirely different story. It tells the story of God’s eternal love from which all life bursts forth. It recounts the story of God’s love that seeks out Adam in his shame, grieves at the death of Abel, and promises to Noah that the destruction of life, precious and holy – human and creatures alike – will not be God’s way. Holy Scripture recounts, too, God’s liberating love for his people enslaved by Pharaoh and, generations later, for those peoples oppressed by the heirs to David’s throne. Of course, it also tells the story of Jesus’ unwavering love that heals women and men, Jews and Gentiles, daughters of the powerful and the poor, that feeds the multitudes, and receives the outcast – a love so unwavering, so unshakable that it chooses to suffer at the hands of the betrayer and sinner rather than bring harm to a single object of God’s love.

Easter, the story of light in the darkness, life beyond death, is the exclamation point to this story of eternal love! It is the revelation that the story proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Gospels



– the story of concrete love and care for the poor and the oppressed, for Jews and Gentiles, for women and men – is *the eternal story* of God’s love for the world.

To so focus on life after death, however, not only reduces God’s love to a shadow of its eternal reality, it also has the effect of diminishing our responsibility *for* God’s love in the world. Over the last century or so, as we Christians have fixated on the right profession of one another’s faith, we stopped looking at the state of world around us and considering our responsibility within it. Rather than breaking down the divisions and prejudices that have long-plagued our many societies and cultures with the promise of drawing peoples of all colors and all faiths into a new society of mutual respect and care, we have seen authoritarianism, buttressed by the basest of human fears, re-emerge across the globe. Rather than eliminating extreme poverty or expanding the rights of women and children, economic inequalities have re-doubled not only across the globe, but here in our community of Grosse Pointe and metro-Detroit, while the rights of women in American society are increasingly under attack, and the most vulnerable of our children are hiding again in dark closets for fear of our public society.

No, our fixation on life-after death, has been a quaint excuse for Christians to avert our eyes from the real problems that plague the lives of our neighbors – the very neighbors whom we are called to love as our ourselves.

Easter mustn’t become an excuse to avoid the real struggles of human society or the real responsibilities we bear as the people of God. On the contrary, we must hear this wonderful and joyous story as an emphatic exclamation point to the story of God’s eternal – unwavering and unending – love for all people, and our fundamental call to bear God’s love to the world – this world, here and now.

For “Christ is alive,” we shall sing, “Not throned above, remotely high, untouched, unmoved by human pains; but daily, in the midst of life, our Saviour with the Father reigns.