

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The First Sunday after Easter²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the Third Chapter of Zephaniah.⁴

“Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden. Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame. At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith [SETH] the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Verse of the twentieth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he shewed [SHOWD] unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith [SETH] unto them, Receive ye the Holy

Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

“But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

“And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith [SETH] he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.*”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

This is one of the most important lines in all of Scripture. Our faith is not based on religious concepts and ideas, but on solid fact. They were glad, and that means they saw and believed. When St. Paul summarized the Gospel for the Church in Corinth,⁷ he recited four facts: 1) Christ died for our sins; 2) He was buried; 3) He rose the third day; and 4) He appeared to witnesses. These facts of the Gospel were “according to the Scriptures,” meaning, these facts fulfilled the Scriptural

foretelling of the prophets that Messiah would come the first time as priest and sacrifice, and that after His death He would rise again:

“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.”⁸

He had died as the sin offering, and now He was alive again, a man once dead, but who prolongs His days as the one in whose hand the will of God prospers forever. For a dead man to prolong his days, he must rise again. And what is the will of God that prospers in his hand? Our Collect for today provides part of the answer: “Almighty Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification...” These words were drawn from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Church in Rome:

“And therefore it [faith] was imputed to him [Abraham] for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.”⁹

On Good Friday we had a very mournful service, for that was the day in which Christ fulfilled the Scriptures of the prophets, that He would die as the offering for sin, fulfilling as well the entire symbolic system of sacrifice in the Law of Moses. On that day we saw Him as Passover Lamb and as the Atonement slain on *Yom Kippor*. We saw His soul sorrowful unto death the night before in the garden, and we were with Him at the Cross. On Sunday, that is on Easter, we were suddenly glad, sharing the joy of those who first witnessed the sight of the risen Christ. “*And when he had so said, he shewed [SHOWD] unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.*”

Our faith is based on fact. They saw Him risen again, and they witnessed this sight together as a group. Their testimony was a shared testimony, something that by its nature cannot be dismissed as a delusion. His death was a fact, and His Resurrection was a fact. But now we must see not only these facts, but the meaning of these facts. His Resurrection showed that He had been, all along, exactly who he claimed to be. He was vindicated. Indeed, before Abraham, He had been and always was I AM. He was, and throughout eternity had always been, One with the Father. And, yet though He was the one *vindicated*, that is whose words were proved true, it is we who are *justified* freely by His grace.

His vindication was made into our justification, for now Christ Jesus the Lord had taken away sin and had defeated death. If we hold fast and believe, we will spend eternity not only as forgiven sinners, whose Lord died to bring that forgiveness to his people, for even beyond having been forgiven, if we hold fast and believe, we will spend eternity as the children of God through the grace of the risen Lord, fully justified as if we had never sinned at all. We are forgiven because He died, and we are justified because He rose again and ever lives to make intercession for us. That means we have been made righteous, as if we had never sinned at all, in the sight of God. Forgiveness is made richer because of Divine forgetfulness, as the Bible also states plainly: He *forgets* our sins. So, in the eyes of God, because Christ rose again from the dead, we are restored fully and given the inheritance that our first father lost.

We have been allowed to start all over again, and to become God's own children through Christ. This has everything to do with that little two word phrase that St. Paul repeats throughout his Epistles: "In Christ." It is a small phrase, and thus easily overlooked. And, yet, it is our identity in the eyes of God; it is your identity, and has been ever since the day you were baptized into Christ. If you are "in Christ" and if you abide and dwell in Christ, God sees you in the Person of His only begotten Son. He sees you in His Son, the one Beloved of the Father in all eternity.

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted **in the beloved.**”¹⁰*

That God sees you in the Person of His only begotten Son means that, even beyond forgiveness, you have been justified as if you had never been born in sin, and had never sinned yourself. That is justification; that is adoption as a child of God, that is what it means to be “in Christ.”

This is why it is so very tragic when any child of God chooses to live as merely a son of this fallen world (“For as in Adam all die: even so in Christ shall all be made alive”). You do not belong to this world of sin and death, and have no business living as if you did. Because we are justified freely in the Risen Christ, we are called to sanctification, that process whereby we become saints.

A saint is, simply, a holy person. In an objective sense you have been made holy by having been separated from the world of sin and death, and set apart unto God. This was done in your baptism. But, in terms of the life you live here on earth, as we also have seen in the Epistles of St. Paul, you have the vocation, that is the *calling*, to become holy, to be a saint, conformed to the image of Christ in this world. Growing in the grace of God and acquiring holy virtues, above all charity, is the vocation every child of God has in common. This we cannot do if we choose to live in the darkness of carnality and selfishness.

The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord, though as yet they did not fully comprehend all that it meant to do so. But they could quickly comprehend that Christ’s Resurrection demonstrated the goodwill, the love and saving intention, of God. Somehow, it meant that everything He had suffered was part of the plan; it demonstrated that He had

been in control all along; it meant that the fear and suffering of Friday was not a defeat, but rather the very plan, just as their Master had foretold several times. For example, hear these words from the Gospel of Mark:

“And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid. And he took again the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen unto him, Saying, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again.”¹¹

The Resurrection demonstrated that Christ had come to bring salvation, that God had come in peace rather than as an enemy. *“For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”¹²*

“Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.” Now it was time for the Lord to send them out: *“Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”*

This means that the Apostles were, and therefore the Apostolic Church is, in the world as the Body of Christ, the extension of His Incarnation. It means the Apostolic Church, including you and me, is here to assist and work with God in the service and ministry of reconciliation, calling all men everywhere to repent, filling the world with the Good News that Jesus Christ has taken away sin and conquered death. It means the Apostolic Church, of which you are a part, is to go into the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that His house may be filled. It means that you are here on a mission of peace, to help your neighbor obtain peace with God through Jesus Christ.

“And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith [SETH] unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins

ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”

This too speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ. Of course, it speaks directly of a Sacrament that belongs to the Apostolic ministry of Christ’s own priesthood though ordained men. And I have challenged those who reject our belief in the Sacrament of Absolution, in these words: “If your church has no one in it who believes that he has the authority to forgive sins, how can you say that you are in the same Church founded by the Risen Lord Jesus Christ through his Apostles?”

More largely, it speaks of God’s purpose that forgiveness of sins be spread far and wide. Yes, forgiveness is conditional. Indeed, after the General Confession (for example) you hear conditions in the Absolution that follows, namely, “heartly repentance and true faith.” “Heartly” means simply, from the heart, or, sincere. Repentance must be sincere; not necessarily emotional (though that can be a very good sign), but always sincere. And “true faith” may be as small as a grain of mustard seed, for even that little is enough. More largely, the Good News is that the risen Christ has commissioned the Church of His Apostles to be His instrument of forgiveness, not of condemnation.

In all of history, no line has been more important than this: “*Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.*” His resurrection was a fact they could see, hear and touch. To this fact they have borne witness by preaching the Gospel, their own eyewitness testimony courageously declared, unrelentingly declared even to the shedding of their blood as His faithful martyrs. For, above all else, the message of His Resurrection from the dead on the third day is the message of God’s love, that His Son came into the world to bring salvation, peace and reconciliation with God.

This is the message Christ has commissioned to be proclaimed by His Apostolic Church. Therefore, we too must believe He has risen, and be glad.

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The Rev'd Robert Hart¹³
April 15, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the First Sunday after Easter, 2012.*

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxiii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ *Zephaniah 3:14-end (KJV).*

⁵ *St. John 20:19-end (KJV).*

⁶ *St. John 20:20b (KJV).*

⁷ *I Corinthians 15:1 ff.*

⁸ *Isaiah 53:10 (KJV).*

⁹ *Romans 4:22-25 (KJV).*

¹⁰ *Ephesians 1:3-6 (KJV).*

¹¹ *St. Mark 10:32-34 (KJV).*

¹² *St. John 3:17 (KJV).*

¹³ *Rector, St. Benedict's Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.*