

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.³

“The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying, What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

“...

“Yet say ye, Why? doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, and hath kept all my statutes, and hath done them, he shall surely live. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith [SETH] the LORD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?

“But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.

The Rev'd Robert Hart²³
April 29, 2012.

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Mass for the Third Sunday after Easter, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 44 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxix (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxviii (CIPBC 1963).

³ Ezekiel 18:1-4, 19-end (KJV).

⁴ Ezekiel 33:1-20 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 16:1-end (KJV).

⁶ St. John 16:16 (KJV).

⁷ Chesterton, G.K., *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, 1933, London.

⁸ Isaiah 53:10.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ St. Luke 24:39.

¹¹ St. John 20:27-28.

¹² Romans 8:11.

¹³ St. John 6:54.

¹⁴ I John 3:2.

¹⁵ I Corinthians 15:20-23.

¹⁶ Leviticus 23:15-17.

¹⁷ Romans 6:9-10.

¹⁸ I John 3:2b.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 15:19.

²⁰ Hebrews 13:14.

²¹ I Peter 2:11-12a, 15-16.

²² I John 4:10-11, 19.

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“Yet ye say, The way of the LORD is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal? When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. Yet saith [SETH] the house of Israel, The way of the LORD is not equal. O house of Israel, are not my ways equal? are not your ways unequal? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.

“Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.”

Or,

Here beginneth the thirty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.⁴

“Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people; Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and

Sabbath, was Christ's Easter. The day when He comes again shall be our Easter; and like Him, all who have looked for His appearing again, all who love God, will enter into His immortality. Though we will have died, we will die no more; Death shall have no more dominion over us; for it has no more dominion over Him. This is our future if we remain *In Christ*.

Paul also wrote, "*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*"¹⁹ Modern religion all too often is about feeling good in this life, or being successful in this world, or even about health and prosperity; all of which things, though, they may be good for a time, are ultimately worthless; for this life ends. "*Here we have no abiding place.*"²⁰ These words that Jesus spoke mean so much more. They mean everything.

Without this hope of the Gospel, these words of St. Peter's would come across as mere moral platitudes. But, in the context of Christianity, of the Gospel and our Risen Living Lord, they take on lively and powerful meaning: "*Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having your conversation honest among the Gentiles.... For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.*"²¹

In the context of eternal life, every commandment takes on new meaning. That meaning is, "*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.... We love him, because he first loved us.*"²²

For a brief while they did not see Him, and then they saw Him. "*A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.*"

take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.

"So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Therefore, O thou son of man, speak unto the house of Israel; Thus ye speak, saying, If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live? Say unto them, As I live, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? Therefore, thou son of man, say unto the children of thy people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression: as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness; neither shall the righteous be able to live for his righteousness in the day that he sinneth. When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it. Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; If the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live.

"Yet the children of thy people say, The way of the Lord is not equal: but as for them, their way is not equal. When the righteous turneth from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, he shall even die thereby. But if the wicked turn from his

wickedness, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby.

“Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. O ye house of Israel, I will judge you every one after his ways.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

“These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew [SHOW] you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew [SHOW] it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew [SHOW] it unto you. A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father. Then said some of his disciples among themselves,

*drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”*¹³

For “we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is,” wrote St. John.¹⁴ St. Paul, writing to the Church in Corinth, says: “*But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming.*”¹⁵

The imagery is from the harvest. In spring we have the first fruits, that first growth of the field; it is a foretaste of what comes later in the harvest. It fulfilled the meaning of the feast of the firstfruits in the Book of Leviticus.¹⁶ The feast of the first fruits was directly after the first Sabbath that followed the Passover. No coincidence that.

After the Sabbath they were to present the first fruits, just as Christ would rise and appear to witnesses *after* the Sabbath, on the first (and eighth) day of the week. The first fruits are a pledge of the future, a promise of what is to come. As Christ rose from the dead in the Springtime of the world, He will come again at the time of harvest. As He rose from the dead never to die again, so also shall those who love God and look for His appearing rise again at His coming, and enter into His Easter life, His resurrected and eternal life, His immortality, never to die again. St. Paul in his Epistle to the Church in Rome, writes: “*Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.*”¹⁷

You see, “*when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*”¹⁸ Easter is history and future. It happened and will happen. The third day, the day after the

witnesses who gave the word *martyr* (witness) its new meaning. They stared down death as the only people in the world who could now laugh at the terror of the grave—or, rather, the former terror; for they feared death no longer.

The other thing we may be moved to do with these words of Jesus is to apply them to our own emotional ups and downs, or to our own fears and the comforts that come by God's grace in this life. That is fair enough, as long as we see all that as a mere shadow of their true meaning. And, when we consider the implications of the resurrection of Christ for us, the literal meaning of His words is far greater for us.

Because He rose again from the dead the third day, your hope is not in this world only, but in the world to come when God makes everything new. St. Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, "*But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.*"¹²

We do not believe merely in a symbolic resurrection, something to help us feel good about worldly things, about transient emotional turmoil or desires. Our hope is not about this world that passes away, or the things of this world that so easily draw away our love from God to carnal affections. Besides, it is not always the will of God to deliver us from our perceived problems or to give us what we think we want for ourselves. Frankly, some of our desires are petty, some are sinful and selfish, and some are simply irrelevant to the things that God would have us pay attention to.

Easter past and future

Easter is a fact of history; but it is also the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to come. The Resurrection is a fact that was accomplished on the Third Day, and a promise that will be fulfilled on the Last Day. "*Whoso eateth my flesh, and*

What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? They said therefore, What is this that he saith [SETH], A little while? we cannot tell what he saith [SETH]. Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew [SHOW] you plainly of the Father. At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God. I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father. His disciples said unto him, Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb. Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God. Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.*”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

These words must be taken quite literally, for they were fulfilled literally. For a brief while they did not see him, and then they saw him. We must hear in these words their blunt, literal, objective meaning. They are echoed in words we say every morning and evening in the Apostles’ Creed: “*He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose again from the dead.*”

In my younger days I was among people who wanted to be very spiritual, and some who wanted to *appear* to be very spiritual. The words I have quoted above were treated all too mystically by some people. They wanted to interpret them in terms of spiritual or religious experience. I want to be careful not to rob anyone of the significance of real experience of that kind, nor of a spiritual sense in which these words describe it for them: “*A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.*”

However, I recall the words of G. K. Chesterton writing about the Thirteenth Century, and the prevailing mysticism of that era. In his biographical sketch of St. Thomas Aquinas, Chesterton wrote: “When Religion would have maddened men, theology kept them sane.”⁷ So, these words of Jesus, “*A little while, and ye shall not see me; and again, a little, and ye shall see me,*” must be treated first and foremost by the “Queen of the Sciences”—by which I do mean theology. It is a science, based on facts, facts that amount to revelation. And, if I may intrude

upon the religious nature of a church service with the science of theology, let me encourage everyone here to examine the facts.

The scientific approach

Within a few days after the Lord spoke these words, the Apostles’ situation was this: Their Lord was dead. Several times He told them how it would be. He said several times that He would be handed over to the Gentiles and be crucified, and die; and that He would rise again the third day. But their minds blocked out what He told them until they went through the worst of it. That is understandable. Their hope was shattered. They mourned and wept while the world rejoiced.

But, after three days, He appeared to them alive again. He had not conquered Rome; He had, instead, conquered the *real* enemy. He had overcome sin and death. He had been the Suffering Servant spoken of by Isaiah the prophet; now He was the man who died as “*an offering for sin,*”⁸ and then rose again to “*prolong His days*”⁹ as the one in whose hand the will of the Lord would prevail (all just as the prophet had said).

Those are the facts, as witnessed by His disciples. That is theology as science, based on facts of Revelation. And, indeed, Jesus encouraged the scientific approach, as St. Luke records: “*Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.*”¹⁰ And, as St. John reports: “*Then saith 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.’*”¹¹

The Lord encouraged faith too; but He also made known His will that they should accept the proofs He showed them, that He was alive. As I said on Easter, this was not about some mystery called “the empty tomb.” It was about the facts declared by eyewitnesses; and not just any eyewitnesses, but those