

I am the Resurrection and the Life, Saith the Lord An Easter Sermon

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This sermon was delivered on Easter Sunday at St. Gabriel and All Angels, Liberal Catholic Church in Fairfield, Iowa in the U.S.A.

Good morning to all of you and Happy Easter. I wish particularly to welcome those of you who are not regular attendees at St. Gabriel's, and, even more especially, those of you who are not regular attendees at any church but who join us on one or both of the Two Great Christian Festivals—Christmas and Easter. I will speak today, in connection with Easter, about going to church and not going to church, but don't worry—I'm not going to criticize anybody or anybody's church going practices.

This morning we heard read to us St. Matthew's account of the Resurrection. Unfortunately, however, the version in our *Liberal Catholic Liturgy* leaves out a few words that, in my opinion, are very important. After the angel's words, "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead," the following words occur in St. Matthew's account: "and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you." And, after the disciples fall at Jesus' feet and worship Him, He says these words: "Be not afraid; go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me." Similarly, in St. Mark's account, the angel says these words to the first witnesses: "...he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you."

Now let's get back to church attendance.

St. Gabriel's, of course, like all churches, is a very holy place, but it is not the holiest Catholic church in the world. That honor would be reserved, in the opinion of most Christians, for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, which contains within its vast area the site of the crucifixion and death of Jesus and the site of his tomb, based on historical and archeological research. Throughout many centuries it has been considered very meritorious to go there and

pray, if only for a few minutes, at the site of Jesus' tomb and resurrection. I myself was privileged to do so about ten years ago.

Well, not too long ago I met up with one of my high school religion teachers, a Jesuit priest (I went to a Jesuit high school for four years), and he told me the following story:

He had been working in Africa for several years, in both the Sudan and Kenya, and, while in Kenya, he came to know a British Roman Catholic nun, who had been teaching adolescent boys for many years at a Roman Catholic school in Kenya. She was no longer young and had not been out of Kenya for many years, so, one day, she got this message from the head of her religious order. Her superior said, "Sister, you've been working very hard here for many years, so we think we should give you a little time off. Tell us where you want to go—anywhere in the world, for several weeks—and we'll pay your airfare, your hotel bills, and all your other expenses." She immediately replied, "I want to go the Holy Land." She left on an El Al plane, but, just a few days later, everybody at her convent and school got a big surprise: after only a few days she was back in Kenya—she didn't even last a week in the Holy Land. When they asked her what happened she gave an unforgettable explanation: she said that, when she entered the tomb of Jesus at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and knelt down to pray, she was forcibly reminded of these words of the angel at the tomb, "He is not here—He will meet you in Galilee." She realized immediately that Galilee for those who received that message was where they had come *from* when they came to the tomb, where their homes were, where their relatives and friends were, in short, where they lived their day to day lives. And in the same instant she realized that Galilee for her was that Catholic school in Kenya where she was working with those adolescent boys.

It's very interesting to reflect that, while the Easter narratives in all four gospels differ in many respects, they are all alike in one very important respect: in every account the witnesses are told to leave, and immediately, that very holy place, which today is considered the holiest of churches, and get back to Galilee, where they live their daily lives. The angel gives this command—to leave immediately and go to Galilee—in St. Matthew's and St. Mark's gospels. In St. John's gospel Mary Magdalene sees Jesus outside the tomb, whereupon he tells her not to embrace Him, "but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." In St. Luke's gospel no specific command is given, but we find this explicit mild rebuke: "Why seek ye the

living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen." In other words, "You fools, why are you looking here for the Lord of Life? This is a *tomb* for God's sake!"

Yes, it's a good thing to go to church, but, this gospel suggests, where it really is is outside church. Think of professional counseling or psychotherapy: what good does it do you if it becomes an end in itself, if it has no connection to your life outside the counselor's office?

In the gospel read in our Church today, Matthew's account, the witnesses are ordered to proclaim the "good news" of the resurrection, and, as they go forth to do that, we are told Jesus "met them on the way." What does it mean for us to proclaim the good news of the Resurrection? Not usually to go around like pests buttonholing people and saying, "Hey, did you hear about this man Jesus who rose from the dead two thousand years ago?" Our context is different from the context of those people two thousand years ago—everybody in our society has heard about these events; believe me, whether they believe anything or not, they've heard about it. To understand what such a proclamation means to us, I think, we need to recall the words of St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. *If necessary* use words. St. Francis was suggesting that our proclamation is not primarily religious discussion, but rather living the reality of the Resurrection in our own lives. How do we do that?

Easter is the point of Christianity. Good Friday is not really the point. Christmas is not even really the point because Jesus came at Christmas only to win the victory of Easter. Jesus entered His tomb only to come out of it, and, strictly speaking, not to come out of it Himself, but to lead us out of it, and, even more strictly speaking, not to lead us out of His tomb, but to lead us out of our tombs. We were already dead when Jesus died, and He died so that we might die to our limited dead identities and rise to authentic new life—that we might, in a sense, exchange His tomb for ours, and then follow Him out of it.

So we proclaim the Resurrection by coming out of our own tombs. For example, if you're addicted to some harmful substance, come out of that tomb. If you're a family man and everything with your wife and your children is a power struggle—if you're a "shut up and listen, my way or the highway type of guy," who doesn't consider the rightness or wrongness of anybody else's opinion but always has to "win," snap out of it, wake up, come out of that tomb! If you're a woman who sees men as "the enemy," give up that living death and start living a full human life. If you're given to espousing and articulating negative, pessimistic philosophies of life, rise from that tomb!

Easter Day in particular, but the whole Easter Season too, is a time when great spiritual energies are available to all of us, and the Eucharist is a wonderful conduit for those energies. We earnestly invite all of you—Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, everybody—to our communion table, and nobody here will disrespect your spiritual path or try to “convert” you. Ask the Lord Christ what tomb you most need to come out of this Easter. And then leave here today without your shroud, without the habiliments of the grave, and get back to Galilee. The people you live with will notice the difference, and, as was the case with these witnesses in today's gospel, He—i.e., the Lord Christ, will meet you “on the way.”

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