

The Resurrection of Our Lord

1 Corinthians 5:6-8: "Let Us Therefore Celebrate the Festival!"

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EXORDIUM

I know you are disappointed like I am that we are not able to celebrate our Lord's resurrection together in church. Not that there is ever a good time for a crisis, but I wondered why it had to happen now, at the high point of the Christian church year. For a number of you, this may be the first time in your life that you are not in church on Easter Sunday. It's hard to miss out on that. It's hard to be apart from your fellow congregation members, whom you love and who love you.

And then there are the difficulties on this day of not getting together with members of our extended family. This makes us feel sad and alone. Besides this, we are worried about the spread of a powerful virus, worried about its effect on the worldwide economy, worried about having enough for now and in the future. There are many who share these worries and fears. We wish this virus had never come. We wish we could go back to the way life was before. We were comfortable with that life.

But there were problems then too: health problems, financial problems, relationship problems. Since the fall into sin, there has never been a perfect time. There has always been trouble, hardship, and pain. And there has always been the threat of death. As more and more people are added to the statistics of the worldwide pandemic, death seems closer to us now than it did before.

That is why Easter could not have come at a better time. Easter provides a better hope and a surer comfort than "social distancing," "flattening the curve," or an effective antidote. Those things have their place. But our only real hope when we face uncertainty and death is Jesus. Jesus "*bore our griefs and carried our sorrows*" (Isa. 53:4) to the cross and died in payment for all our sin. Then after He had been placed in a tomb and a large stone was rolled over the entrance, He came alive again on the third day.

The very thing that causes us the most anxiety and fear had nothing on Jesus. He undid those chains that bind us so tightly, and He rose triumphant from the grave. Death had its chance at the Lord of Life, and death utterly failed. Jesus conquered death forever, and He conquered it for you. "*I am the resurrection and the life,*" said Jesus. "*Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live*" (Joh. 11:25).

This promise of life through Jesus is what the dying world needs. It is what you and I need. Jesus died for you, and He rose again for you. A joyous life awaits you in heaven where there will be no more worries, no more fears, no more troubles. Jesus lives, so you will live. That is something to celebrate wherever you are on this Easter day. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! We sing the hymn, "He Is Arisen! Glorious Word!" (ELH 348).

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The sermon text for today is taken from the fifth chapter of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, beginning at the sixth verse:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, to whom we are joined in Baptism and on whom our faith rests, dear fellow redeemed:

How do you typically celebrate the festival of Easter? Besides the activities at church, do you usually have a big dinner, maybe ham with all the fixings? Does Mom make a special dessert? Is there an Easter egg hunt or some other family activity? Those are all wonderful things, good ways to set the day apart.

In today's text, the apostle Paul urges us to remember one thing more: "Don't forget to *cleanse out the old leaven.*" He is not talking about how you should prepare your dinner rolls. He is talking about sin, sin which works its way through us like yeast in a lump of dough. This is "*the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil,*" which is contrasted with "*sincerity and truth.*"

"Already done!" we say. "I'm hardly malicious and evil, and I would definitely consider myself a sincere and truthful person." But that's the kind of thinking that shows the leaven is inside us. We just don't realize it. The inspired words of Paul are not asking for us to render a judgment about ourselves. They are a judgment. If there were no "*old leaven*" in us Christians, these words would not have needed to be written.

The leaven of sin is certainly still inside us. It makes us become "puffed up" with pride. It makes us "swell" with our own self-importance. It makes us think we are "too big" to serve or help a neighbor who needs it. If we hold the opinion that we are really good people, it will be easy for us to justify whatever we chose to do or not do. We find it easy to criticize the "bad" people in our community, who deserve whatever trouble comes their way. At the same time, we are eager to dismiss the wrongs of the "good" people we know, even when they are actively engaged in sins against God's law.

This was the case of the Christians in Corinth who were the first to receive Paul's letter. A member of the congregation there was involved in a sinful sexual relationship. And it wasn't just that the congregation ignored what was going on. They gave it their approval. Paul said they boasted about it! That is the context for the words of today's text: "*Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*" Sin affects not just the individual Christian but also the Church.

When we adopt a different moral code for ourselves or others, when we hold one another to a different standard than God does, we do away with Jesus' work on our behalf. Jesus did not die for what we consider sinful or not sinful. He died for what God says is sinful. This death for what God says is sinful is at the heart of today's text.

Paul writes that *"Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed."* Jesus was the perfect Passover Lamb, without blemish. He was offered up as the sacrifice for all sin. He let Himself be blamed for our wrongs. He suffered and died for our *"old leaven."* If we justify our sinning, if we say that we have no leaven to repent of, then Jesus died for nothing. If we embrace sin, we lose our Savior.

But if we embrace our Savior, we lose our sins. This is what Paul means when he says, *"cleanse out the old leaven."* He means to repent of sin and believe in Jesus. In Jesus we have new life. Our old lump of flesh is shaped into something useful. We are formed into *"a new lump,"* free from the self-inflating leaven of sin.

The Holy Spirit began this cleansing and reshaping of our lives at our Baptism. Paul writes that in Baptism, we were buried with Christ—*"our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin"* (Rom. 6:6). And in that same Baptism we were united with Him in His resurrection. Just as Jesus rose from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also *"walk in newness of life"* (6:4).

When we were baptized into Christ, life stopped being about us, what we wanted, what our desires and plans were. Then we gained a much higher calling and greater purpose. Then we were joined to the body of Christ like grains of wheat brought together into a loaf. By faith in Him, we now share in His holiness, His life, His majesty. All of His work was for our salvation: His triumph over sin, His victory over death, His glorious reign in heaven—all of it is ours.

"For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival." In the Old Testament, the Feast of Unleavened Bread began immediately after the Passover celebration (Deu. 16:1-8). The Passover reminded the people of their deliverance from slavery and death in Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminded them of the haste with which they left. There was not even time for the bread to rise!

Jesus is our Passover Lamb sacrificed on Good Friday. And His resurrection the following Sunday is the Feast of Unleavened Bread which we celebrate as long as we have breath. Jesus took care of all *"the old leaven."* It doesn't stick to us anymore. He cleansed it out by the shedding of His blood and left it buried when He rose from the grave.

That empty tomb where Jesus used to be on that first Easter, is the proof that your sins are forgiven. No matter what wrongs you have done, what sins you have fallen into, what guilt you carry, in Jesus you are found innocent. God the Father declares you *"not guilty"* because of what His Son has done. So we do not pursue sin; we pursue Him. We do not serve ourselves; we serve Him.

And through the powerful Word, the Holy Spirit continues shaping us in His image. He humbles us in order to work out the leaven that wants to rise up in us. And He strengthens us for whatever we must face in this life. There is nothing in our future that we will have to suffer through by ourselves – no trial, no pain, no sadness. We are joined with Jesus. He is our Bread of Life. He is our comfort, our hope, our joy in every trouble.

Even when the time comes for our earthly death, we do not enter it alone. We were already buried and raised with Jesus in Baptism, so death is nothing to fear. We enter death with the Lord of Life, the one whom “*death no longer has dominion over*” (Rom. 6:9). He has made death the door by which our soul enters His heavenly kingdom. And then He will come again in all power and glory and raise up our bodies from our temporary tombs, totally free from the leaven of this life.

Let Us Therefore Celebrate the Festival! Our victory is won! Our sin is forgiven! Heaven is ours! All of this because: The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! *Amen.*

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