

5. The Resurrection

Easter is the greatest feast of the year for Catholics.

We begin to prepare for it forty days before the feast itself. That period of preparation is called Lent. It is a time of special prayer and self-denial when we renew our efforts to live the Christian life more fully.

At Easter we celebrate the great central mystery of our faith, namely our redemption from sin and restoration to the friendship of God. We call it the Easter Mystery or the Paschal Mystery. We are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, not by his death alone.

By dying for us and rising again, Jesus made it possible for all men to pass over with him from the death of sin to the new life of friendship with God.

This is the very heart of our faith, our conviction that the Christ, whose life we share, has already overcome sin and death by his death and resurrection. We are convinced that all who live and suffer and die in union with him will also rise like him to a new a greater life beyond death.

"This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (1 John 5,4).

At the central point of our Mass, the priest invites all present to "proclaim the mystery of Faith". We all cry out together, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again".

Every time we go to Mass we re-live the Paschal Mystery of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the solemn ceremonies of Easter, we do this in a particularly elaborate and expressive way.

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The Hour of Glory

On several occasions Jesus foretold that he would be put to death and would rise again on the third day. He spoke of this as the hour, or time, of his glory and indicated that his whole mission in life was to reach that time.

Once he drove out of the courtyard of the Temple the men running a market there. The priests were annoyed and demanded proof that he had the right to do such things. He replied: "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will build it up." The Gospel goes on to say that he spoke of "the Temple of his body." His

disciples remembered these words after he was put to death and rose on the third day (John 2, 19-22).

This statement was brought up at his trial. Witnesses said that he had threatened to destroy the Temple. But the priests knew what he had meant, for when he was dead they said to Pilate: "We remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.'" They asked that his tomb should be guarded, lest his body be stolen by his followers (Matt. 27, 63-64).

On several occasions he told his apostles that he would be scourged and crucified and rise on the third day. Naturally he was afraid of the pain which this would cause, but he longed for it to happen. The twelfth chapter of St. John's Gospel tell how, when the time of his arrest was drawing near, he cried out: 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour . . . I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12 27-32). He longed for his hour of suffering because it would be the occasion of lifting Christians up with him. It was his hour of glory. On the last night of his life he cried to his Father: "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee" (John 17, 1).

The following is the account of his death, burial and resurrection given in the four Gospels.

The Burial of Jesus

The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John make it clear that Christ certainly died on the cross. St. John carefully describes how the soldier plunged the spear into the side of Christ, although he was obviously already dead. This was to make absolutely certain that the death penalty had been executed. St. John tells how there came out from the wound blood and water (John 19, 34).

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body down from the cross, wrapped it in linen cloths and put it into a new tomb cut out of the rock. The group of women from Galilee was with them. A great stone was rolled over the entrance and was sealed down by the priests.

Without intending to do so, they supplied a very strong piece of evidence that Christ did rise from the dead. St. Matthew tells how they went to Pilate and said:

"Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore order the sepulcher to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away, and tell

the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."

Pilate said to them: "You have a guard and soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the sepulcher secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Matt. 27, 63-66).

After he died, Jesus went to give the good news of salvation to the dead who had eagerly awaited the coming of the Saviour. Both St. Paul and St. Peter mention this:

"In saying 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?" (Eph. 4,9). "He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah" (1 Peter 3, 19-20).

They could not enter the joy of heaven until Christ had died and risen. The place where they waited is called Limbo. In the Creed as translated into English it is called "hell", but it was obviously not the place of the damned. In Old English the word "hell" had a much wider significance than is customary in modern English.

The Empty Tomb

The four accounts of the Gospel were written at different times and followed different traditions. The writers record different details of the account of the resurrection, but all clearly teach that Christ rose from the dead, was seen and spoken to by many witnesses after his resurrection.

Before dawn on the Sunday morning there was an earthquake and an angel from heaven came down to the tomb where Christ was buried, rolled away the great stone from the entrance and sat on it. His face and clothes were shining bright. The guards put there by the chief priest fell down in terror, then ran into the town to tell the priests what had happened. They were given a sum of money and told to spread the story around that the disciples of Christ had stolen the body by night. Mary Magdalene and a group of women had set out before dawn to go to the tomb and lay out the body of Christ properly. They had not had time to do this on the Friday night, and Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, the day of rest. They wondered who would roll back for them the great stone at the entrance to the tomb. When they arrived there they found to their surprise that it was already rolled back. A young man in bright clothes sat on it. They were afraid at the sight of him. He told them not to be afraid, that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had come to find, had risen again. He invited them to look into the tomb and see

that it was empty. Then he told them to go and tell St. Peter and the rest of the disciples that Christ would go ahead of them into Galilee.

Sts. Peter and John came running as soon as they heard the news from the women. John was the younger and arrived at the tomb before Peter. He tells us in the fourth Gospel how he did not enter, but stooped down to look into the tomb and saw the linen cloths that had been around the body of Christ.

St. Peter arrived after John but went straight into the tomb. He noted carefully that the cloths that had been round the body of Christ were in one place and the cloth that had been round his head was lying rolled up in another.

They went back and told the others.

Meetings with the Apostles and Disciples

Mary Magdalene stood outside the tomb weeping because she thought the body of Jesus had been stolen. She turned and saw him, but did not recognize him, probably because her eyes were full of tears, and in any case his body was changed in some mysterious way. It was different in appearance from the exhausted and bloody body that had hung on the cross. She thought the person in front of her might be the gardener and asked him where he had put the dead body. Jesus said simply: "Mary." She cried, "Master," and fell at his feet. He told her not to cling to him but to go and tell the others that he was risen.

That afternoon Christ met two of his disciples going on a short journey to a place called Emmaus. Because he was so changed they did not recognize him, but as they walked along the road they discussed what the Old Testament said about the Saviour. When they came to the place where they were to stay the night, they invited him in and he sat down at table with them. It was only when he blessed and broke the bread, as he had done at the Last Supper on the night before he died, that they recognized him. Then he disappeared and they returned to Jerusalem full of joy.

That night he visited the apostles gathered in a room with doors locked, for fear of the Jews. "Peace be with you," he said. He showed them the wounds in his hands and side so that they would know that he was flesh and blood and not a ghost and he ate a meal of roast fish and honey with them. One of them, St. Thomas, was absent on that occasion, and when on his return they told him about it he refused to believe. He said that unless he could see the marks of the nails in the hands of Christ and actually put his finger into the wounds in hands and side, he would not believe. Eight days later Christ appeared to them again when Thomas was present and invited him to touch his wounds.

He appeared to some of them when they were coming back from fishing on the sea of Galilee, sat with them on the shore of the lake and had breakfast with them. On that occasion he appointed Peter as the head of his Church on earth. This will be explained fully in Lesson 8.

The Ascension

During the next forty days he met his disciples frequently and had long conversations with them in which he explained his teaching and gave them further instructions. His final appearance was forty days after his resurrection. He had a meal with them and took them out to a village called Bethany, near Jerusalem. On a hill nearby called Mt. Oliver he spoke to them for the last time. He told them to go into the whole world and preach what he had taught them and baptize people in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. When he had finished speaking he rose into the air and finally disappeared from their sight behind a cloud.

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While the Apostles were standing gazing into heaven, there stood by them two young men in white robes, who said: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1, 11).

The Good News

The resurrection of Christ was the good news announced by the Apostles when they went out to preach their sermons. It is the good news which has been announced by the Church ever since.

We read in the second chapter of the "Acts of the Apostles" how St. Peter told the great crowds in Jerusalem on the Feast of Pentecost that they had put to death the Saviour, the Son of God, but that he had risen from the dead. Hundreds of those listening to him had seen Christ crucified. Thousands knew of it from eye-witnesses. There were many eye-witnesses who testified publicly that he had risen from the dead. They had met him several times after his death, spoken to him, eaten with him, even touched him.

Large numbers were convinced by the preaching of the Apostles. They came to St. Peter and asked: "What shall we do?" He replied: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ." Three thousand of them were baptized on that day and the number of Christians continued to increase rapidly day by day. What had convinced them more than anything else was the resurrection (Acts 2, 37-42).

The Witness of St. Paul

When Saul, the ardent Jewish rabbi, was hurrying to Damascus to hunt out Christians and put them to death, he was struck down. The ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles tell how he saw a blinding flash of light and heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He said: "Who are you, Lord?" The reply was: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." He was led blind into Damascus, but received his sight back, was baptized and became a zealous teacher in the cause of Christ. He never forgot that vision of the risen Christ. In the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians he gives this witness to the resurrection.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor. 15, 3-8).

He goes on to ask how anyone can say that Christians will not rise again from the dead. He says:

"If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 15, 14).

But he insists that Christ did rise again from the dead and that therefore all united with him will also rise.

Baptism and Resurrection

St. Peter and the eleven other apostles insisted that all who believe in Christ must be baptized in his name, in order to receive the Spirit of God. St. Paul throughout his writings frequently explained the connection between the resurrection of Christ and the baptism of the Christian.

To be baptized means to be plunged under water, or to have water poured over the head. The Jews, and in particular John the Baptist, practiced this rite before the coming of Christ. The pouring of the water was a sign that they wished to be washed clean of sin by God. It was also a sign that they desired life from him. Water is a natural sign of life since there can be no life in Nature without it. For the Jews it was also a sign of the Spirit of God who gives life.

Jesus taught his Apostles to use this sign. But his Baptism was not just a sign. It did not merely suggest cleansing, it actually did cleanse from sin. It did not merely suggest life, it gave divine life. It did not merely suggest the Spirit of God, it gave the Spirit.

Christ rose from the dead to lift up men into glory. To rise with him they must be united to him by living his divine life. They receive it in Baptism. It is then through Baptism that they live Christ's life, imperfectly on this earth, and eventually will live it perfectly when they are raised up with him in glory.

St. Paul compares Baptism to the resurrection. Christ went down into the grave and rose from it into the glory of heaven. The Christian goes down under the water and rises to the glory of new life, the life of Christ. He lives this new life imperfectly on this earth. But if he remains united to Christ till death, he will rise to live with him in the perfect glory of heaven.

In the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6, 3-4).

This is the great and consoling joy of the Christian, the conviction that if he lives with Christ he will rise in glory with him. St. Paul says:

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6, 5).

Salvation through the Resurrection

The writers of the New testament hardly ever separate the death of Christ from his resurrection. They teach that Christians are saved not by Christ's death alone, but by his death and resurrection. He died in order to rise. Death and resurrection were part of the one movement, his passage to his Father in heaven. And he passed to his Father in heaven that he might lift up men with him that they might live for ever in glory.

So St. Paul says that Jesus was "put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4, 25). And again he writes, "And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5, 15).

Christ the conquering hero

At the resurrection and ascension of Christ, human nature in him was completely filled with the Spirit of God and lifted up into glory. This is a cause of great joy and hope for the human race. It has a representative before God who is always pleading the cause of mankind. Moreover Christ has something to show for his labours on earth. He is the conquering hero, for ever showing to the Father the wounds which he received in his victorious battle against evil on behalf of man.

There is a further cause for joy and hope. Those who are united to Christ by faith in him and share his life will be lifted up with him into glory if they remain united to him till the end.

There is no room then for depression and despair in the Christian life. It is full of hope. Death is a great tragedy for those who have no hope of a life hereafter. But death for the Christian is but the entrance into glorious life.

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Guardsman Gallagher of the 1st Battalion Irish Guards was short in the back in Palestine in 1948 on a bren-gun carrier taking water to an isolated Jewish settlement in the hills above the sea of Galilee. He was six-feet-two, had been decorated for gallantry and was admired by all ranks for his humble and brave service in many campaigns.

He was buried in the British Military Cemetery beneath Mt. Carmel on the road from Haifa to Athlit. The pipes played a lament as the funeral party followed the coffin to the grave. When the funeral prayers had been said by the priest, the firing party fired a salute and the bugles sounded the Last Post. As the plaintive notes echoed over the slopes where some of the prophets and hundreds of Carmelite monks had been buried, sad thoughts of a young life stupidly wasted lay heavy on the mind.

Then the bugles sounded the Reveille, the stirring call with which the Army bids the soldiers rise and begin the day's service. Then the words of the hymn full of faith and hope, which comes near the end of the first letter to the Corinthians, came to mind, and sadness was dispelled (1 Cor. 15, 52-55).

"For the trumpet will sound

**and the dead will be raised imperishable,
and we shall be changed.
For this perishable nature
must put on the imperishable,
and this mortal nature
must put on immortality.
When the perishable
puts on the imperishable,
and the mortal
puts on immortality,
then shall come to pass
the saying that is written:
'Death is swallowed up in victory.'
'O death, where is thy victory?
O death, where is thy sting?'"**

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POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. comment on this passage from the Vatican Council's document on the Church. "In the human nature united to himself the Son of God, by overcoming death through his own death and resurrection, redeemed man and remoulded him into a new creation".
2. How does the Resurrection assure us that Christ is God?
3. Which apparition of Christ do you consider the most impressive?
4. What was the final command given by Christ to his disciples before he went to heaven?
5. What significance did St. Peter and St. Paul attach to the Resurrection when telling others about Christ?
6. What connection do you see between the Resurrection and being baptized?