

## EASTER – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

*Amen.*

I think there are five major events in a human life as we record them liturgically, that is, in a place like this, in words and actions and by the use of symbols that we find to communicate meaning that is beyond the gift of words. Today we celebrate the middle event, Easter, the one we are asked to believe is central to God's intentions for humanity.

Let's start at the beginning: The first major event we observe, that is, we note and mark and set apart for special celebrations, is our baptism. We are born into a family, but we are baptized into something much larger, a household of faith, a body of people who believe in God, who live for God, who incorporate us into the loving arms of God. This is a very specific and individual matter, but it can happen for every one of us, with no limits, no disqualifications. No one ever has the right to say that someone else does not belong. No one can get in the way between a person and God—at least not in God's eyes.

The second major event is Christmas, when we are given the gift of the life of Jesus who helps us to realize the value of the gift of our own life. Christmas is everyone's gift, and is shared by many throughout the world who do not even have the slightest idea of the original meaning of it. It is wonderful that even the secular version of it communicates the essence of it in popular culture. We might prefer that everyone know and understand the source of what it means to give and receive the Christ, but the most important thing is that they catch on and try to live the love that God creates us to be in this world.

The third event is Easter, which comes right after what seems to be an awful tragedy: death; not only that, but ignominious, demeaning, dehumanizing death. It reminds me of a saying from my theology professor: “Do you know what the second greatest gift to humanity is? The answer is Death, because it reminds us how valuable life is.” Have you ever thought of it that way before? Easter is the celebration of new beginnings for whatever is old or broken-down, or lifeless, or hopeless. Easter is the resurrection not only of hope and the possibility of looking forward again, but it is also the promise and reality of *living in love* again. That is, really living!

The fourth major event is Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit of power and possibilities, the gift of dreaming dreams and having visions and finding within ourselves and those among whom we live the capacity to make those dreams come true, to bring vision into reality, to become more than we ever imagined, to become what God imagines.

The fifth major event is death, and by that, I mean death and our observations of it, our loved ones committing our body to the ground and commending our soul to God. Death and burial is the closing of our final chapter on this earth, but it is not the closing of the book. The rest of the book of our life is still to be written in God’s Book of Life, which we only glimpse right now, as Paul says, “through a glass darkly.” When we die, we believe we shall see clearly.

For many years, I preached on this day: “*we are the Easter People!*” I believed it then, all those years ago, and I believe it now. I am happy to proclaim it, and every year I relish repeating the threefold cry “Alleluia, Christ is Risen!” which St. John Chrysostom gave to the Church almost twenty centuries ago.

Yet I have observed some other dimensions of human life which cloud that proclamation.

So many of us become preoccupied in life with fear and death and anger and resentment, are tied in knots by griefs and sorrows, or are incapacitated by prejudices and hatreds, that we are so very often living in the Good Friday of life, nailed to the cross for what seems eternity.

Spending Lent and Holy Week in Antigua, Guatemala, some twenty years ago, I saw this very clearly. On Good Friday the churches were all packed to the rafters, and on Easter they were, at best, half full. I can appreciate that many of the people, with a far lower income than mine, with far fewer opportunities, with far more oppression (that's the big one), needed the comfort of Jesus the Nazarene, bearing his cross in parade after parade of that Lenten season, on the Via dolorosa—the Way of Sorrow—on the way to Golgotha where Jesus was nailed to and died on the cross. They knew and know themselves to be seen and understood and cared for, and most especially, they know themselves to be *loved* by the Jesus who clearly suffers as much as any of us do. I know many people who suffer in similar ways, yet have also deeply heard the gospel of Resurrection, and are able to celebrate it. But many do not, or perhaps cannot yet celebrate Resurrection.

In our culture, which has at least preached a Resurrection gospel, I find we can be similarly limited in our ability to celebrate it. The difference is that in our culture we are more likely to be afraid of observing Good Friday because we do not want or know how to name our pain, to name that which binds us, or what confines us and keeps us down. We may celebrate Easter more openly as a culture, but it is so often about bunnies and chickies and competitive egg hunts which raise our greedy hopes and mercenary attitudes. I have to wonder: what are we really teaching our children? Some of those observances, rather than freeing us from the death we experience in our souls, deny it or obliterate it. And yet we cannot be healed or released from what we cannot name.

We are the Easter People, I still affirm that, but I want to say it in a particular way. Years ago we changed the profession of faith we use when saying the Nicene Creed. Instead of saying “I believe,” as in the Apostles’ or Baptismal Creed we use today, we now proclaim, “We believe.” That may seem like a little thing, but not so. On any given day, I might not believe some particular parts of what we proclaim in the creed, or, on really bad days, I may not believe any of it at all. Because I do not believe it that day does not make it any less true. Saying “WE BELIEVE” gives us all a chance to hang on, to hang in there, riding, at times, on the faith of the people on either side of us, trusting that their faith can carry me—can carry us—across a chasm of doubt or fear or even despair, until our hearts and minds can again be gripped by and filled with hope, the hope that gives us the courage and capacity to keep on loving.

May I remind us: we cannot be Easter Persons alone, all by ourselves, without being a part of God’s Easter People. We know resurrection by the sharing of it, for we remind each other by our forgiveness and by our loving what it is to be born again. *Amen.*

*+JLJ*