Homily for the Easter Vigil

S. Stephen’s, Providence

April 3, 2021

“Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

He is not here; for he has risen, as he said.”

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alleluia. Christ is Risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

How holy is this night.

How holy and blessed, indeed.

In some ways, the words of the Exsultet,

together with the Gospel reading,

say all that we need to say about tonight.

This is the Passover of God,

the night when Christ broke the bonds of death,

and burst the gates of hell,

offering life and immortality to all who would believe in him.

This is the night,

as was sung in the Exsultet,

when man is finally reconciled to God:

after thousands of years of covenant and promise,

which we heard in the prophecies,

humanity is finally reconciled to God,

through nothing we did.

Rather, it is all from God –

God becomes one of us,

lives and dies as one of us,

and by his own death destroys death.

The religious authorities who had plotted against Jesus,

and the Romans who had conspired with them to kill Jesus,

surely thought that the lifeless, disfigured corpse taken down from the cross

was the last the world would ever know of this Jesus of Nazareth.

And yet through that complete self-emptying,

God finally demonstrated that when love and self-sacrifice persist,

sin and death are no match.

Frankly, while we tend to shy away from militant or muscular language

around God and our faith these days,

I can think of no better way to frame the events that we celebrate tonight.

The forces of evil and wickedness threw all they had at Jesus.

Jesus, through his passion and death,

met all that evil had to throw at him head on.

He would not give in.

Because he would not give up or concede, he prevailed.

Good and Evil, Life and Death

engaged in stupendous combat,

and Christ was the victor.

Descending into the realms of the dead,

he offered salvation to all those who had trusted and hoped in the God of Israel,

and who had long awaited this promised Lord and Savior.

One of my favorite icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition

is the Icon of the Resurrection.

Christ stands victorious, emerging out of the tomb,

the gates of death and hell having been knocked aside.

But Christ doesn’t stand there alone:

below him, being pulled up by their arms

are Adam and Eve.

They whose very disobedience resulted in the Fall and the state of human sin

are the first to be restored to life and immortality.

All the patriarchs and prophets who had hoped in God with faith

are likewise rewarded:

Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David,

Sarah, Rachel, Leah, and Miriam.

And having offered salvation and preached the Gospel

to all those who had already fallen asleep,

Christ then returns to offer this salvation to the rest of the world,

and to show his disciples that he is Risen,

so that salvation may begin in Jerusalem and Galilee,

and continue out across the world throughout all ages.

The Resurrection is, in a way,

like a mega-nuclear bomb in the fabric of time and space,

extending in all directions,

both into the past and into the future, as well as the present.

As much as you will not like hearing this,

the notion that somehow human progress is linear,

or that we only get better and smarter,

is a lie.

Yes, technology changes and improves,

but we humans are ultimately the same as we were two thousand years ago.

People, societies, civilizations, and empires are all cyclical:

they ebb and flow, they rise and fall:

our human behavior and mortal nature go unchanged.

You only need look at the past year and the global pandemic to see that.

Whether time is linear or cyclical,

the fact of the Resurrection stands as a huge interruption in the middle of it all –

it changes everything that came before, and everything that will come after.

Even the Creation itself is made new by Christ’s resurrection.

Christ, present at Creation and himself the active Word of God,

by whom and through whom all things were made,

redeems not just humanity, but the entire cosmos as well.

The enormity and magnitude of this event are conveyed to us

in Matthew’s account, as we heard moments ago:

“And behold, there was a great earthquake;

for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven

and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.”

Coincidentally, that is the very angel depicted on the door of the altar tabernacle,

and likewise, our Easter altar frontal that adorns the high altar.

The earth shakes at the magnitude of this event –

it is something that is filled with might and strength,

and in fact, the first emotions experienced by all are not joy, but fear.

This angel of the Lord is so frightening that the soldiers flee,

and the women who had gone to the tomb are likewise filled with terror.

But as always, angels do what angels do, and his first words are

“Do not be afraid.”

“Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.”

It is the angel who then announces to them what it all means.

“He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”

Go and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead.

Do not fear. Words for our present time if ever we needed them.

And so I leave you with the closing portion

of that great Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom.  
  
Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.  
He has destroyed it by enduring it.  
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.  
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.  
  
Isaiah foretold this when he said,  
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."  
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.  
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.  
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.  
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.  
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.  
  
Hell took a body, and discovered God.  
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.  
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.  
  
O death, where is thy sting?  
O Hell, where is thy victory?  
  
Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!  
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!  
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!  
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!  
  
Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;  
for Christ having risen from the dead,  
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.  
  
To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!