

Low Sunday (Easter I)
The Rev. Dcn. C. Lance Davis

“Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:
therefore let us keep the feast.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

These words I have just read, taken from St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, form the opening verse of a canticle known as the *Pascha Nostrum*, which the Prayer-Book orders to be sung at the beginning of Mattins on Easter Sunday and throughout Easter week. This canticle, a mere eight verses long, speaks of “death” nine times, and “resurrection” only thrice. Why is it that the Church’s liturgy for the great Feast of the Resurrection appoints a hymn whose lyrics are dominated by references to death and sacrifice?

No doubt by now, you have all noticed the beautiful crucifix which has taken up residence just behind me here at the pulpit. I imagine some of you, particularly if you did not grow up in the Catholic tradition, may wonder why such a visceral representation of Christ’s suffering would be given such a prominent place in the

church now that Good Friday is behind us. Wouldn't an empty cross be more appropriate?

Growing up in a protestant household in the South, the image of the crucifix was not something I encountered regularly. Yet, when I was in high school, my father gifted me an impressive solid gold crucifix meant to be worn as a necklace. I was compelled by its beauty, and proudly wore it as an expression of my faith in Christ. The first time I went to school with that crucifix around my neck, I was amazed at some of the comments I received. "What are you, a Catholic?" I was pejoratively asked. "The commandment prohibits graven images." "Don't you know that he isn't on that cross anymore?" In reality, all of these criticisms—though perhaps well meant—were borne out of a fundamental misunderstanding of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection.

So why did Christ die? Christ died because we were dead, corrupted by the disease of sin. Though created in the image and likeness of God, our first parents Adam and Eve fell by the deceits of the devil. Their sin incurred not guilt or some legal penalty, but rather death. "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Christ—the sinless one, who alone among men did not deserve death—came to rescue us from our prison. He became what we are—flesh, blood, and bones—that we might become as he is. Dying, he destroyed our death; rising, he restores us to life.

The crucifix, with its depiction of Christ dead on the cross, is a stark—and sometimes uncomfortable—reminder of this agony and sacrifice endured by our Saviour. It portrays the depths of human misery, the vileness of sin, and the magnitude of God’s love for his creation. It is a symbol of humility, of selflessness, and of mercy. Our Lord’s crucifixion is the heart of the Gospel and the crux of Christianity. “We preach Christ *crucified*,” St. Paul says, “an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, [but to us] the power and the wisdom of God.” The crucifix proclaims the Gospel better than any other medium, precisely because it so clearly presents the profound paradox of Christian faith: the seeming contradiction of life emerging out of death, of victory born from defeat. It reminds us that the resurrection was not a triumph *over* suffering, but a *transformation of it*. It is through the wounds of Christ that we find healing, through his death that we are made alive. The crucifix speaks to those who are oppressed, marginalized, and downtrodden, offering them solace in the knowledge that Christ himself experienced their pain. It is a symbol of solidarity, of compassion, and of the promise that God is present even in the depths of despair.

The idea—so popular in much of American cultural Christianity—that Christ suffered so we don’t have to is false. “Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” “[But we] were called [to suffer],” says St. Peter,

“because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that [we] should follow his steps.” The whole essence of the spiritual life is to die to the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are commanded to suffer with Christ, to participate in his one redeeming sacrifice at Calvary. It was not a memorial of his Resurrection that Christ left us at the Last Supper, but a memorial of “his precious death and sacrifice,” whereby Christ “did humble himself, even to the death upon the Cross, for us, miserable sinners, who lay in darkness and the shadow of death; that he might make us the children of God.”¹

This call to suffer with Christ is an invitation to love, to empathy, and to compassion. Through the crucifix, we glimpse the Sacred Heart of Our Lord. “He who does not fall in love with God by looking at Christ dead upon the cross will never fall in love with anything.” When God punished the disobedient Israelites in the desert with a plague of venomous serpents, the remedy prescribed to them by God was to gaze upon the very thing that had brought about their destruction: a snake mounted on a pole. Likewise we need to be confronted with the full horror of the disease of sin, by gazing not at merely an empty cross, but upon the lifeless body of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. In order to be healed, we need to see the crucifix.

¹ BCP Exhortation.

But when we look at that crucifix, it is never without the awareness that Christ's suffering ended in the victory of the resurrection. It is not without significance that St. Thomas and the Apostles did not truly believe the resurrection until they gazed upon the wounds of the crucifixion still visible in Our Lord's glorified body. The resurrection does not undo the crucifixion, but rather makes it eternal. Christ is the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," who pleads his own sacrificed blood before the Father in heaven and upon the Altars of his Church. Indeed, without the crucifixion there is no resurrection; and without the resurrection there is no salvation; for "if Christ be not raised, [our] faith is vain; [and we] are yet in [our] sins."

It is because of all this that the crucifix is the ultimate sign of victory, promise, and hope. The crucified and resurrected flesh of God is the source of salvation. It is the solace of humanity, the victory over Satan, a terror to demons, the cleansing of sin, and the gateway to heaven. If we embrace Christ in his death, he will embrace us in his life. The future Our Lord vows to give us is not one of absorption into some cosmic consciousness, it is not reincarnation into some other life-form, nor is it a bodiless eternity in some ethereal heaven—no, on the contrary, the future of every single person who has ever and will ever live is resurrection: in our physical bodies, freed from sin, death, and corruption, reigning with Our Lord in his restored and glorified creation.

The crucifix, then, is not merely a reminder of death, but the promise of resurrection—a promise that gives meaning to our suffering, purpose to our lives, and hope to our souls. The image of Christ crucified should be ever before our eyes, it should take pride of place in our churches and in our homes, because the death of the God-Man is the turning point of history and the redemption of the world. If you don't have a crucifix in your house, get one, and be sure to bring it to the church to be blessed. We should never be ashamed to look on him who was pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities, for it is only through the cross that God's infinite mercy and love are most perfectly revealed, our salvation secured, our fallen nature healed, and our resurrection guaranteed.

“O Christian Soul, look on the Wounds of the Suffering One, the Blood of the Dying One, the price paid for our redemption. These things, O think how great they be and weigh them in the balance of thy mind, that He may be wholly nailed to thy heart, Who was for thee all nailed unto the Cross.” —St. Augustine

Amen.