

E A S T E R

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

Easter Day is the great festival of the Christian church. All Christian denominations are united in observing this anniversary of our Lord's resurrection, for it is the fact of the resurrection which gives the Christian gospel its basic and its motive power - death defeated. The first Easter Day saw the beginning of the transformation of the disciples from frightened dis-spirited men to a band of courageous, enthusiastic preachers, willing to face suffering and death for the sake of the message they had been commissioned to give by their risen Master. Indeed the change in the character of the disciples is in itself a strong proof of the fact of the resurrection. You will remember how that a day or two before, they had all run away when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Only Peter summoned up enough courage to follow at a distance, but even that courage evaporated when he was accosted by the serving girl, and three times over he denied any relationship to Jesus. Then we read that in the evening of the third day after the crucifixion when the disciples were assembled they still kept the doors locked because they were afraid. We can easily understand their feelings. It was while behind these locked doors that Jesus came to them, and the knowledge of His resurrection transformed those disciples, so that shortly afterwards they were able to say in front of that same Jewish Council that had condemned their Master, "We must

obey God rather than men. We cannot but preach the things that we have seen and heard".

How are we to explain this change in the disciples' character apart from the reality of the resurrection? and it is even more difficult to explain away the fact of the empty tomb. You will remember that Jesus had been publicly crucified and the reality of His death had been attested to by the Roman officer in charge. Pilate the Governor had made specific enquiry on the point. After that, Jesus' body had been buried by Joseph of Arimathaea, (doubtless with the help of his servants), and a heavy stone which took more than one man to move had been rolled up to close the door of the rock-hewn sepulchre. That was on Friday evening; yet early on Sunday morning the tomb was found empty and the stone rolled back. You may be sure that when the gospel of the resurrection began to be preached in that very same city of Jerusalem where Christ had been buried the Jewish opponents of the disciples would have inspected the tomb. How easy it would have been to squash the new gospel simply by producing the body of Jesus! One may be sure that sceptical Thomas, for example, amongst the disciples, or Saul of Tarsus amongst the opponents of Christianity, would have certainly checked on so simple a point as to whether the tomb was empty. But no suggestion to the contrary was ever made; so the empty tomb becomes an

irrefragable fact of history. But how did it become empty? What happened to the body of Jesus? His enemies would not have removed it and kept silence since the whole gospel sprang from His resurrection, nor could His friends have removed it; for then they would not have been able to sustain the life of persecution which they were to endure in subsequent years, if all the time they were conscious that it was a fraud. The only adequate explanation of the empty tomb is that which is given in the gospels, namely that God, the all powerful Creator, raised Jesus from the dead; and this explanation is confirmed by the testimony of the disciples who witnessed clearly to the fact that Jesus appeared to them not once, nor twice, but often, after His resurrection, and that He had commissioned them to preach the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in His name. This clear testimony of reliable men is not easily set aside.

Naturally then Christians celebrate this great event with enthusiasm and unanimity; for the resurrection of Christ means that death has been overcome. Death is the great alien element in life. Have you noticed that everything else that happens to us by way of nature is more or less pleasant, I mean to say, eating and drinking to sustain life, growing up, marrying, forming a home; all these things are pleasurable and looked forward to. God has made our life like that, for He is a God of love. But death is

quite different. It is something alien to life. It cuts right across everything. The Bible gives us the reason: death is not part of God's design for man but it is the consequence of our sin, of our rebellion and turning against God. We have cut ourselves off from God through self will and as He alone is the source of life, death is now our portion, not only physical death (this is really only the outward sign) but real death, spiritual, eternal death, separation from the living God for ever in Hell.

Death is the result of our turning from God. As St Paul put it, "As through one man sin entered the world and death through sin, so death passed upon all men for that all had sinned". But the message of Easter is that Christ has overcome sin. He has borne our sins in His own body on the tree; never Himself giving way to sin even in the slightest, and so death had no claim on Him. He rose again, raised by the same power of God which created us all in the first place. He died for our sins, and He rose again because His death was accepted as our sin offering. Through it we have been forgiven with God. He is the forerunner of our own future resurrection, and His resurrection is the proof and guarantee that if we become united with Him by putting our faith in Him and accepting Him as our Lord we also will rise again, through that same power of God which raised Christ from the dead. Death has thus had its sting drawn,

for Christ who died is now risen from the dead: "As by man came death, so by man came also the resurrection of the dead". Now He is exalted to God's right hand and we look forward to His return, for "God has given Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow" - Scripture urges us to keep these facts vividly in mind. Since Christ has risen and we with Him we should set our minds on things above.

But Christ is not only our sin bearer and the fore-runner of our resurrection, but He is also the example by which we should now live. Faith in God was the basis of Christ's life and the principle by which He lived. It was through faith in God that He endured the cross. This is brought out in Hebrews 12:4, which says that for the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross. He is the exemplar and perfecter of faith. And we are called on to exercise the same faith. His faith in God was tested in the Garden of Gethsemane in that famous prayer "Father may this cup pass from me, yet not my will but Thine be done"; and it finds expression in the words which He spoke shortly afterwards to the disciples "The cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?" There are also other passages in the Bible which speak of the faith which Christ as man put in His Heavenly Father, such as the words in Hebrews 2 "I will put my trust in Him", and in Isaiah 50:7-9

where again Christians are exhorted to exercise similar faith. In this fundamental activity of living by faith in God, as in everything else, Christ is our example. However, some traditional writers have denied that Christ ever exercised faith; and so He would not be our example in this all important matter of living the life of faith. At this point they follow medieval tradition which had difficulty at this point in reconciling Christ's Godhead and manhood. The teaching that Jesus never exercised faith goes back to Pope Gregory the Great and to Thomas Aquinas who in his Summa III-7-3 said explicitly "There was no faith in Christ". In this Aquinas was following reason rather than Scripture but as a consequence of his teaching Roman Catholic authors are constrained to explain away rather the biblical texts, which teach plainly that Jesus lived his life by faith. The Roman Catholic writer Ludwig Ott writes on page 262 of his book "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma", "Because of the completeness of Christ's knowledge He could not possess the theological virtues of faith and hope." Here dogma determines the interpretation. This is a good example of how tradition, if once admitted to an equality with the authority of the Bible, gets the better of the plain teaching of the Bible. However, as we have seen the Bible sets before us quite clearly that in his exercise of faith, as in everything else, Jesus is an example to follow. We too must

put our faith and hope in God. Our Lord was able to do the will of God perfectly because of His unwavering faith in His Heavenly Father. Through His perfect obedience (which led Him through dark Gethsemane to the desolation of Calvary) He has borne our sins and obtained complete forgiveness for us. On this God has set His seal by raising Him on the third day, and we are now invited to receive the full and complete forgiveness of our sins by putting our faith in Christ, and to live by the hope of our own resurrection of which His most certain resurrection is the guarantee, and in the light of this hope to live day by day a life of trust in the perfect will of God which characterised our Saviour. As Hebrews puts it, "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who hath endured such gainsaying of sinners against Himself, that ye wax not weary."

4. 6.4.69.