

Easter IV (7 May 2023)

“Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you.”

+In the Name...

When you were a child, did your parents ever make a decision for you with which you did not agree, and then follow it up with the words, “This is for your own good”? While I have attempted to purge those incidents from my memory, they are still back there lingering, waiting for such an opportunity for illustration as this one. “This is for your own good” was probably only edged out by “This will hurt me more than it will hurt you” in sheer unpopularity. Is this not what Our Lord is saying to the apostles in the Gospel reading this morning? You do not understand why I must leave, and you will not like it regardless of the reason anyway, so I am still going to leave for a while.” And so the disciples sit there dumbfounded, just like you and I did when our parents enforced some despicable rule like making us brush our teeth after meals or going to bed at a reasonable hour when there was school the next morning.

Yet despite near universal scorn from children, our parents continued to make decisions “for our own good”. As we matured, we realized that our parents were not as unreasonable as we first thought they were. Presumably we reached that conclusion, or else we would not continue to tell our own children the same thing!

A wonderful aspect of the Christian faith is that it involves us, made members of Holy Mother Church by our baptism, in an ongoing process. Baptism is not the end. Holy Communion is not the end. Confirmation is not the end. Salvation is an ongoing process that began on Good Friday when Our Lord died on the cross and will continue for each one of us until we have passed on and hear those glorious words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

But I am getting ahead of myself. The apostles are not there yet because they are still trying to make sense of where Jesus is going and why they will not be able to follow Him. Wouldn't it be nice if the Resurrected Lord could just stay here with us? Imagine the ease with which doctrinal matters could be solved: "Jesus, when you said 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood', were you being figurative or literal? What did you mean when you told Peter he was the rock on which You were going to build Your Church? How do you keep everyone from bringing potato salad to the potluck?" Okay, so perhaps some issues are beyond the realm of solutions for even the Originator of theology, but you see my point that denominationalism would practically melt away. Not only do we not have Our Risen Lord here with us, unlike the Apostles we do not even have the luxury of having seen the Risen Lord! But lest we think we have it worse than anyone else, at least we know through the writings of Holy Scripture that Christ existed in history and also rose again from the dead. Our old friend Job was lacking the New Testament, but even in the throes of despair, he could convincingly proclaim, "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." [Pause.] Now that is faith!

To believe that the Lord is Risen, is to believe that He is present in a radical and wonderful way. His powerful presence is accessible only by faith — this is because He has ascended into heaven. Such is the substance of our hope. When we cleave to Him by faith, because His presence is real and personal, He raises us up with Him. When Mary Magdalene calls out to the Risen Lord, He tells her not to cling to Him because He has not yet ascended to the Father. He sends her to His Apostles to announce to them the Resurrection. His words reveal that someday she will possess Him in a more marvelous way — but He must ascend from the midst of this life first, in order that this new presence can be known. She will have the

fullness of faith when the Holy Ghost descends on her. By the faith the Holy Ghost produces, Mary Magdalene will be raised up to new life – and with that life, she will be able to cling to the One whom she loves — and Who loves her even more.

Christian faith is a not self-generated psychological exercise. It is part of the new creation, the new humanity which the Risen Lord has established by His victory over death. His Gift of the Holy Ghost produces the faith. This is why He ascended into Heaven. That great helper and strengthener, the Holy Ghost, could only descend on us if Christ ascended to His Father. What a gift faith is! Doubts and difficulties of all kinds might afflict the soul — but our faith can keep us strong. This assent of the will is given if we ask for it in even in trying circumstances. The darkest trials cannot defeat it because it communicates something to the mind which no affliction in this world – no height, nor depth – can shake. In fact, such trials when endured with love, and by love, make faith stronger.

Even though Mary Magdalene cannot yet cling to Him, the faith of the Apostles is stirred by her message. They run to find the empty tomb and encounter the Lord for themselves. They hear His voice and speak to Him. They see His body. They touch his wounds. They eat with Him. But they cannot yet cling to Him.

Though He has conquered death, He must leave this world because His Kingdom is not of this world. He must ascend above this life so that the faith of the Apostles in Him will raise them up above this life too. The Resurrection was not about any mere restoration of an earthly paradise — it is about access to Heaven. This is a new humanity — humanity, with power that exceeds what this world can contain; a humanity which is filled with what is eternal. What about us, here and now? The Risen Jesus longs for us to be where He is — and He is now ascended,

and ascended He reigns at the right hand of the Father. Now we can cling to Him by faith.

Christian contemplation and theology converge on the objective and personal presence of the Risen Lord. By objective, we know He is present to us quite apart from whether we feel or imagine Him. By personal, we know that our faith opens up a real heart-to-heart relationship with Him. This is not fluff — it is the substance of our hope.

This objective and personal faith is not limited to knowing things about the Lord; the Christian faith discloses the mysterious depths of God so that we can really know Him and His great love. To know these depths, to delve into them in prayer, to search them in sacred doctrine and Holy Scripture — such things raise us up with Him so that we might dwell where He dwells. In all this the fullness of joy is ours, even now in a hidden way, here below the banquet has begun in mystery, and all this as we learn to cling to Him.

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