

Ps 16:5
Ps 30:2
Ps 6:2,3,4
Hy 51:1,2,3,4
Hy 51:5,6,7,8
1 Corinthians 15:1-20; 50-58
Ephesians 1:1-10
Lord's Day 17

Yarrow, April 4, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

I'm not aware of any of us ever having witnessed a resurrection. They just don't happen; those who die remain dead. The Lord's words in Genesis 2:17 loom large in our minds; if you sin, you die. And we and our loved ones have sinned....

By the providence of God we are meant on this Easter Sunday to listen to the word of the Lord about the Lord's resurrection from the dead. The Scripture is insistent: the Saviour who was buried on Good Friday arose from the grave on Easter Sunday. The Bible records that some arose from the dead before Him (2 Kings 4:35; 13:21; Matthew 9:25; Luke 7:15; John 11:44), records too that many arose on the day of His death (Matthew 27:52f), and gives an example or two of persons who arose after He did (Acts 20:10). But none of us have seen it; we know it only from the Word of God. And what we hear from Scripture strikes us as intriguingly impossible; though we'd love our loved ones to arise from the dead, we simply don't expect it to happen – for the dead simply don't arise....

Our faith, though, congregation, is to trump experience. The Lord tells us realities far beyond what the eye has seen or science can explain, and that's because the world is far more wonderful, and the God of this world far greater, than creatures can ever determine. In point of fact, Christ's resurrection is real – and so our resurrection assured.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S TRIUMPHANT RESURRECTION GUARANTEES OUR BLESSED RESURRECTION.

Following our Lord's Day, I draw the link between

1. Christ's resurrection and our justification,
2. Christ's resurrection and our sanctification,
3. Christ's resurrection and our glorification.

1. Christ's resurrection and our justification

Suppose, congregation, the Lord Jesus Christ had successfully atoned for sin on Good Friday, and then stayed in the grave. What difference would that make for your salvation? To put the question differently: what difference does His resurrection make? Why did He have to arise from the dead?

I ask the question because of what Paul writes to the Corinthians. He tells the Christians of Corinth that the matter of Jesus' resurrection is something of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). In fact, he stresses in vs 17 that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." So Paul makes it his business to present to His readers a list of more than 500 people who saw

with their own eyes the risen Jesus, and even invites his readers to go and interview any of the 500 (vss 5ff). Why is Paul so insistent that Jesus Christ has in fact vacated the grave and risen to new life? *Why is this matter so important?*

To get a handle on this matter, brothers and sisters, we need to return in our thoughts to Paradise. The God who formed all things in the beginning is none else than *the God of life*. Because of His own identity as God of life, He placed at the moment of creation a connection between sin and death. That's Genesis 2:17: you eat of the forbidden tree, and you will surely die. Why? Sin would drive a wedge between the sinner and God, and the result of the wedge would be distance between man and God. As we heard with Lord's Day 16: distance between God and man would mean in effect that man is separated from the God of life, is unplugged from the Source of life, and so man would inevitably peter out; to be unplugged from the Source of life is effectively to be *dead*. And that's what happened; with the fall into sin man was separated from God and so He *died*.

But Jesus Christ has come into the world in order to atone for sin and reconcile sinners to God. As we heard last time with Lord's Day 16, this is a task in which He succeeded. On the cross Jesus was rejected by God, and that's to say that He was disconnected from the Source of life –unplugged from God, if you will– and yet He did not peter out – for Jesus had life in Himself. He could withstand the judgment of God, and so give Himself to Death at the time of His choosing. Death did not take Him, but He –King of kings and Lord of lords as He was– gave Himself to Death as its Victor.

But see: if sin leads to death, and in Jesus' victory sin is atoned for, then death must in turn also disappear! If the God of life takes away sin through His Son Jesus Christ, then the death that follows on sin must vanish. That's the good news of Easter; through His resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ makes clear to all the world that He has in fact triumphed over sin, reconciled sinners to God.

This, brothers and sisters, is the first benefit listed in the Catechism about Jesus' resurrection. "By His resurrection He has overcome death, so that He could make us share in the righteousness which He has obtained for us by His death." That righteousness: that's the notion of sinners being made right with God, the notion of sinners being declared Not Guilty of their sins by the great Judge of all the earth. And we know: if *He* declares "Not Guilty", then that's the final word of the matter; these sinners are deemed to be Not Guilty by the very God against whom they sinned. So they're freed from the judgment they deserve *simply because Jesus Christ has taken on Himself the judgment they earned*. But if that's what Jesus has done for us, beloved, if we're righteous before God, are in His good books for Jesus' sake, then the sentence of death we drew upon ourselves through our sins cannot endure. Yes, we still die, but not (says Lord's Day 16) as "a payment for our sins"; the death of the child of God "puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life." That's the blessed connection between Jesus' resurrection and our salvation; so fully did He atone for our sin that death is no longer the enemy it once was.

In the midst of our remaining sins and brokenness, here is glorious gospel indeed! It will not do to stare ourselves blind at our sins; it is for us instead to delight in His resurrection and so be reassured that there is abundant life for all of us who are united to this Saviour through faith.

That brings us to our second point:

2. Christ's resurrection and our sanctification,

The Catechism mentions a second benefit flowing from Christ's resurrection. Says the Lord's Day: "Second, by His power we too are raised up to a new life." We read that, and our thoughts go to the resurrection of the dead that shall happen on the day of Christ's return. Make no mistake,

beloved: that resurrection will indeed happen, and that's what the Catechism will get to in the third point of the Lord's Day. But with this second point the Catechism is onto something else.

What that is? Please note how this second point of the Lord's Day is formulated. Lord's Day 17 uses here the *present* tense, and not the future; it says that "by His power we too *are raised up* to a new life." With that formulation the Catechism wants to describe a *present* reality.

To grasp the significance of the point, I draw your attention to the passage we read from Ephesians 2. The apostle Paul wrote this chapter to "the saints in Ephesus" (says 1:1), people whom he described in 1:7 as having redemption through Jesus' blood, the forgiveness of sins – and that's to say that these readers were righteous in God's eyes on account of Jesus' work on the cross, Not Guilty of their sins. Of these saints, these people who now "share in the righteousness which [Christ] has obtained for us by His death," Paul says in 2:1 that "you were dead in your transgressions and sins." Note: that's past tense, that's how things used to be. But, adds Paul in vs 5, God "made us alive with Christ," and repeats the thought in vs 6, "God raised us up with Christ." Intriguing language. How are we to understand this??

Again, congregation, we need to go back in our thinking to Paradise. When the Lord God created the human race, He established a bond of love between Himself and our first parents. That bond of love included the privilege of being able to image almighty God, reflect what the Creator was like. That reality, we understand, resulted in a particular lifestyle. Specifically, Adam's and Eve's manner of living in the Garden made clear to any observer what the God of life was actually like.

With the fall into sin, Adam and Eve (and in them we all) broke the bond of love with God and joined the camp of God's enemy the devil. Instead of continuing to image what God was like, fallen mankind imaged what Satan was like. That reality brought about a *lifestyle*, a way of living known as *sin* – and it greatly offended the Creator. This notion of following Satan, of reflecting what he is like, is described in Ephesians 2 as being "dead in transgressions and sins". One is divorced from the God of life, one is attached to the devil (and there is no life in him), and so one is 'dead'. This is Ephesians 2:2: the person "dead in ... transgressions and sins" in fact "follow[s] the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air" – and that's the devil, "the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." Typical of those who follow the devil, who are dead in spirit, is (says vs 3) that one "gratifies the cravings of our sinful nature," and that's to say that one produces the works of the flesh, works characterized by selfishness (cf Galatians 5:19ff).

But what happens now? The Lord God has sent His Son into the world to rescue sinners from Satan's bondage. To accomplish that goal, Jesus Christ suffered on the cross the judgment we deserve (Lord's Day 15) and died (Lord's Day 16). Yet so complete was His victory that He arose from the dead; so fully had He paid for sin that the wages of sin – death – were no longer His due. So He arose from the dead, and so spelled out to His own that we are righteous before God, Not Guilty of our sins. Let me say it this way: through Christ's triumph we are delivered from Satan's side and brought back to God's side – justification. No longer does God see us as sinners; He sees us instead as righteous, in the right with God, justified. That, you recall, was our first point.

But now a question: do those who are restored to God's side remain "dead in ... transgressions and sins"? The Biblical answer is No! "Dead in ... transgressions and sins" is what one is *on Satan's side*. But when one is redeemed by Jesus' blood one is also renewed by Jesus' Spirit, changed, made alive. That's Ephesians 2:5: God "made us alive with Christ", and vs 6: "God raised us up with Christ."

I do not know how we are to imagine this. Back in Romans 6 Paul elaborates somewhat on this theme, and there he says that when Christ was crucified on Good Friday He was not the only one crucified but we were also crucified with Him. Similarly, when Christ died and was buried He wasn't

the only one who died and was buried, but we died and were buried with Him. More, when Christ arose on Easter Sunday He wasn't the only one who came out of the grave but we came out of the grave with Him. I don't know how to understand that, no more than I can understand how I was included in Adam's sin in Paradise. But the Lord God says it is so, and so it's for me to accept and believe. To the point at hand this means: we who were dead in transgressions and sins (for we followed Satan in whom is no life) have been made alive together with Christ.

And that's a glorious reality! Imagine: because of Christ's work we're plugged into God again, connected to the Source of life so that we can be *alive*. And no, that's not a future reality for the people of God, but it's something true for today! That's Ephesians 2: God "made us alive", God "raise us up with Christ". Hence the wording of the second point of Lord's Day 17: "by His power we too *are raised up* to a new life." Wow! Plugged in to God again – what privilege!

That delightful gospel, brothers and sisters, has a very obvious consequence. Recall Lazarus. In the grave the man was obviously dead, and he did all the things the dead do, and that is nothing other than decay, return to dust. But once Jesus called him out of the grave the man was obviously alive – and so he did the things that living people do; he went home to eat and sleep and on the next day returned to work. My point: because he was alive, *he acted the part*, he looked alive, *did living things*. So it is too in relation to those who are raised with Jesus Christ to a new life. When they were dead they did the things spiritually dead people do, and that's to follow Satan and so give in to the cravings of the sinful nature (Ephesians 2:3). But now that we're alive, it is obvious that we're to *act alive*. To say it differently: now that we're connected to God again through Jesus Christ, we're to image God once more – and never image Satan anymore. *Being alive looks like something!* That's why Paul can end that paragraph from Ephesians 2 where he speaks about the dead being made alive with the words of Ephesians 2:10: "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works*." Do good works: that's *inevitable* for the child of God raised to new life in Jesus Christ. So inevitable is it that the Bible –Old and New Testament alike– is filled with commands and instructions for God's people about holy living. They are sanctified, made alive, regenerated, and so must live the part.

Here is place for a challenge for the congregation. We readily and thankfully confess that we're alive in Jesus Christ, raised to new life. And our gratitude comes out in a lifestyle that does differentiate us from the world in which we live. That's reason for great gratitude indeed.

But suppose Lazarus after his resurrection from the dead was content to be lazy, eating half-heartedly, doing his work grudgingly, dragging himself around though he was in fine health. We realize: that was not God's intent when He created man in the beginning, and it was not Jesus' intent when He raised Lazarus from the dead. Since he was alive again, Lazarus was meant to *be* alive, dynamic, chirpy. But the same is true spiritually. If we're alive in the Lord –and we are– we're also meant to be dynamic in God's service, eager to serve across the board, full of life-in-His-service.

But here I see too much half-heartedness. We'll glue to the TV to watch the Olympics, but we won't do the same for Bible study. We'll make sure we're up to speed on the latest financial reports, but we don't begin the day with Bible reading. We'll talk to the people we need to contact to get things done in our work, but we don't have time to begin the day in serious prayer. Here is need for change, for repentance. If we're raised to new life in Jesus Christ, if through Jesus' work we're plugged into God as Source of life once again, then we'll need to *look spiritually alive*, demonstrate to all who see us that God is our delight and the centre of our existence. Being raised looks like something, and it's *not* half-heartedness; it looks rather like zeal for God as source of our being.

Now we need to turn yet to our third point,

3. Christ's resurrection and our glorification.

Yes, we're raised to new life, and so God wants us to act alive – with no hint of spiritual death in us at all. But that's a goal we can't achieve, try though we might. As Paul said it to the Romans: "what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing" (7:19). We're alive, but have such a small beginning of the obedience God requires. We're alive, but the eager zest that is to characterize those plugged into the God of life is so broken.... It's something that needs our continued effort and prayer....

On top of that, we experience to our dismay that death is very much part of life. Loved ones die, and we miss them badly; we ourselves age and weaken, and will one day end up in the grave. Burying seems so final, so hopeless....

Yet our God, brothers and sisters, would not have us get disillusioned by the sin that remains in us (despite our being raised to new life), nor would He have us get discouraged by the endless rows of gravestones in a cemetery. Jesus Christ triumphed so thoroughly over sin on the cross of Calvary – including our sin– that sin no longer requires those wages known as Death. Then Yes, we still die, and the body is placed in the grave to decompose. But burial is not the end! Even the soul being with the Lord at death is not the end, for God has prepared something better for us. In the words of our Lord's Day, "Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection." Paul is insistent: if Christ arose, we who died with Him will also arise to new life on the last day. He's the firstfruits; we will follow! It's the way he ends that chapter on the resurrection: "the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable" (1 Corinthians 15:52), and so it will be clear to all that "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (vs 54). The graves will open, and our bodies once ravaged by sickness, accident, or old age, will arise in strength, be united with our souls, and be made like Christ's glorious body (see Philippians 3:21). Then there shall be perfection and glorious joy in the presence of our God and Maker forever.

We've never seen a resurrection from the dead. But that's not a problem to faith. Faith accepts what the Lord has said, believes that Jesus Christ Himself arose on Easter Sunday. Since His resurrection was an obvious triumph over death and the sin that caused death, I am confident that today I am justified in God's eyes so as to be righteous before Him, am sanctified also so as to be raised to new life already, and will soon be glorified so as to be without any result of the fall into sin. I look forward to that glorious day eagerly, and therefore live the sanctified life already.