

Christ is Risen!

Homily, Easter Vigil, April 11, 2009
Grace Episcopal Church
Fr. Han van den Blink

1. Without the Resurrection of Christ we would not be sitting here this evening. Without the Resurrection there would be no Christian faith, no Eastern Orthodoxy, no Roman Catholicism, no Protestantism, no Anglo-Catholicism and certainly no Grace Episcopal Church. The Resurrection is the foundation of our ability to have faith in a Merciful God, to hope against all odds, and to trust that loving and being loved is indispensable to human flourishing.

We accept the reality of the Resurrection for three main reasons. First, the testimony of reliable witnesses who were completely taken aback by Jesus' resurrection. They had seen him die a horrible death and they did not expect this to happen at all. Second, the way their encounters with the Risen Christ transformed their lives and enabled them to reflect the Light of Christ with courage, patience, persistence and resilience even in the face of failure and death.

And third, the experience in our own lives of the transforming, forgiving and healing effect of the Indwelling Spirit of our Risen Lord. The Resurrection of Christ was not a one time event, it is ongoing. And yet it is not easy for us in our time to grasp the relevance of the Resurrection for our age, accustomed as we are to need convincing proof and explanation before accepting the truth of any assertion or creed.

2. What has helped me to understand the relevance of the Resurrection for our time and to get a better sense of the way it impacted the early Christians, was an experience I had as an almost eleven year old boy when imprisoned during the Second World War in a Japanese concentration camp on the island of Java, Indonesia.

My mother, younger brother, and I had been in several increasingly dismal camps for a number of years. There was no sense of the War in the Pacific happening since we were geographically far removed from the scene of action and had no access to news. All we were aware of was the presence and might of the oppressors.

On January 28, 1945, at a time when things were getting particularly hopeless in our camp, with more and more people dying of starvation and disease, early one morning we heard the sound of airplane engines. Now hearing and seeing airplanes was not unusual since there was a Japanese airbase nearby. But these engines sounded different. I will never forget their sound and a moment later a B-25 Mitchell, an American built twin engine bomber, with the markings of the Royal Netherlands Air Force on its wings, thundered very low over our camp, so low that we could get a glimpse of the pilots.

Years later I learned that the crew of this B-25 was part of a Dutch squadron based in northwest Australia. These men had volunteered for this very dangerous and risky

roundtrip flight of more than 14 hours because they all had family members imprisoned in Java and wanted to encourage them to hang on.

I can still see that low-flying B-25 in my mind's eye, even though it was gone in a flash but not before it dropped a cloud of leaflets. A few of these leaflets fell into the hands of people in our camp. I never saw an actual leaflet, for it was too risky to be caught passing one around. But the basic message passed through the whole camp like wild fire: "Don't lose hope. The war is being won. Peace will come."

Needless to say, this gave an enormous boost to all of us. We could hope again. But the conditions in the camp worsened and many more succumbed. It was not until seven months later, in August 1945, that the war in the Pacific finally ended.

Several things stand out for me as I reflect on that brief experience with the B-25. First, the courage of the pilots and crew who were willing to take the risk to make that long and very dangerous round trip from Australia to Java for the sole purpose of encouraging their imprisoned families and friends to hang on. They would have faced certain death if captured or having to ditch their plane due to a malfunction of some kind.

Second the complete trust we had in the message of these witnesses, the pilots and crew who knew from personal experience that the war was being won but also those who had actually held the pamphlets in their own hands and read the message with their own eyes.

And third, the raising of hope and lowering of despair even in those who did not survive, for they now knew that we were not forgotten, that there would come an end to the suffering, and that peace would come. The flight of that B-25 that January morning in 1945 was not a figment of our imagination. It had really happened and many of us had witnessed this completely unexpected event.

3. In early October last year I visited the city of Iasi, Romania, to deliver a lecture at the A. I. Cuza University. While there, I was introduced to an ikonographer, a man of about 40, whose name is Cristi Covrig. After completing his theological degree Cristi discerned that he was called to be an ikonographer rather than an Orthodox priest as he had thought. Ikonography in Eastern Orthodoxy is considered a religious vocation.

When he showed me the ikons that he had done and the ones in a local parish church that he was working on, I was so impressed with his work that I asked him to make for me the ikon that touched my heart the most, the Resurrection of our Lord as traditionally depicted in Romanian ikonography.

The ikon depicts the Risen Christ in a barren region, surrounded by John the Baptist and King David on the left and the Gospel writers on the right, trampling down the doors of hell and liberating Adam and Eve, as representatives of the fallen, human race, from the bondage of sin and death.

The figure of the victorious and transfigured Christ is bathed in heavenly blue light and crowned with the golden halo of divinity inscribed, in Greek, with the words “The One Who Is”. In the dark, below the broken doors of the netherworld on which the Risen Christ is standing, all manner of broken chains and locks and nails are visible. The two mountains in the top left and right of the ikon signify spiritual ascent, our longing for God.

This ikon summarizes in a powerful way the profound meaning of Jesus’ Resurrection not only for those early Christians but for Christians in all times and places, including ours: His decisive victory over evil and death and their offspring, suffering and meaninglessness.

This does not mean that there is no more suffering and evil and death in this world. But it does mean that we can trust “The One Who Is” for having destroyed the dominance of evil and death. We still need to deal with them but we no longer have to be afraid of them or enslaved by them.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!



++++++