

Easter 2020 “Saved in Hope Revisited Part III”

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Alleluia! Alleluia! The Lord is risen! Even in the midst of a pandemic, the Church defiantly proclaims from the rooftops Jesus’ victory and rightfully so. The Gospel reading for the vigil, which we have permission to also proclaim at the Mass on Easter day, speaks of Mary and the other Mary coming to the tomb early in the morning. When they arrived, there was an earthquake. When the angel appeared to roll back the tomb, his appearance was that of lighting. Let’s sit with this image for a moment because many of us recall waking up in the middle of the night last July to an earthquake centered in Monroe. Remember that? It was followed shortly after by an aftershock, which most of us also felt. I think a number of us can also recall a time when a great lightning storm woke us up in the middle of the night at some point in our life. You see, there is something about earthquakes and lightning that shake and shock us into taking notice of our surroundings. Everything that we think that is important before these moments are suddenly forgotten. The first priority is to process what is going on. The second priority is to act accordingly.

This is how Matthew’s Gospel wants us to think about the resurrection. The resurrection of our Lord on Easter morning was an earthquake in the fullness of time that can be felt in all corners of history, past, present and future. The resurrection of the Lord is also like a lightning flash that requires us to take notice and reassess what is important right now. After everything we have experienced in Jesus’ ministry to his passion and death on the cross, the Church now stands before Jesus’ empty tomb. It is like an earthquake. It is like a flash of lightning. The world isn’t what it seems. Death does not have the final say. In hope we are saved.

During the Triduum, I have been giving reflections inspired by Pope Benedict’s encyclical “Saved in Hope”. I have been revisiting this encyclical in light of the times we live in. After this homily, we will be renewing our baptismal promises. Pope Benedict has something very interesting to say about this practice. He writes in reference to an older form of infant baptism when a priest would ask the parents, “what do you ask of God’s Church for your child?” The answer would be “Faith”. The priest would continue, “What does faith offer you?” And the response from the parents would be “eternal life”. Pope Benedict continues, “Today, as in the past, this is what being baptized, becoming Christians, is all about: it is not just an act of socialization with the community, not simply a welcome into the Church. The parents expect more for the one to be baptized: they expect that faith, which includes the corporeal nature of the Church and her sacraments, will give life to their child-eternal life. Faith is the substance of hope.” Pope Benedict continue, “But then the question arises: do we really want this-to live eternally?” That is a really provocative question, don’t you think? Do we really want our Easter hope?

It is a provocative question because when we are young and we have our whole lives ahead of us, the last thing on our minds can be our mortality and eternal vocation. There is too much competing for our attention. Heaven can wait, as the saying goes. On the other hand, as we grow older, and our aches and pains accumulate, with loved one's passing away before us, and relationships becoming more distant, and now with Covid 19 most of our social interactions are happening through Zoom or Instagram (as cool as all this technology is), the prospect of this kind of life going on for eternity seems unbearable. Eternal life in that sense does not seem very attractive at all. And so, as we are offered the gift of eternal life on Easter Sunday, the question Pope Benedict asks us in his encyclical is quite jarring, "Do we want this?"

To help us answer this question, Pope Benedict suggests we need to better understand what God means by eternal life. After all, if Easter Sunday is a promise of eternal life through Jesus, it probably is a good idea to understand what eternal life is and what it isn't. To begin with, eternal life properly understood is not an endless series of days that turn into years and then centuries where we just sit around and grow cobwebs and get bored. As mortals, we live in space and time. Eternal life in God is a place by definition not governed by space and time. Eternal life in God is an eternal now. And in our present state, we can only grasp what this is like through metaphor. Pope Benedict describes eternal life in God in this way, that it is like "plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time – the before and after – no longer exists." It is "...a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy." That is what eternal life can be for us if we are united with Christ, plunging ever anew in the vastness of being in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. Demonstrating where we can find this understanding in the bible, and there are many to choose from, Pope Benedict chooses a passage in John's Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples, "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). That's heaven.

And so, we can ask ourselves, what can this future hope of eternal life in God do for us today, in this moment? My friends, this hope gives us new eyes and a new awareness that we do not come from nothing and go back to nothing. We in fact come from God and we will go back to God. Life does not have to end in emptiness but rather with an ocean of infinite love. Once we incorporate this founded faith into our lives, we can live our lives differently than we ever have before. In fact, as we grow closer to Jesus in this life we can begin to feel that ocean of infinite love more and more. Heaven is not some far off distant place in the cosmos. For Christians, heaven is a place inside of us right now and all around us by the measure we love God, our family members and our neighbors.

And, if I may be so bold, I wonder if the times we live in now paradoxically help us to see this more clearly. You see in my mind, Covid 19 is also like an earthquake in human history. There are so many things we thought were important only a month or two ago that are simply not as important to us today. Am I right? Maybe you were planning a family vacation, maybe you were thinking about the next project at work, maybe you even were thinking about going on a cruise. Good luck with that. Today, our priorities have changed. And take some time to reflect on how much our priorities have shifted.

Our Easter hope influences how we respond to these moment in history like we are in today. The resurrection of our Lord can do that. We know that this pandemic, the crosses we carry, and even sin and death itself does not and will not have the final say. On Easter morning, our Father in heaven has stretched out his hand to us, redeemed us by the passion, death, and resurrection of his Son, and life has changed forever by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been offered hope in our eternal salvation in a way that those without God can't even begin to understand. As we renew our baptismal vows in a moment the question becomes, do we want this? If the answer is yes, and it should be yes, then this year above all years, we have reason to proclaim from the rooftops more defiantly than ever before, Jesus Christ is risen, alleluia! *Spe salvi facti sumus*, in hope we are saved!