

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, APRIL 23, 2023

JOHN 20:19-31

“ALL WILL DIE---BUT CHRIST IS RISEN!”

One of the great composers of the early 1800's was Franz Joseph Haydn. He wrote a lot of symphonies! His 45th Symphony is an unusual one. It is called “The Farewell Symphony”. It starts out with a full symphony orchestra. Then every few minutes one of the players has no more music to play---he puts his instrument in his case while the others play on. This keeps happening and gradually the orchestra shrinks down bit by bit.....Finally, all that are left are two violinists playing a beautiful duet. Then the music ends and they each put their violin in their instrument cases and walk off the stage in silence. The symphony is over. There were no farewell waves but one by one the players bid farewell to the crowd until there was an empty stage. Thus, the title---“The Farewell Symphony”.

Life is like that for us, at least if we get very old. One by one, the people we know and love bid farewell and leave this life. If we live to be very old, perhaps almost all our family and friends leave the stage of life before us.....and we end up like those 2 violinists in that final duet. And we know that that song also will end and we will say our own farewell to this life.

Death takes us all, one by one. No exceptions (except St. Enoch & St. Elijah in the Old Testament, but I doubt any of us will be third one on that very short list!). One by one, we bid farewell..... But as we think of that fact, it is also important for us to remember another fact---Christ is risen!

Yes, we will all die, *but* Christ is risen. That's what we are celebrating in this joyful Pascha season---that one man came back from His grave, walked out of His tomb. In the Trisagion Hymn that we sing and pray so much, each of the “holies” refers to one member of the Trinity: Holy God: the Father; Holy Mighty: the Son; Holy Immortal: the Holy Spirit. Christ is called Mighty in this hymn/prayer because He was strong enough to conquer death! Dead and buried—and 3 days later He arose! Even death, which seems all-powerful was not as mighty as the Son of God. And that is the central fact of human history—that the Mighty Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

We know it happened because of all the changes that fact caused. Think

about the Disciples in Holy Week---confused, cowardly, despairing. Then think of them during the rest of their lives-----united, strong, brave, taking on the whole world for Christ! What could cause such a change? Only a resurrection.

Today is St. Thomas Sunday and we just heard the gospel reading from John 20 about how at first Thomas doubted the rising of the Lord he loved so much. His life was shattered because he really didn't think Jesus could be alive. But then later, his faith was restored and he became a faithful apostle, going all the way to India to save souls and start churches. What could have caused such a change? Only a resurrection.

We know from the gospels how most of the Jewish priests hated Christ. They worked together with the Pharisees and the Romans to put Him to death on Great and Holy Friday. Yet, we read in the book of Acts that not long after Holy Week and Pentecost, many of them became believers in Christ! First, they helped to have Him crucified. And then not much later, they became part of His Church. What could cause such a quick and drastic change? Only a resurrection

In the Roman Empire, Jews and Gentiles did not get along! There was prejudice, hatred, and violence. Then in the early Church, Jews and Gentiles united as Christians, dedicating their lives to Jesus Christ regardless of what their nationalities were. What could cause such a change? Only a resurrection.

In those early centuries of our Orthodox Church huge amounts of our people joyfully died for Christ instead of rejecting Him at the command of the government---we call them "the holy, glorious, right-victorious Martyrs". What could cause just ordinary people to give up their lives for a man who had died on a cross? Only a resurrection.

Only something huge, very dramatic, and very real could cause all these amazing things to take place....only a resurrection!

The resurrection of Christ is so central to our Faith and to our lives as Christians that it is important for us to understand what it means-----for we will all die! It's a very relevant topic for us.

Vin Scully was the well-known broadcaster for many years for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Back in 1991, as a game was about to start, he was reading off the line-up list for the Dodgers. The most famous Dodger at that time was Andre Dawson. Scully mentioned a bit sadly that Dawson wouldn't be playing that day. He said, "Andre Dawson is not playing today due to a

bruised knee. He is on the “day to day” list.” Then Scully paused for a few seconds and said, “Come to think of it, I guess we are *all* on the day to day list!” (George Will, “The Last Word”, “Newsweek”, 9/5/05, p. 84)

Vin Scully had it right---day to day is what we all are! We know there are no exceptions, each of us know we will die. We just don’t know what day! So knowing what the words “Christ is risen!” mean is important.

Some might say—Well, it means that even though Jesus was killed, His teachings and example are still with us for us to follow. No, “Christ is risen” doesn’t mean anything like that.

Others might say—“Christ is risen” means that even though Christ was killed and His body dead and buried, His immortal soul still lives on. No, it doesn’t mean anything like that, either.

What “Christ is risen” means is that the Lord arose bodily from the tomb 3 days after He was killed. The tomb was empty on Sunday morning because He got up and left! The tomb is still there in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but there is no body in it. St. John Chrysostom wrote around 400 A.D. (and I imagine him chuckling at the divine irony of it all as he wrote the words) that in his time people were flocking to go see a tomb with *no one* buried in it! Of course, Jesus’ tomb.

How wonderful! A grave without a body! Because the buried person came back to life. That’s what “Christ is risen!” means. That is what we are celebrating and that is the most important truth in our lives.

And what makes it doubly wonderful is that this will happen to us, too. One day Christ will return and all who have fallen asleep in Christ will be raised up from their graves by Him. Yes, now we still have to face inevitable death. But because of Christ’s resurrection, the sting of death is gone. As St. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 15:55—“O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” Yes, we will die, but the sting of death is already gone, because we know that, because Christ is risen, death is only temporary.

Jesus Christ went through death, He went into the grave ahead of us. He paved the way through for us. He leads us through the grave to our own resurrections on the other side. Once a little girl and her mother were on a trip through the Rocky Mountains. At one point the train was heading straight

towards an enormous mountain. The girl got scared and said, “Mommy, we are going to crash right into that mountain!” But just as the mountain got real close, she saw a tunnel entrance ahead. The train didn’t slow down a bit---it zoomed right into the tunnel and kept right on rolling through the dark until it came out into the sunlight on the other side of the mountain. The little girl said with relief---“Oh, good! Someone came here before us and made a way for us to go right through the mountain!” (“Our Daily Bread”, 12/14/97)

That’s what Jesus Christ has done for us. He went through death ahead of us and for us. He made a way *through* death for us. A way to life on the other side of the mountain of death. Not by a tunnel, but by His rising from His tomb.

So that when our personal days of death come... (and they will come), we can in faith follow Him through death to eternal life. Christ has risen from the dead!---and because of that fact, we will, too!