

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

‘When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow.’

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Not long ago I was put in the awkward position of defending the Easter egg before a venerable body of ordained Lutheran clergymen at an official synodical function. Though this was a task that would have more appropriately fallen to one of my daughters, [which one I do not know, since either could do it with more enthusiasm than I] yet, according to God’s good will and wisdom it fell upon me.

The attack was based on the false premise that Easter eggs are of a pagan origin, based on the belief that anything too fun and frivolous cannot possibly be Christian, but must be traced to our heathen ancestors. This line of argument always seems odd to me, as between all the murdering, raping, pillaging, child sacrifice, witchcraft, bloodletting, and enslavement, I never thought that the pagans had much time for fun, whereas the Church allows that there is, at least on some occasions, a *time to dance*.

That Christian customs cannot be lighthearted customs is not at all true. As I often remind my hopelessly godless friends back in the Gomorrah that is Washington D.C., if religion isn’t fun, you’re doing it wrong.

But with that said, among all the many levities bursting out of the Christian tradition, I would not count the Easter egg as being one of them. In origin, it is the custom of taking an egg, and dying it with the skins of a red onion. The egg would become scarlet, representing suffering and Christ’s passion, with the egg representing the new birth that would come forth from such agony. Suffering, blood, and birth are many things, but rarely would I call them whimsical. Just because it appeals to children does not make it childish. The dolls of little girls often get married, and boys love nothing more than playing soldier; and as the Lord Himself declares, the *Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these*.

If one keeps in mind the most noble Easter egg, today's pericope, and its interpretation, are not hard to understand. The Lord speaks to His disciples concerning the *hour of his glorification*, of the season of His Passion, of His humiliation before the eyes of men on the cross, which is His exaltation in the eyes of the Father.

Though we in the Church, seeing all these things in hindsight, recognize the cross as the moment of cosmic salvation, with crosses upon our altars and walls, above our doorways, around our necks, and upon our hearts; to the disciples, there at the time, it would not at all have seemed so. Rather it would have seemed that their Lord had been disposed of with all the ceremony and efficiency that one disposes of last week's newspaper; to be tossed into the waste, but only after a fair bit of crumpling up.

It is only natural that Jesus tells His disciples that they will despair, for no one likes to be told that their Lord and God, their savior and redeemer, is simply yesterday's news.

Yet even as weeping is cast for the night, that joy may come in the morning; even as a seed remains alone, lest it die, and then produces many grains; even as a woman, giving birth, has sorrow, but forgets her sorrow when she sees her child; so the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be crucified, that on the third day He might rise again.

For a little while, He must go away, that He might not be seen, so that He might return, and be seen again.

It seems simple enough.

But is it true that a mother, once her child is born, forgets her sorrow?

The Word of God does not seem to say so.

Rather woman is cursed because she was deceived, and her *sorrow in childbearing shall be greatly multiplied; again and again she will desire her husband, that he may give her children, yet he will wield her.*

For her sorrow is not in the pain of labor, but rather the pain of knowing that even as she gives birth, she is only giving birth to a future death. By Eve, *sin came into the world, and death by sin*, and now *cursed is she among women, and*

cursed is the fruit of her womb: mortality.

Again and again she will have children, for woman has no other way to fend off the final end of humanity, and man has no weapon at all against this darkness, save his wife, *whom he shall wield* to this end. *Yet all is vanity, and striving after the wind. 'For their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.'* Indeed, it seems inescapable, that *there is a time to die.*

Now you see, your mother Eve, is mourning, and even now she mourns. Yet the Lord Christ will no longer bear her tears; rather He shall *honor His father and mother*, and put an end to death through the victory of all life in the Resurrection.

By His rising from the dead, He has not simply overcome death for Himself; rather, He has redefined life for all humanity. No longer is existence merely a march from a sudden beginning to a gradual end. Now it has become a journey from a living birth to a life-giving eternity, into the heart of life itself, the face of the Father, who is without beginning nor end, who *desires the death of no man, but that all might be saved.*

It is in this truth, dear Christians, that we strive to live. The truth of an egg dyed scarlet. That in the Resurrection of the Christ, He not only overcame death for Himself, nor has He given a gift of life to those who would otherwise die. Rather He has abolished death completely and utterly, for *all flesh shall be raised on the last day. The old has passed away, behold the new has come.* You, dear Christian, *yet though you die, shall never die;* for you are no longer mortal, but immortal.

Indeed, we strive to live in this truth; we labor to live as those who shall live forever, who fear no temporary, passing thing, who fear no loss, no want, no pettiness, for on the scale of eternity, anything that is for but a time disappears into insignificance. Therefore having eternity, we shall not want, and wanting not, we shall not sin; for those who possess God possess everything.

But truly, it is a labor. It is not at all easy to live as those *who shall never die.* In every way this world besieges us, torturing us with the vision of all we lack, telling us that we have only a short time to gain it. We have not enough prestige, so we envy. We have not enough pleasure, so we become gluttons. We have not enough talent, or beauty, or charm, so we become jealous. We have not enough money, so we become restless. We have not enough rest, so we become idle.

And if we are so ambitious and successful and clever as to gain these things, you will not have them for long. Buy what you want, indulge your talent, enjoy your charm. As your body weakens and decays, these things will disappear, and they will not return.

Whatever mark you have left in the world will either be destroyed by those who hate you, or squandered by those who claimed they loved you. The inheritance you build will be wasted by your inheritors, even as your wisdom will be wasted on the foolish.

And even as you lose everything else, perhaps you will comfort yourself with the soft words of your Pastor, who again and again tells you that Jesus is with you, even as you lose your money, your accomplishment, your fame, your health, your vision, your mind. As much as your Pastor speaks such easy words, you will not feel it, you will feel no presence, you will feel no warmth. You will feel forsaken; and indeed, you will be alone.

But do not forget the lesson of the egg and its scarlet, or the seed and its death, nor the woman and her labor. For do you not remember that even the world itself is giving birth? *For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famine and earthquakes in many places. But these are just the birth pains.*

For if God, who is all in all, has died, that He might rise again, should not the all creation, which has all its being in Him? What you one day shall experience of your life *being rolled up like a scroll*, is but a one part of the death of the world, which shall be consumed with fire, and blown away as chaff. *There will be great distress, unequalled since the beginning and the world, and never to be equaled again.*

But then you shall see it, *a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And you will see the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And you will hear a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have*

passed away.”

And the one who speaks from the throne shall turn. And what you thought you would never see, what you always longed to see, what you thought had disappeared, shall be present before you as more than all that you have ever known. In His dread glory and infinite compassion He will turn His eyes down, even down to you.

And then He shall see you again.

‘And no one will take your joy from you.’

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-7; John 16:12-22.