

Victory over Death

I Kings 17:8-16, Mark 12:35-44 (ESV)

April 20, 2003

“How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?” So it is that Jesus, standing in the temple, teaching a great throng of people, quoted Psalm 110:1 to show that the Christ was not merely the royal son of King David, but that he was also and even more, King David’s Lord.

But there is more than that. Imbedded in this quote is a prophecy of Easter: “The Lord (God the Father) said to my Lord (the Christ), Sit at my right hand, *until I put your enemies under your feet.*” Not only is the Christ King David’s Lord, but also the Christ is the one for whom and in whom and through whom God will conquer all his enemies! The Christ is the one for whom and in whom and through whom God will conquer sin, death, and evil. The Christ is the one for whom and in whom and through whom God will establish eternal life. The Christ is the one about whom this ancient Psalm was written, “The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, *until I put your enemies under your feet.*” And what that says about him proclaims the good news of Easter to us yet today: in and for and through Jesus Christ, God has defeated the power of death. God has won the victory over death. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

What began as an ancient determination on the part of God to put away the power of death once and for all came to fruition in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first Easter morning, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and lifted him bodily from the grave into a new and different and wonderful life forever beyond the reach of pain, disease, decay, decline, and death. God raised Jesus Christ to a new and eternal life, beyond our comprehension, forever in the presence of God. So the power of death has now been broken in principle, in truth, and in reality. For even though we still die, death does not hold us forever. We do not belong to death. God has won the victory over death. Thanks be to God!

But why did God raise Jesus from the dead? Of the millions or billions who have died, why was Jesus the one to be raised? Why not someone else that day, or a thousand years earlier, or a thousand years later? Why was the victory won in and through and for him? When we look at what went before Easter, we realize that the resurrection was not capricious. Instead, the resurrected one was none other than the crucified one. The resurrection was God’s vindication of the perfect self-sacrifice of the one who gave his life for us on the cross. For it was there on the cross that Jesus

won the victory over sin, bearing the sin of the world and suffering its punishment without ever sinning himself. It was there on the cross that Jesus won the victory over hatred, absorbing the hatred of the world but never being reduced to hating in return. It was there on the cross that Jesus won the victory over evil, suffering its worst attacks and indignities but refusing to respond in kind. It was there on the cross that Jesus won the victory over faithlessness, instead keeping the faith and believing in God even when it seemed God had abandoned him. It was there on the cross that Jesus won all these other victories, at the greatest cost to himself. So it was that God vindicated his suffering and self-sacrifice by raising him from the dead, the crucified one. God won the victory over death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who had already won all the other victories on the cross.

So how was it that Christ won all the other victories on the cross? He gave of himself entirely, without reservation, without holding back. And that brings us back to today's reading. Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'" This observation of the widow's offering was the last act of his public ministry. After this he turned to the final instruction of his disciples, then it was on to the last supper, his betrayal, arrest, conviction, and crucifixion. "This poor widow...put in everything she had." And when Jesus saw what she did, he walked out of the temple and to the cross, where he gave us everything he had, his life, his breath, his all. Why was she there that day, at that hour? Do you think her faith gave Jesus courage? Did it confirm him in the way he was going? Did it let him know that the time was right? Did it give him strength? Did it help him do what he came to do? "This poor widow...put in everything she had." Then so did Jesus. Thanks be to God!

Of course, while the resurrected one was none other than the crucified one, it is also the case that the crucified one became the resurrected one. Apart from that, we would still have nothing. That is, if Christ who gave all on the cross were still dead, if there were no Easter, there would be no church, no gospel, no hope, no forgiveness of sin. If the body of Christ were still lying in the grave, we certainly would not be here today remembering what he did. While his sacrificial, victory winning death was important, his death would not be worth remembering if God had not made him alive again. But Christ has been raised from the dead. The crucified one has been resurrected. To the one who gave all, all has been given. This is the

great, good news of Easter. This is the reason we are gathered here today. This is the reason we sing God's praises. Thanks be to God!

And not only has Christ been raised from the dead, but also his resurrection is the promise of our own. His resurrection was not an isolated event but was instead the first fruits of a large harvest of resurrection. In short, death is not lord over us. God is Lord over us. The great truth, the great joy, the great goodness of the faith is that we belong to God. The whole earth, and we who live on it, belong to God. We do not belong to the devil. We do not belong to sin, death, and evil. We do not belong to the government. We do not belong to race, society, or class. We do not belong to disease, decay, or decline. We do not belong to city, state, or country. We belong to God, the creator and sustainer of the world. We belong to God, the judge and redeemer of the world. We belong to God, the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Nothing and nobody can take us away from God.

Now, because we belong to God, we belong completely to God. It is not the case that only our soul belongs to God, and the rest belongs to us. It is not the case that only our spirit belongs to God, and the rest belongs to us. It is not the case that only our heart belongs to God, or only our mind belongs to God, and the rest belongs to us. All that we are belongs to God, heart, soul, mind, and strength. All that we are belongs to God, past, present, and future. All that we are belongs to God, in life, in death, and in the resurrection.

And therefore all that we have belongs to God. The means by which God sustains our lives—air, food, water, shelter—God lends to us for a while. They are not ours to do with as we please. They, too, belong to God, and we use them gladly and gratefully, not only to sustain our lives but also to glorify God and to help those in need. It is a high privilege that God entrusts us with this responsibility. It is a duty we dare not neglect.

Our reading today tells of many rich people putting in large sums of money. Jesus did not criticize that. He did not in any way suggest that they should not have been doing that. He did observe that they were giving out of their abundance, out of their wealth and superfluity. Though the gifts were large and welcome, they may have been relatively easy to give. All of this was to establish a contrast with the one poor widow who put in everything that she had. Her gift was tiny: two coins which, taken together, would barely make what we would call a penny. But her tiny gift was immense and absolute, for it was "everything she had, all she had to live on." The encouragement to us is not to give tiny gifts, but for us to aspire to such faith, courage, and trust in God that we can give more and more and more, until our giving approaches hers and his, all that we are and all that we have.

Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box." The very thought of Jesus watching us put money in the

offering, or, for that matter, watching us not put money in the offering, is a little discomfoting. And yet, there he was then, and here he is today, watching, observing, evaluating, and perhaps even commenting to those about him. There is an intensity and an immediacy about this to which we are, perhaps, unaccustomed.

So now it is our turn. How shall we live? How shall we give? No matter how cleverly I study today's reading from the gospel, I cannot escape the conclusion that our giving fairly accurately reflects both our faith and our gratitude. Is it possible that, by the power of the gospel, even we might be made brave and bold to trust in God and in God alone? Is it possible that the faith and example of the poor widow might sweep even us up into greater heights of faith and giving than we have ever before known or experienced? Is it possible that, having heard the gospel read and preached, we might bring to God all that we are and all that we have? Is it possible that we might actually love God even more than we love money and more than we love ourselves? Can you imagine that? What an Easter adventure, what a wonder, what a joy, and what a high privilege that would be!

Today we hear of the poor widow who gave everything. But have we ever heard of anyone else doing this? Oh, yes. There was one other place we heard of this. In the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, he gave all that he was and all that he had. The widow's gift in the temple points us ahead to Christ's gift of himself. His teaching about her was as if he were saying, "Look at this widow's offering, and you will understand what I am about to do. I am going to the cross to die for you. I am giving my all, my life, for your sake." Christ purchased our redemption, the forgiveness of our sin, the taking away of our guilt, our reconciliation to God and to each other, with the price of his blood. Christ gave his life that we might live. No wonder God resurrected him!

"How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" This is what Easter means! God has won the victory over death for us in our Lord, Jesus Christ.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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