

Three Great Days: An Easter Message

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I announced last Sunday that I would break into my series of expositions of the book of Titus and would bring something more nearly related to the Easter day. And today I want to read a bit of Scripture and let it be part of the sermon, by far and away the best part, where a man with anointed vision looked, and behold, a door was opened in heaven. And the first voice he heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me which said, come up hither and I will show thee things which it must be hereafter. And then immediately I was in the Spirit, the whole the throne was set in heaven. And One sat on the throne. And He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone. And there was a rainbow round about the throne in sight like unto an emerald. Round about the throne were four and twenty seats. And upon the seats, I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment. And they had on their head, crowns of gold. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal. In the midst of the throne, round about the throne, there were four beasts full of eyes, before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, second beast like a calf, the third beast had the face as a man and the fourth was like a flag eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. When God speaks of himself, he says, I am. When his creatures speak of him, they say he was and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Now there's a picture of heaven, and God the Father and the throne and the strange beasts, living creatures, redeemed elders. Then I saw in the right hand of Him that sat on the throne, a book. Written within and on the back side, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals there of? They must have searched and searched a long time because no man in heaven or in earth, neither under the earth was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. One of the elders saith unto me, weep not. Behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals there of.

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. The Lamb Exalted and I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

And no man could preach a sermon on that text without suffering a brain hemorrhage. It is too vast, too emotional, too noble, too elevated, too full, too musical, too poetic, too wonderful to do anything, but read, so that's all I'm going to do with it. Just read it before you. For it is the story of the Lamb who died a Lamb and rose a Lion. But I have three little words to speak to you today about three great days: the day He came which we call Christmas; the day He died which we call Good Friday; and the day He rose which we call Easter. If we had never invented the names, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, which are words borrowed and put together. If we had never invented names, still, those three great days stand; the greatest days in the history of the world.

And God said, let there be light and there was light. And God separated the light from the darkness. And the darkness He called night and the light He called day and the evening and the morning, the first day. So reads the story of God's creation. So, it was a great day.

It was a great day when the ark of God floated the high above the waters, cleared the hill where it had been built and floated high and all-around devastation and watery death. And Noah and the eighth person floated free and safe in the ark of God. It was a great day when Abraham heard the voice of Jehovah saying get thee up out of thy country to a land that I will show thee. And God began the redemption and restoration of the race. It's a great day when Moses put blood on all the door posts but really it was night, and put blood on all the doorposts and lentils. And the million slaves who were the seed of that same Abraham rose and walked out on their feet, out over the sandy wastes and across where the river, or the Red Sea used to be, but was no more for the river part of the sea part didn't let them through.

Those were days, great days, but nothing to be compared with the three that I've named. The day He came and the day He died and the day He arose. The day He came, there was joy. It was the joy of hope. It was the joy of sentiment. For God was now a Babe in a manger. And a bright-eyed mother looked upon Him, a little red-faced Fellow making funny little animal noises, feeling around for His mother's breasts. And all the ages have surrounded this day with sentiment and beauty and flowers and music, and well they may have. How could we escape it? What else could you do? We, being human and being sons and daughters of the sun and the moon and the rolling heavens, time and anniversaries and years and day. You can't escape them no matter how hard we try if we wanted to.

So, we have made Christmas a great day. It is a day of joy because it's a day of hope. But that's all it was. You can't carry it too far. That's all it was. It was a day of joy. But it was the day of the joy of anticipation, not the day of the joy of realization. For very few knew the Babe had been born. And those that didn't know, didn't know who He was for certain, maybe half a dozen, maybe two or three--no more. It was the joy of anticipation.

But I can think of how that joy might have been dashed like a beautiful vase and destroyed. I can think of a hundred ways. I can think when Herod said go out and kill all the babies under two years. Go out and kill them. I can understand how they might have caught that Babe, caught that mother and father unaware and plunged the sword through the innocent bosom of that little Baby along with all the others in that neighborhood of Bethlehem. That would have been the end of all that joy. That would have mocked the angels as they sang over the Judean hills. And that would have mocked the shining eyes of Mary, and would have made the very Word of God of none effect.

I can think how when Satan came to Him when He had grown to be a tall man, thirty years of age now, strong and vigorous and at the peak of His physical powers, when the devil came to Him and said, turn this stone into bread. Fall down and worship me. Leap off this pinnacle. For it is written, it is written He might have there, at least we can think it. We can imagine it. He might have there given Himself over, surrendered under pressure, and put a vial of poison where the oil of joy had been.

But He said, it's written and Satan turned his back away and you remained holy as He'd been born. God had called Him, that holy thing, that holy thing. And He stayed that same Holy Thing through His development and boyhood and youth and now a strong grown man. He was still that Holy Thing and was as pure as the waters that flow from under the throne of God. It was the joy of anticipation and a hundred possibilities I say, except He were God, might have intervened there.

You've had many a joyful anticipation that blew up in your face and left you more grief stricken than if you had never expected the joy. The day He died was not a day of joy. It was a great day, but

it was not a great day of joy. It was a day of dejection and despondency. It was the grief of uncertainty, just as they didn't know who He was. And the simple little negro spiritual says so plaintively, and it must have been beautiful when it was first written before it was commercialized. But back there, the first simple-hearted black man who sang it maybe to his own homemade banjo somewhere. We didn't know who He was, said the song. With Jesus, we didn't know who you was. What beauty is there, we didn't know who He was.

And when He died, we didn't know what He'd done. They stood around Him and tradition has it, Mary fainted and was carried away, leaning heavily on the arm of John, into whose care Jesus had given her for the rest of her life. But they didn't know what He'd done. He had told them, but their eyes were holden and their ears stopped. They didn't know what He'd done. And it was a time of dejection and of the grief of uncertainty. He went out there and died, and they didn't know what He was doing when He was dying.

Every one of them had seen people die. They knew everybody died. But when this man was dying, they didn't know why. And all the joy of hope and anticipation that any of them had had back there 33 years before and were still alive, Mary was among them and there were some others. All that joy suddenly turned to bitterness. For He was dying now. He was dying now. And His disciples thought maybe there would be a dramatic rescue. They thought it out, a dramatic rescue. But there was no dramatic rescue. They said, the God who delivered the three Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, the God who delivered Daniel; that God will deliver Him as He delivered them. But there was no deliverance. And after six hours, He groaned and gave up the ghost, and died in the darkness and they all turned away.

But that day was just as important as that first day of joy. That day that they took down a dead Man, partly stiff already from rigor mortis and stained with blood, flies buzzing around Him. That day was as important in the mind of God as that day Mary held the baby in her heart, the tender, pink-skin, baby, sweet to touch. Now, the cold, gray body, unpleasant to touch. But one was as important as the other. For if there had not been the day that He died, the day that He came would have been a mockery to the human race. But if that had been the last day, those other two days would have been dreams and no more.

But the day that He arose set a crown upon the others. And just as the day He came was a day of the joy of hope and the day He died the day of the grief of uncertainty, the day He rose was the day of the joy of triumph. For now, it was finished. It's finished. Nothing could be interposed now. When the boy Jesus played with His father's tools and got in the way and helped a little as He was able, and sometimes didn't help, but tried to help as a little growing boy. There were a lot of things that could have intervened, I say, possibly at least they were technically possible that could have intervened. But they didn't, but at least we can think them. But now we can't even think anything there.

When He rose from the dead, He rose absolutely triumphant. And when the old Latin writer, we sang it this morning, an English translation. When the old Latin writer said, He opened heaven and He closed hell. That's correct for all that believe. For all that believe. There isn't a crevice or crack anywhere in the walls of the hell where a saint can get in. And there isn't a door in the walls of heaven that a saint can't get in. By saint I don't mean a saint on a pedestal. I mean any redeemed man. For the day He arose was the day of the joy of triumph. Somebody read here or a choir sang or something, I don't know, but I caught this phrase this morning. He is not here. He is risen. And I jotted the word "not" down there so I'd remember to tell you "not." If it had said, if the angel had left that one little word of three letters out, we would have been and be now of all men most miserable--following a dead man.

But that little word "not" there, only three letters. A tiny, monosyllabic word, not. You can say it, you can time it it is so brief and yet upon it hung the whole hope of all the world for all the time to come. He is not here. The angel had folded his wings and bowed his head and said, we're all mistaken. He is here. Come in, look, He is here. If he'd been there, the bottom would have fallen out of redemption for all time to come. He is not here. And in one simple word, God Almighty set all the bells in the universe to ring. He is not here. He was there. He died. But He's not dead. He's alive again.

So, these are the three great days. The day He came was called Christmas, the joy of hope. And there we had the weak babe in the manger. And the day He died, there was the cross and we had death. And I regret that some cannot see beyond that.

We had a long-distance Easter call last night from our girl out in New York. She said that she and her boyfriend from the church here had been in a great cathedral in New York. And she said what do you suppose? They've covered all the statues of Jesus. They have draped them all. He's dead. All draped. They had draped all the statues and pictures of Jesus. Death was in that cathedral.

And that's all there is at the cross--death. That's all there was in the manger, weakness and hope. And all there was at the cross was death and despair. But when He walked out of the grave, then there was triumph forever and ever and ever. I have no statues of Jesus, and I don't even like pictures of Jesus, though I don't condemn those who do. But I don't even like pictures. But pictures of Jesus all ought to have gold frames and never be shrouded and never draped. For Jesus doesn't die once a year, just as He doesn't get born once a year. And He doesn't rise once a year. There was one great day, the day He was born. A great day, the day that He died. And a great day, the day that He arose.

Now, there are just some other days I'll mention and say no more. The day He finds you. That would be a great day, for you. But it never could have been it, except for these other great days.

And the day you find Him. For remember, He finds you before you find Him. It's got to be so. And the day He comes again and the day He's crowned. And all His sheep and all His lambs and all His children and all those who make up the royal train, joggle with him to His coronation. Beautiful. We're not a ritualistic church here. And the result is at Easter time we have very few more people to church than we do all the other, year around because we're always talking about the Lord rising here and singing about it.

But I want to say to you this one word. I want to tell you what I told my friends up in Milwaukee last week, Friday night, no Friday afternoon. We had a good Friday meeting, six churches met and I preached to them. And there popped into my head an illustration as I was closing. I think God gave it to me. I had never thought of it before that I remember in my life. But it fit the situation, I'm afraid, for some people's lives and possibly in yours.

I said, and I say now, look, there's excitement down the street, cars pulling up quick, putting on the brakes. People getting out and dashing up steps. People hurrying away. Others hurrying up, what's going on? What's going on? There too, we learn a baby was born down there a day before yesterday. A new baby, Jr. A new baby, their first. Junior's been born. There he is. They've named him after his Dad. I know now why all that excitement. Then the excitement levels off and tapers down and disappears, and the cooing and gurgling is over and they settle down to living with the baby. But they've got the baby every day, every night, every hour, all the time. Sleeping and waking, he's still there. If it's asleep, they can peek out of it. If it's awake, they can pick it out. They still have it. A year goes around and they have a celebration. The table is set up now. So, they bake a little cake and put one candle. That's his little first birthday, another celebration. Cards come and gifts, and neighbors drop in, another celebration. Second year, two candles appear, another celebration. And they celebrate every year that exciting time when the little new fellow arrived out of the anywhere and came into the here and became their boy.

But I said, have you ever thought of this? The age of six months or eight months or nine months, a sudden stroke of disease falls upon little Junior and he dies. And with broken hearts they lay the little quiet white alabaster statue in silk, white silk and put it away and buried with his ancestors down in the earth. And when the first birthday rolls around, the father sits sober and dejected and trying to be strong and the mother openly weeps. But they bake a little cake. And they turn out the electric light and they light the candles. And they have a little candle there and they light it and they try to think they've got him with them. But he's not there. Finally, in despair, the mother turns her back, throws herself across the bed and sobs. And father comes and stands around awkwardly and doesn't know what to say. He feels it too. All they've got now is a celebration. The babe has died.

And I told those Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians, watch that you don't lose out of your heart the life of Christ, the life of God, and have nothing left but of celebration. Nothing left but

Good Friday and Maundy Thursday and Easter and all the rest. Look out that you don't lose it all and have nothing but empty arms and empty hearts and a celebration that has no meaning. And I wouldn't have said it to them if I couldn't have said it to you.

So, I say to you today, let's watch it. They were great days, those days, the day He was born, and the day He died and the day He rose and triumphed the Lamb, risen to be a Lion. Those are great days. And we have the marked on the calendar and we celebrate them. But let's look out. They are not just candles on the cake of a religion that's dead, for it can happen. The world can be too much with you. And you can sell out your spirituality and be nothing but a hollow shell. And yet you can celebrate and buy flowers and go through the motions and have a celebration and light the candle, but there's nothing living in it.

But we can have all of these. We can have them both. Mama and Papa can have both. They can have the celebration and the boy, by the grace of God, if he lives--they can have both. So, you and I can have both. We can meet and sing such brilliant and beautiful songs as we've been singing this morning about His rising again and opening heaven and closing hell and triumphing over the grave. We can sing them and celebrate, but we can celebrate a living Christ in our midst. We don't have to have one or the other. We can have both.

So, we today celebrate. We celebrate the Easter of His rising and triumph. But it's not a hollow empty thing for those who believe and follow Him into reality. He's still here. He's with us. He's with us this morning. And at the Lord's Supper, we will have what our Episcopal friends call the Real Presence. He's here, living, a real presence. We do show forth His death. Yes. Till He comes. Yes. In the meantime, His real presence is with us.

We will now go on into the celebration of the Lord's Supper this Easter morning. And it is for all of God's children. It's not for the members of this church only. You may feel free if your heart sings this morning with us that Jesus is risen and He's yours. May you feel free to share with us and thus make our community complete.