

+ John 20:1-18 + Victory in the Garden + The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Dawn + 20 April 2014 +

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

It's finally over. Yes, it certainly seems like winter is over with the return of warm, sunny days and life returning to God's creation, but that's not what's finally over! What's finally over is the battle that started with defeat and a promise back in the Garden of Eden where God said, ***"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel."*** (Genesis 3:15)

Centuries flew by as the Lord guided human history to get everything ready for that final battle. The Lord prepared his people for the arrival of their Champion with detailed prophecy after prophecy, and then Jesus finally arrived. He came to save his people from their sins, to rescue them from the dreadful power of death, and to crush the serpent's head. This past Lenten season we visited battlefield after battlefield—and always Jesus won, but before he could win the final battle, he himself had to be defeated.

Remember the prophecy? ***"He will crush your head...and you will strike his heel."*** Jesus would have to suffer. Jesus would have to endure attack and ridicule, violence and injustice, death and hell—everything Satan and the sinful world and death could throw at him. Jesus would have to die.

...But what's so victorious about death? If a king died in battle, the battle may be won, but often the war was lost. Surely Satan and all his minions rejoiced as sinful humanity turned on their loving Savior, as he was betrayed and arrested, beaten and mocked and condemned, as he was pierced and crucified and when he finally bowed his head in death. How could there be victory if Jesus—the Son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the Savior of the world—were to suffer death himself?

Surely that thought of utter and total defeat was going through the minds of Jesus' followers as they hurriedly prepared his body for burial, as they enclosed his body in a newly cut tomb with a large stone, as they hid behind locked doors. The sense of loss and defeat was crushing. "How could this happen to Jesus? We thought he was the Messiah. He cast out demons and raised the dead. How could he allow himself to be defeated, to be destroyed by his enemies, to die a criminal's death?"

As the Passover Sabbath came and went, the darkness of defeat hung heavily on all of Jesus' followers. There was no joy in recalling God's deliverance. There was no celebration in the great victories he had won. There was just defeat and despair and complete loss of hope. No one recalled that Jesus had told them right before he entered Jerusalem, ***"On the third day [the Son of Man] will be raised to life!"*** (Matthew 20:19) No one considered his final cry of ***"It is finished!"*** to be a victory cry over sin and Satan. (John 19:30) In fact, none of his disciples were willing to do anything at all.

There was some difficult work to do, though. The burial party hadn't had enough time to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial. So early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and a couple other women decided to show their love for Jesus one last time and finish the job.

There was no expectation of victory on their mind. This was a journey to another garden of defeat. For Mary, out of whom Jesus had cast out seven demons and who had faithfully followed Jesus thereafter, she had no joy in her heart—only grief and sorrow. Her friend, her teacher, her healer was dead. So she plodded to the cemetery early that morning expecting to pick up the shattered pieces of her hope and faith and love.

Just when it seemed like things could get no worse, they did. When Mary arrived at the tomb, Jesus' body was gone. This only added insult to injury. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she rushed back to tell Peter and John: ***"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him."*** Flooded with grief, Mary wandered back to the garden and watered the earth with her tears outside Jesus' tomb.

What about you? Are you crying at Jesus' tomb today too? Does grief reside in your heart? Have you felt like things in your life have gone from bad to worse? Have you had dreams destroyed and hopes dashed? Have you had the joy sucked right out of you? Are you feeling defeated?

Mary wasn't the only one crushed with defeat that Sunday morning. Peter and John also went to the tomb. They grieved just as much, but there were other emotions filling their hearts too. For good reason, Peter probably took Jesus' death harder than anyone else. Not only did he have to deal with the grief of losing a beloved teacher and friend, but he was crushed with guilt and shame. After promising allegiance to the point of death, Peter had abandoned his Lord. He had buckled under the pressure of a servant girl's questioning and denied knowing the One who knew him so well.

Imagine the knife in Peter's heart when he heard the rooster crow and saw Jesus' disappointed glance. Peter had abandoned Jesus in the darkness, even though Jesus had once given him a glimpse of heavenly glory. So Peter went to the tomb defeated by guilt and shame.

Is it any different for us? Maybe like Peter, you say one thing about your loyalty to Jesus with your lips, but say something completely different with your life. You lie awake at night feeling guilty about being a lousy parent, a lousy spouse, a lousy worker, a lousy church member, or a lousy pastor. Your trip to church on Easter Sunday is often traveled with eyes fixed on the rearview mirror, looking at the cross of Friday that shouts, "Your sins did this!" Like Peter, you go to the tomb defeated by guilt and shame.

What about John? He grieved for his Lord. He felt the shame of abandoning Jesus. Now humanly speaking, he could try to soothe his conscience knowing he had been near Jesus before the high priest and had consoled Jesus' mother at the cross, but what about his skepticism? After all, none of the disciples believed the first reports about Jesus' resurrection.

Are you and I skeptics when it comes to believing in who Jesus is and what he has done and what he is capable of doing? Do you read the promises that Jesus makes in his Word to bless his people with hope and a future, with grace and strength, and think to yourself, "Yes, but..."? Do you find yourself quick to doubt that God really can do great things with very little, that he does have plans for his people, and that he will do what's best for us? In our skeptical age, Satan doesn't have to work too hard to defeat you and me.

...But remember what I said at the beginning of the sermon? It's finally over, and it doesn't end with the defeat of Jesus and his followers. Crushed with defeat we go to the tomb, but we leave that garden victorious!

John left that garden victorious. When he went inside the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, "**he saw and believed**". Jesus' victory transformed John's skepticism into certainty. Jesus' victory does the same for you. The empty tomb proves not only that Jesus is the One he claimed to be, but that he fulfills every last one of his promises—even his promise to defeat death for you. Thus John writes a few verses later, "**These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God**". (John 20:31) Jesus' victory removes your doubts with trust in God's promises. Jesus' victory in the garden transforms your skepticism into certainty.

Peter left that garden victorious too. God used the empty tomb to overcome Peter's guilt with forgiveness. Listen to the message God's angel had for the women at the tomb. After reporting that Jesus was alive, the angel instructed, "**Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee'**". There in Galilee Jesus went out of his way to tell Peter, "I forgive you. Your guilt is gone." That's why Peter could later write, "**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**" (1 Peter 1:3). The empty tomb gives us that same "**living hope**", that same "**new birth**", that same victory over guilt. Think of what that means for you and me! Even though you were defeated with guilt and shame, Jesus has overcome your guilt with his victory over sin and death. The victory of his grace is now yours!

Jesus' victory in the garden didn't just overcome skepticism and guilt, but also grief and sorrow. Mary left that garden victorious too! She came to the tomb full of sorrow. She lingered there crying, believing that the body of her Lord had been stolen. When Jesus appeared to her as her risen Lord, however, her tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy. "**Teacher,**" she cried, as she grabbed hold of his feet until Jesus told her it was okay to let him go.

Then she went back to the disciples to deliver the good news of victory! "**I have seen the Lord!**" Her temporary defeat turned into a victory celebration that lasted an eternity, because the empty tomb validates Jesus' promise, "**Because I live, you also will live**". (John 14:19) Jesus' victory over death guarantees that one day you will enjoy his eternal victory in heaven where there will be no more tears or pain or sorrow. Jesus' victory in the garden takes the grief and sorrow you brought with you today—and turns it into joy!

It's finally over. The battle is over. The victory was won in an unlikely place in an unlikely way by an unlikely Savior, yet sin has been conquered. The serpent has been crushed. The power of death has been destroyed, and "**the victory is ours through our Lord Jesus Christ**". (1 Corinthians 15:57) Leave the garden today victorious for the tomb stands empty and Jesus lives! **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!** Alleluia! Amen.