

SERMON, ST. JOHN'S EASTER

Alleluia, Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen, indeed, Alleluia!

It is painfully difficult to shout these glorious words this Easter this year because we are all haunted by the horrible spectre of Ukraine. In particular, the harrowing stories and images of Bucha, the Kiev suburb from which Russian forces departed this past week, have cast a dreadful pall over this year's Holy Week and Easter: three civilians killed on their way to take food to a dog shelter, a grandmother shot as she opened the door to her home, a man on a bicycle blasted by tank mortar fire, teenage girls raped and murdered, abundant evidence of torture, people shot working innocently in their gardens – it goes on and on. Images reminiscent of the worst horrors of World War II. How can we proclaim resurrection light in the face of such profound darkness? It certainly shatters any illusions of joyous and happy Easter mornings that attempt to smooth over the ugly hatred, violence and death with sweet sentiments of hope, accompanied by cute bunnies, baby chicks, family dinners and lots of chocolate! We sing in one of my favorite hymns, "That Easter Day with Joy was Bright, the Sun Shone out with Fairer Light." Is that **really** so? How can we sing that in the dark night of Bucha? Are we cruelly delusional proclaiming a kind of sweet and cloying Polyanna kind of faith in the face of such vile darkness? I am afraid we are, if we proclaim resurrection in a way that turns a blind eye to the violence, that sweeps the ugliness of hatred, pain and death under the rug as if that proclamation of the Risen Lord can actually make it all go away. No it doesn't, for we are all painfully aware of the fact that it's still there, and not only Bucha, but New York subway shootings, cancer, domestic violence, our own suffering and grief, our unkindness and cruelty to one another, and violence against God's beautiful creation. I'm sorry to start an Easter sermon with such gloom, but if our faith means anything at all, we must preach the Truth!

A word that has come to mind so much for me this week to characterize these hellish images of violence and death is "harrowing." This word, which we often use to describe "an acutely distressing or painful experience," such as the horror of Ukraine, has an ancient and fascinating lineage. The word "harrow" comes from the Anglo Saxon "hergian," which means "to harry or despoil." "Harry," in turn, means "to persistently carry out attacks on an enemy." Anglo Saxons applied the term "The Harrowing of Hell" to describe that strange time when Christ was in the tomb between Good Friday and Easter. Some obscure passages in the NT mention his curious descent into the underworld, but don't actually describe what it meant. However, a rich and colorful tradition developed that held that in this time he brought salvation to the souls held captive in Hades, the Jewish Sheol, since the beginning of the world. The idea is that the righteous men and women of the OT, such as Adam and Eve and the Patriarchs and Prophets who lived before Christ, also deserved the chance to hear the Gospel and be saved. Some of you may remember that in the old version of the Apostles' Creed we actually say after "he was crucified, dead, and buried," that "He descended into hell." Some of the most beautiful Byzantine icons, which would be very familiar to the Orthodox Christians of Ukraine, feature this liberation of the souls in hell as "Anastasis," "Resurrection" - strange, because the event pictured takes place before Easter Sunday morning and yet it is quite moving because these souls in limbo get kind of a sneak peek at Resurrection! The image portrayed on the walls of the

exquisite little Church of Our Saviour in Chora shows a triumphant Christ literally dancing across the vault of the church while reaching down his hands to pull Adam and Eve out of the tombs with all the symbols of bondage breaking and scattering all over the place: chains and locks, as well as what appear to be instruments of torture, of man's inhumanity to man.

So, why might this be relevant to our proclamation of Easter in the midst of Ukraine's hell? First of all, Christ is there in hell itself. He's not dancing above it, as if violence, pain and death are beneath him, but he is in the midst of it, for he is on the Cross. If we believe, as Christians do, that God took flesh in Jesus, then God is on the Cross. The Cross is the most powerful symbol of all because here God himself is present in all the suffering and death of every creature since the beginning of time, just as God is surely present in the streets of Bucha, Ukraine! Christianity doesn't pretend that suffering doesn't exist, nor does it sweep suffering under the rug, nor does it insist that suffering will go away, proclaiming a cheap and easy hope, but rather confronts suffering with the image of the crucified Lord. This is compelling because coupled with the proclamation that God is on the Cross is the profound truth that God is perfect Love and perfect Love can never die. That is why one of the most powerful symbols of the Byzantine Empire, which they placed on all their coins, was a Greek cross with the word NIKE emblazoned across it: NIKE means Victory. The Victory here is the triumph of Love over "all that corrupts and destroys the creatures of God," and that triumph is what constitutes resurrection hope in the midst of the hell of Bucha.

I am reminded of another one of the odd passages of Scripture, one which until quite recently completely flummoxed me. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is at the Last Supper with his disciples and Judas goes forth to betray him. Jesus says the strangest thing as Judas runs out: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." I could possibly understand, "Will be glorified," meaning perhaps the future Resurrection, but he says "has been glorified." He is clearly referring to Judas' betrayal, but what kind of glory could there be in that? Then it dawned on me that in the very midst of the hell of betrayal by a friend, Jesus forgives Judas. Within the hatred of this act, which would take Jesus to the Cross, there is a seed of resurrection because perfect Love forgives. As such, hell is harried and there is true Resurrection even before the Cross and Empty Tomb because where Love prevails, Hope dawns. Ukraine's hell can see hope, not because the pain and suffering and death will magically disappear, but because Love is on the Cross of Ukraine drawing all the world to himself. We Christians believe that this Love is the greater context into which all creation is placed, and if this is so, then this hell is not the final word.

I can joyfully proclaim Resurrection, not primarily because I believe in a resuscitated corpse, but because I have encountered the Risen Lord in my firm belief that Perfect Love is eternally unconquered. My Hope comes from the conviction that all creation is embraced in a Love that is infinitely bigger than the hatred, thirst for power, guns, bombs and tanks of Putin. My Hope comes from the image of God himself on the Cross reaching out and embracing all of us in our suffering, pain, and death. My Hope comes, too, from that glorious image of Jesus dancing in hell, reaching out his hand and raising up the dying people of Ukraine. From this Hope, I can truly believe that Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead!

Alleluia, Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen, indeed, Alleluia!

