

“Jesus the Christ, the Savior of the Entire World” Grace Episcopal Church, Asheville, NC  
The Rev. Gary Coffey May 11, 2014 The Fifth Sunday of Easter

I’ll never forget what a visiting monk said to us when he visited our seminary. He said, “You had better make sure that you spend enough time with God, that when a dying person looks up at you and says, ‘Is there really life after death?’ that you are able to answer that question with a reassuring yes.”

This is the subject that Jesus is dealing with in the first part of our Gospel reading for today, life after death. When He told His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them, that where He is going, they would someday follow, for some strange reason, I thought of the Christus Victor, the Victorious Christ understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

This Christus Victor understanding is spelled out in our Proper Preface for Easter in the prayer book. The Proper Preface are those mysterious words that the Celebrant of Holy Communion launches into after he or she says, “It is right and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” At this point the Celebrant prays the Proper Preface which is usually seasonal. These prefaces for Rite 2 are found beginning on page 377 of the prayer book. Just for fun, why don’t you turn to page 379 and look at the Easter preface with me.

About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way down the page, we see, “But chiefly are we bound to praise you for the glorious resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; for he is the true Paschal Lamb, who was sacrificed for us, and has taken away the sin of the world. By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising to life again he has won for us everlasting life.” How wonderful is that, Beloved? By Christ’s death, He has destroyed death.

By His death, Jesus destroyed death and has gone before us, according to today’s Gospel, to prepare a place for us, that where He is presently, one day we will be together with one another and together with Him. That is the great news of the Gospel for the world.

He told his disciples then, and He says to us as His present day disciples that fortunately we know the way to the place where He is going. Thomas, confused by this, said, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going? How can we possibly know the way?”

Jesus responded, “Thomas, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know the Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Phillip, confused by this, said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” Jesus responded, “Have I been with you all this time, Phillip, and you still do not know me? Whoever

has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you now believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? But if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves."

I remember when one of the local Jewish rabbis came and spoke to us one evening here at Grace that he said that it was the Incarnation of God in Jesus that the Jews just couldn't fathom. For them, God would never lower Himself to become a human being. And also, for us to believe that Jesus is God, in their minds violates their belief that there is only one God. For this reason, the Rabbi said that the Jews, despite all of their conflicts with the Moslem faith, were closer in belief to the Moslems because in their understanding, both Jews and Moslems are monotheistic, that is, they worship the one true God.

What we hear Jesus saying to Phillip, in our hearts and minds, confirms the fact that we as Christians, like the Jews and Moslems, believe in the one true God as well, because Jesus is careful to say that anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father. Why? Because they were and are one and the same God. Therefore, we as Trinitarian Christians are monotheistic as well. We just acknowledge that we have experienced that one God in three distinct ways, as Father, and as Son and as the Holy Spirit.

Having said that, let's agree that words fail us when it comes to describing our infinite and wonderful God. But, words are what we have to use. So, words are important so long as we acknowledge that whatever words we use are the tip of the iceberg, and as the apophatic tradition of our faith teaches, there is actually so much more that we don't know and understand about God than that which we do try to know and understand. Therefore, in our faith tradition, we celebrate the mystery of God as well as our limited understanding of the one true God.

I would like to try and say a word or two about Jesus' words, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Some hear these words as very limiting where salvation is concerned, and would go so far as to say that this is proof positive that the Christian faith is the one true faith and that all of the other religions and faiths are worthless. However, there is another way of looking at this that is sort of the opposite of that limiting way.

I once had a bishop, Bishop Fitz Allison, who said that "people may be saved or rescued by God **in** other religions but not **by** those religions." What he meant by this is that it is Jesus who is the Savior of the world. In John chapter 3, verse 17, we read, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

Therefore, we don't have to be critical of the other religions of the world and the people who practice them. We can simply proclaim that God chose to rescue and forgive the world through Jesus.

There are myriad passages that say that Jesus came for all people, not just a chosen few.

From the First Letter of Peter, we read, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

From Isaiah, we hear, “God will prepare a feast for all people. He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations. God will eliminate death, wipe away the tears from all faces and remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.” We believe God did all of this in Christ.

In Jeremiah, chapter 31, God is promising the Hebrew people a new covenant where God would put God’s law into people’s hearts. “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.” We know that our Lord Jesus came as the cornerstone of this new covenant. Through His death and resurrection He has won eternal life for all who repent and believe. Some will repent and believe during their lifetimes. For the rest, I believe it will be on the last day when Christ comes not only to judge the living and the dead but to rescue them and take them to Himself. If it were any other way, Satan and evil would triumph, at least to some degree. No, I do not believe that Christ will lose one person that He came to save, not one.

And why is that? It is because none of us, not even someone like Mother Theresa, is perfect. We all need God’s forgiveness in Christ. And through His death, He destroyed death and procured that forgiveness for us.

In recent years, I have begun to think that God’s plan of salvation is way bigger and more comprehensive than I was taught and than I ever imagined. God sent His Son to save the world from itself. It is true that some of us have been fortunate enough to hear of this and believe it during our earthly lives. We have met this Christ, this Savior, and have had the tremendous privilege of worshipping Him, getting to know Him, and hopefully proclaiming Him to the rest of the world. We are incredibly blessed in this regard. On our death beds, we will be reminded of Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. I am going to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be also.” What a gift those words are to us.

But of course there are masses of others who have lived on this earth who may have never even heard of this Christ, or if they did, they didn’t understand Him or come to know Him. I may be wrong but I believe that at the last day, when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead, that **all** will see Him, the living and the dead, in His glory for Who He is, and as St. Paul’s letter to the Church of Philippi suggests, that “on that day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father”, and that on that day God’s plan for the salvation of humanity will be fully and finally realized.

In the meantime, it's up to us to live the Good News with untroubled hearts and to proclaim the Good News of the salvation of the world through this Christ, that more and more people in this life will come to know Him and through those who come to know him, more and more others will come to know Him, that people will experience the peace and joy of that very last day NOW as we follow Him and serve Him and keep proclaiming His salvation to and for the world.

Surely, this is what Jesus meant by saying, "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." So, it makes sense that as we try and follow Jesus in our lives, that we would be doing a lot of the things that He did like loving people unconditionally and trying to relieve suffering, and helping people understand the love of God for them. Perhaps the greater works that we do is that we get to tell the world the rest of the story, that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us, and that by His death He has destroyed death, and by His rising to life again He has won for us and for all the gift of everlasting life together with Him.

Remember that when God called Abraham, He told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, a great people, and through that chosen nation of Israel all of the world would be blessed. St. Paul referred to Christians as the New Israel, and said that we have been grafted in to Israel, God's chosen people. And think about it, that being the case, we have inherited that same call as Israel, through Israel, and now also through us all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Just as Israel was, we have been blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. May we go out of these doors again this morning, empowered by God's Holy Spirit to proclaim God's love and God's salvation for the whole world.

And so we pray to you O God, with all that we are,

"Please Lord, make us the blessings that you would have us to be, and this we ask in the Name of the Savior of the world, Jesus the Christ who is our Lord, our Brother and our Friend. Amen."