

## Easter 2024

As you can imagine, the two most difficult days of the year to preach are Christmas and Easter. It is very difficult to try to somehow put into meaningful words the wonder, awe, and magnitude of the mysteries that we celebrate on these days.

Christmas. The almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, the sustainer of all being, becoming man. Meaning, not only is there a God, but the living and true God cares about, rather, loves us so much that He would choose to be born in time, in poverty, to serve those who would by and large reject Him, revile Him, and finally put Him to death. How much do our own fragile egos suffer from the slightest insult, and here, God is despised by His own children and subject to perhaps the most painful, humiliating, and lonely death! All of this He knew, He foresaw, and He still chose to go through it, for us.

Easter. This God whom we put to death, being the author of life, could not be overcome by death, and rose again! That in and of itself would be amazing, but would ultimately only be a torture to us mortals if He did not also choose to share His resurrection with us, as undeserving as we are. Thank God He did choose just that!

But here's the thing: we don't have to believe any of this, and we know many people today don't believe. A recent WSJ poll revealed that revealed only 39% of Americans think that religion is very important. This is down from 62% in 1998. Now that's a topic for a whole other sermon, but in the face of such massive disbelief, I would like to turn to a much better preacher, St. Peter, and his masterful sermon to the people of Caesarea that we heard in our 1<sup>st</sup> reading today from the Acts of the Apostles.

The first thing to highlight here is this: that Peter names himself among the witnesses of not only *all Jesus did*, but even more, among those *who ate and drank with Jesus after he rose from the dead*. And this was no coincidence; Peter reveals that he was among those *witnesses chosen by God in advance*. You see, Jesus could have risen from the dead in the middle of the night, and then immediately ascended to the Father, unbeknownst to anyone. We could hardly blame Him for wanting to get out of here after how He was treated by His own people and abandoned by His friends! But that's not what He did. In Matthew's account of the resurrection that we read at Mass last night at the Easter Vigil, an angel appears to Mary Magdalene and says to her, *go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you*. The risen Jesus wants to be seen by the witnesses the Father has chosen. He wants to leave us unbelieving children proof of his resurrection!

So St. Peter indeed sees the risen Lord, and comes to believe. And because of his faith, He receives the Holy Spirit after Jesus' ascension into heaven, and is truly a changed man. He is no longer the coward who denied Jesus. He embraces his vocation and becomes the great preacher, the Rock upon whom the Lord builds His Church. Peter continues in his

sermon, declaring that God *commissioned us to preach to the people and testify that [Jesus] is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead*. Did you catch that? Peter was commissioned by God to testify, to give witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Even more, Peter reveals that his witness is corroborated by other witnesses too: the Prophets of the Old Testament. *To Him (Jesus), he says, all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins through His name*.

As I mentioned, many Americans no longer value the virtue of religion. But the “residue” of Christianity, so to speak, still lingers in our country. Many people still have a belief in heaven and the afterlife, even if they do not profess faith in Christ. But here’s a question: what are they basing this hope of life after death on? After all, I certainly have no idea how to rise from the dead on my own strength. And I’ve never met anyone who rose from the dead and is still alive. So if heaven is available without Christ, how do we get there?

The truth is, there is no other way to the Father than through His Son, Jesus Christ. In another sermon in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Peter will boldly proclaim to the rulers and elders of the Jerusalem temple, *there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved than the name of Jesus (4:12)*.

And that, my friends, is why we believe. We were not there to witness the resurrection. But Mary Magdalene and Peter and the other witnesses’ testimony has been passed on through the ages and now has come to us. And now we are called to give testimony to our belief, and, on account of this faith, receive forgiveness of sins through the Name of Jesus. And if the *wages of sin is death*, and our sins are forgiven, then we no longer need to fear death! That is truly good news—news that needs to be shared.

But if we are honest, sometimes we are afraid to share this good news. After all, it is not very popular today to speak of the Lord Jesus. But it never has been. Another reason why our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead rests on a solid foundation is because like St. Peter, most of the eyewitnesses of His resurrection were put to death *because of their witness*. Just as Jesus was put to death for claiming to be God, His disciples were martyred because they continued to spread the message that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, rose from the dead! Remember, these were real men with families of their own. So if the resurrection was not true, why on earth would they have gone to their deaths just to keep up a lie? No, it is true, and it is so important that they were willing to die in this life so as to help others to believe in the resurrection of the dead—which was their hope as well.

But just as many people disbelieved Jesus during His own time, so we cannot make anyone believe. All we can do, as St. Paul says in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, is seek to be a little yeast that leavens the lifeless dough of mankind. And so we pray that the Lord will help us to be true witnesses, that all that we are and all we do gives witness to the truth, that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, and He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, forever and ever, Amen! Alleluia!