

“Two Easter Sermons”

April 1, 2018, *Easter Evening*

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Over the years I have made it a custom to do something on Easter Sunday evening that is less typical of a Lord’s Day evening sermon, though generally I have confined myself to subjects that are at least relevant to the subject of the Lord’s resurrection and ours. Tonight is no exception to this practice. What I am going to give you tonight are two Easter sermons, but neither one is a sermon of my own. In fact, these are Easter sermons preached in their own time by two of the greatest preachers in the history of Christendom. Not to worry; I am not going to read the entirety of either sermon and I have condensed even what I will read to you from each sermon, more in the one case than in the other. But I thought it would be interesting, if not fascinating to you to hear specimens of Easter preaching by these titans of the Christian pulpit. In each case the sermon was delivered in the man’s own pulpit to his own congregation.

Now, I am not going to tell you who the preacher was in each case; not until the end. So, while I want you to listen to the sermons, valuable as they are and interesting as they are, I also want you to ponder who the preacher might be and to what congregation he preached. When I have finished with both of them, I will see if you have guessed correctly! I should say that one of them, but only one, was first delivered in English, the other is an English translation of a sermon originally delivered in another language.

So we begin. This sermon’s text was 2 Timothy 2:8. “Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel.” The preacher begins:

“Our text is found in Paul’s second letter to Timothy. The venerable minister is anxious about the young man who has preached with remarkable success, and whom he regards in some respects as his successor. The old man is about to put off his tabernacle, and he is concerned that his son in the gospel should preach the same truth as his father has preached, and should by no means adulterate the gospel. A tendency showed itself in Timothy’s day, and the same tendency exists at this very hour, to try to get away from the simple matters of fact upon which our religion is built to something more philosophical and hard to be understood. The word which the common people heard gladly is not fine enough for cultured sages, and so they must needs surround it with a mist of human thought and speculation.

“Three or four plain facts constitute the gospel, even as Paul puts it in the fifteenth chapter of his first Epistle to the Corinthians: ‘For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.’ Upon the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our salvation hinges. He who believes these truths aright hath believed the gospel, and believing the gospel he shall without doubt find eternal salvation therein.

“But men want novelties; they cannot endure that the trumpet should give forth the same certain sound, they crave some fresh fantasia every day. *The gospel with variations* is the music for them. Intellect is progressive, they say; they must, therefore, march ahead of their

forefathers. Incarnate Deity, a holy life, an atoning death, and a literal resurrection – having heard these things...they are just a little stale, and the cultivated mind hungers for a change from the old-fashioned manna. Even in Paul's day this tendency was manifest, and so they sought to regard facts as mysteries or parables, and they labored to find a spiritual meaning in them till they went so far as to deny them as actual facts.

“Within the compass of this verse several facts are recorded: ...that Jesus was anointed of God.... That this Jesus Christ was really and truly man; for Paul says that he was of the seed of David... It is implied, too, in the text that Jesus died; for He could not be raised from the dead if He had not first gone down among the dead, and been one of them. Then comes the grand truth, Jesus rose again.

“...beloved, as God shall help us... let us consider the bearings of the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. It is clear at the outset that *the resurrection of our Lord was a tangible proof that there is another life*. Have you not quoted a great many times certain lines about ‘That undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns’? It is not so. There was once a traveler who said that ‘I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go away I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am there you may be also.’ Do you remember these words of His? Our divine Lord went to the undiscovered country, and He returned. He said that at the third day he would be back again, and He was true to his word. There is no doubt that there is another state for human life, for Jesus has been in it, and has come back from it. We have no doubt as to a future existence, for Jesus existed after death. We have no doubt as to a paradise of future bliss, for Jesus went to it and returned.

“Secondly, *Christ's rising from the dead is the seal to all His claims*. It was true, then, that He was sent of God, for God raised Him from the dead in confirmation of His mission. He had said Himself, ‘Destroy this body, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Lo, there He is: the temple of His body is rebuilt! Suppose he had never risen. You and I might have believed in the truth of a certain mission which God had given Him; but we could never have believed in the truth of such a commission as He claimed to have received – a commission to be our Redeemer from death and hell. How could He be our ransom from the grave if He had Himself remained under the dominion of death? Dear friends, the rising of Christ from the dead proved that this man was innocent of every sin. Moreover, Christ's rising from the dead proved His claim to Deity. We are told in another place that he was proved to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.

"A third bearing of his resurrection is this, and it is a very grand one, – *The resurrection of our Lord, according to Scripture, was the acceptance of his sacrifice*. By the Lord Jesus Christ rising from the dead evidence was given that he had fully endured the penalty which was due to human guilt. ‘The soul that sins it shall die’ – that is the determination of the God of heaven. Jesus stands in the sinner's place and dies: and when he has done *that* nothing more can be demanded of him, for he that is dead is freed from the law. You take a man who has been guilty of a capital offence: he is condemned to be hanged, he is hanged by the neck till he is dead – what more has the law to do with him? It has done with him, for it has executed its sentence upon him... So when our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, after having died, he had fully paid the penalty that was due to justice for the sin of his people, and his

new life was a life clear of penalty, free from liability. You and I are clear from the claims of the law because Jesus stood in our stead, and God will not exact payment both from us and from our Substitute... He who took our debt has not delivered himself from it by dying on the cross. The Lord Jesus gave himself for our sins, but he rose again for our justification.

“Bear with me while I notice, next, another bearing of this resurrection of Christ. *It was a guarantee of his people’s resurrection.* There is great truth that never is to be forgotten, namely that Christ and His people are one just as Adam and all his seed are one. That which Adam did he did as a head for a body, and as our Lord Jesus and all believers are one, so that which Jesus did he did as a head for a body. We were crucified together with Christ, we were buried with Christ, and we are risen together with him; yea, He hath raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. He says, ‘Because I live you shall live also.’ There is no logic more imperative than the argument drawn from union with Christ. God has made the saints one with Christ, and if Christ has risen all the saints must rise too. My soul takes firm hold on this and as she strengthens her grasp she loses all fear of death.

Once more, *our Lord’s rising from the dead is a fair picture of the new life which all believers already enjoy.* Beloved, though this body is still subject to bondage like the rest of the visible creation...yet ‘the spirit is life because of righteousness.’ The regeneration which has taken place in those who believe has changed our spirit, and given to it eternal life, but it has not affected our body further than this, that it has made it to be the temple of the Holy Ghost, and thus it is a holy thing, and cannot be obnoxious to the Lord, or swept away among unholy things; but still the body is subject to pain and weariness, and to the supreme sentence of death. Not so the spirit. There is within already a part of the resurrection accomplished, since it is written, ‘And you he has made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins.’ Now, just as Jesus led, after his resurrection, a life very different from that before his death, so you and I are called upon to live a high and noble spiritual and heavenly life, seeing that we have been raised from the dead to die no more. Let us...rejoice in this. Let us behave as those who are alive from the dead, the happy children of the resurrection. Let us not set our affections on the foul things of this dead and rotten world, but let our hearts fly upward, like young birds that have broken loose of their shells – upward towards our Lord and the heavenly things upon which he would have us set our minds. Living truth, living work, living faith, these are the things for living men: let us cast off the grave clothes of our former lusts, and wear the garments of light and life. May the Spirit of God help us in further meditating upon these things at home. [Charles Spurgeon, *Twelve Sermons on the Resurrection*, Baker Book House (1968) 141-152]

Now, as I said as we began, that was hardly the entire sermon. What I read to you was only a portion of the introduction and the first of three main points, though the most substantial of the three, and I substantially reduced even those sections. The entire sermon, I suppose was between three or four times longer than the selection that I read. I took the sermon from a volume of sermons on the resurrection by this famous preacher, a collection published in 1968.

We come now to the second sermon, a very different kind of sermon with a very different theme. This preacher, as you will soon hear, was addressing his entire congregation to be sure, but in

part he was speaking specifically to the new Christians who had been baptized that very Easter morning. The reference to the white robes of these newly baptized Christians indicates that the sermon was preached on Easter morning shortly after their baptisms had taken place since, according to an ancient custom, the newly baptized donned those white robes immediately following their baptism and in them entered the sanctuary for their first service as full members of the Christian church. This sermon was considerably shorter and you will hear almost all of it.

“In the book called *Genesis* scripture says, ‘And God saw the light that it was good. And God divided between the light and the darkness; and God called the light day, and the darkness he called night.’ So if God called the light day, then without a shadow of doubt those to whom the apostle Paul says, ‘You were once darkness, but now light in the Lord’ were day; since the one who commanded ‘light to shine out of the darkness’ had enlightened them.

“These infants [he is not speaking of literal babies but of new Christians], whom you behold outwardly clothed in white, inwardly cleansed and purified, the brilliance of their garments representing the splendor of their minds, were once darkness, when the night of their sins was covering them. But now that they have been washed clean in the bath of [forgiveness], that they have been watered from the fountain of wisdom, that they have been bedewed with the light of justice, ‘this is the day which the Lord has made; let us exult and rejoice in it.’ Let the day of the Lord listen to us; let the day made by the Lord listen to us; let it listen and obey, so that we may rejoice and exult in it; because as the apostle says, this is our joy and our crown, if you stand fast in the Lord.’

“So listen to me, O you freshly born children of a chaste mother; or rather listen to me, you children of a virgin mother. Because ‘you were once darkness, but now light in the Lord,’ stick close to the children of light; and let me put it quite plainly; stick close to those of the faithful who are good. Because there are, you see, and this is a sad and sorry fact, a number of the faithful who are bad. They are the faithful who are called so, and are not really so. They are the faithful by whom the sacraments of Christ are misused; who live in such a way that they both perish themselves and ruin others. They perish themselves by living bad lives; while they ruin others by setting them the example of living bad lives. So you, then, dearly beloved, see you don’t join such people. Seek out the good ones, stick close to the good ones, be good ones yourselves.

“Don’t be surprised, either, at how many bad Christians there are, who fill the church, who communicate at the altar, who loudly praise the [minister]...when he preaches about good morals; who fulfill what the one who gathers us together foretold in the psalms: ‘I announced and I spoke; they have multiplied above number.’ They can be with us in the church of this time; but in that church which will come into being after the resurrection, they will be unable to be gathered in with the saints.

“The church of this time, you see, is compared to a threshing floor, having on it grain mixed with chaff, having bad members with good; after the judgment it will have all the good members, without any bad ones. This threshing floor holds the harvest sown by the apostles, watered by the teachers who followed them up till the present time, subjected to no little

threshing under persecution by its enemies; but, the only stage remaining, not yet cleansed by the winnowing from above. However; the one is coming, about whom you have given back the article of the creed, [At the beginning of the service the congregation had recited the creed.] ‘From there he is going to come to judge the living and the dead;’ and, as the gospel states, ‘He will have a winnowing fan in his hand, and will cleanse his threshing-floor; and he will gather his wheat into the granary, while the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

“You older faithful, you listen too to what I’m saying. Any of you who are grain, rejoice with trembling, and stay where you are, and don’t leave the threshing floor. Don’t attempt, on your own judgment, to shake yourselves free, as it were, from the chaff; because if you want to separate yourself now from the chaff, you won’t be able to stay on the threshing-floor. And when that one comes who distinguishes infallibly between grain and chaff, he won’t carry up to the granary anything he doesn’t find on the threshing-floor. So it will be no good at that time for grains to boast about the ears of wheat they come from, if they have left the threshing-floor. That granary will be filled and closed. Anything outside will be gutted by fire.

“So then, dearly loved, if you are good, you must put up with the bad; if you are bad, you must imitate the good. The fact is, on this threshing-floor grains can degenerate into chaff, and again grains can be resurrected from chaff. This sort of thing happens every day, my dear brothers and sisters; this life is full of both painful and pleasant surprises. Every day people who seemed to be good fall away and perish; and again, ones who seemed to be bad are converted and live. God, you see, ‘does not desire the death of the wicked, but only that they may turn back and live.’

“Listen to me, grains; listen to me, those of you who are what I desire you to be. Don’t let the mixture of husks depress you; they won’t be with you forever. How much, anyway, is this pile of husks that is covering us? Thank God, it’s very light. We only have to be grains, and however big it is, it won’t crush us. God, after all, ‘is faithful, and he will not permit us to be tempted or tried beyond our capacity, but with the trial will also provide a way out, so that we can endure.’

“Let the husks listen to me too; wherever they are, let them listen. I hope there aren’t any here; but let me address them all the same, in case perhaps there are some here. So listen to me, you husks, though if you do listen, you won’t be husks anymore. So listen. Let God’s patience stand you in good stead. Let your association with the grains, and their advice and admonitions, make you too into grains. You are not denied the showers of God’s word; don’t let God’s field in you be barren. So, grow green again, grow grain again, grow ripe again. The one who sowed you, after all, wishes to find full ears of corn, not empty husks. [Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part III, Homilies, *Essential Sermons*, 277-279; this sermon the editor suggests was preached in the early years of the 5th century]

That sermon was also taken from a volume of sermons by the same preacher, though only some of them were Easter sermons, a volume that likewise was published recently. Now, as I have told

you before, my favorite definition of preaching is that coined by Phillips Brooks, the 19th century American Episcopalian, known to you perhaps as the author of the Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Brooks defined preaching as “truth mediated through personality.” In my view that is a brilliantly insightful understanding of preaching and one that is again confirmed to me every time I hear a sermon preached. No two preachers are the same and so no two preachers’ sermons are the same, even if they are all good sermons. Every faithful preacher, in other words, expounds the truth of the Gospel in a way peculiar to himself. His own spiritual experience, his own interests, his own scholarship, his own habits of mind, his own culture, his own historical moment, and his own personality determine how he handles any biblical text and how he preaches any sermon. Give the same text to the hundred greatest preachers of Christian history and you will get back one hundred splendid sermons, but not one of them would be same as any other. And, of course, one can preach a biblical theme in many different ways, approach it from many different directions, and apply it in many ways.

What is more, over the course of a man’s entire ministry, he may preach a great many sermons on the same theme, for example, on the resurrection of the Lord. I have preached some 40 Easter morning sermons to the congregation of Faith Presbyterian Church and as many Easter evening sermons. In eighty sermons a preacher may say a great many true things about the resurrection and apply the truth of it to people’s hearts and lives in many important ways. Both of tonight’s two preachers delivered many sermons apropos Easter and their two large repertoires of Easter sermons would, I’m sure, cover much the same ground even with all of their distinctive features. The time and circumstances when a particular sermon was preached would also have a bearing on the content and character of the sermon. That was certainly true in the case of the latter of the two sermons I read. The issue of nominal Christianity was obviously in the forefront of the preacher’s mind as he addressed these new believers.

So, how did we do at recognizing the preachers? Who was it that preached the first sermon? Charles Spurgeon is correct – the 19th century English Baptist. Who preached the second? Augustine. From both of these great men and their sermons you will get a steady diet of spiritual encouragement, as the gospel is explained and applied to the heart, *and* a steady diet of bracing challenge, as believers are summoned to a holy life and forbidden to imagine that they could have the safety and comfort of the gospel without a living commitment to Jesus Christ. On the one hand, death has lost its sting and eternal life rises before us as our actual future, something to be anticipated with relish, a prospect to comfort and strengthen us in the struggles of life. On the other hand, real faith, as Paul reminds us, always works through love and produces obedience. I wonder myself if there were any eyewitness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ who did not love, obey, and serve the Lord the rest of his or her life! So take both the comfort and the challenge to your own hearts this evening!