

A Sermon for Easter Day
By Dr. Robert Crouse
St. Clement's, Toronto, 1956

Humbly and Respectfully Re-delivered by The Rev. Matthew M. Seifert
St. Matthias Anglican Parish, Florence, Kentucky, 2008

If ye be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-3)

Easter is the oldest and most important festival of the Christian Year. From the earliest days of Christianity, the first day of the week, the day of the Lord's Resurrection, has been kept by Christians as the Lord's Day, in place of the seventh day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath. And around the annual observance of Easter, originally the *only* annual Christian festival, the whole of the Christian year has gradually taken shape.

This is as it should be; indeed, as it must be, for it is around the Resurrection of the Lord that the whole Christian faith centers. As St. Paul says, "If Christ is not risen, then our faith is vain"—empty—meaningless. It is clear from the New Testament records that the first Christians considered their mission to be above all else a witness to the fact that Jesus Christ, who has offered himself as a perfect sacrifice on the cross of Calvary, had vanquished sin and death, and returned from the tomb, mighty to save—God risen from the dead, offering a new and eternal life to men who had long lain in the bondage of sin and death.

The historical fact of the empty tomb on Easter morning; the fact that Jesus Christ, who had been crucified, has risen as he said he would, is one of the most significant events in the history of mankind. Easter is not simply the remembrance of an interesting event which took place in the corner of the Roman Empire twenty centuries ago. For us, the real significance of Easter is that Christ, in rising from the dead, has conquered the power of sin and death, and offers to us the victory which is his. We are risen with Christ. We are dead unto sin. Our life is hid with Christ in God.

And if we go on to ask how it is that Christ's new life becomes our new life, we are asking really what Christianity is all about; because *Christianity is not basically a matter of having good behavior, nor of having a satisfactory interpretation of the universe, but a matter of having new life.* Let me repeat that: *Christianity is not basically a matter of having good behavior, nor of having a satisfactory interpretation of the universe, but a matter of having new life.* We have this new life only by virtue of the fact that we are members of Christ, members of his body, the Church. It is in the new society which we call the Church that we have Christ's new life, and it is in the sacramental life of this new society that we both receive this new life, and grow in it. In our baptism we become members of Christ and therefore, as the New Testament teaches, die and rise again with our Savior. And in Holy Communion our new life is nourished by that eternal bread

which cometh down from heaven, that true bread which is Christ Himself. It is in these sacraments that we receive to ourselves all that Christ accomplished in his Resurrection. All else that we can say about the Christian religion rests upon this foundation—in baptism we receive Christ's new life, and in Holy Communion this new life is nourished and preserved. May I repeat this as well: *in baptism we receive Christ's new life, and in Holy Communion this new life is nourished and preserved.*

The language of the New Testament is clear and emphatic on this subject: "Unless a man be born again of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." "Unless ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you; but whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." The means by which we possess Christ's new life is our participation of the sacramental life of Christ's body, the Church, in which we are made members of Christ and are nourished by him. In the light of this fact, it is very unfortunate indeed that we often treat these sacraments as formalities, or as incidental to Christian life, as ceremonies which can be taken or left depending upon how the individual happens to feel about it. The fact of the matter is that being a Christian means being risen with Christ, receiving the new life which he offers us in His Church. For this there is no substitute. Again, *For this there is no substitute.*

Once we understand this fundamental point, that Christianity consists in receiving Christ's new life, we can follow our text further in describing the character of this new life. "If we then be risen with Christ," says St. Paul—if "you are dead unto sin, if your life is hid with Christ in God, you must set your affections on things above, not on things of this earth." This does not mean that we are not to have any concern for the things which go on around us; but it does mean that things above, the love and service of God, must be the most important factors in our lives. It means that we must not set our affections upon all the possessions and attachments which distract us so much from the love of God in our day to day living. It is extremely easy for us to fool ourselves in this matter. We certainly all agree that if we believe in God, God cannot have second place in our lives; but yet when it comes to a question of a practical decision in the ordinary affairs of life, how much is our conduct affected by the love and service of God? When we examine our lives, we find that there are a good many things which crowd for first place—pleasure, possessions, popularity, security, satisfaction and contentment are only a few of them. *But the realization of our new life in Christ demands that we must not let these things become the first objects of our love. Again: the realization of our new life in Christ demands that we must not let these things become the first objects of our love.* These are not the things we as Christians count on most. If we build our lives around these things, we are laying up for ourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. If we allow ourselves to fall into bondage to these things (however innocent they may seem at first), we are on the road to disappointment and disaster. Our new life in Christ frees us from the tyranny of all such things. If we are risen with Christ, our life is hid with Christ in God—our affections are set upon things above, the love and service of God, which is the ground not of passing pleasures, but of eternal blessedness.

This brings us to the final point made by the text we have chosen: *when Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.* Our new life in Christ is the ground of our hope as Christians, for in being members of Christ, nourished by his body and blood, we have eternal life, here and now. But here and now, we walk by faith, and we see things through a glass darkly—as a man might see his reflection in a cloudy mirror—but finally we shall see God face to face. Because we are with Christ, and Christ has triumphed over death, we too, [his members] have triumphed over death. We have here and now eternal—but it is a life in which we must grow, in hope of its fulfillment in us, so that finally we may appear with Christ in glory. We are born anew of God—and *whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world—and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith...God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.*

The risen Lord has sent His Church into the world as the new community of those who are his members, and has established within it the means by which we become his members. The primary and all important mission of the Church, and of us as individual Christians, is to show forth Christ's risen life, and to communicate that new life to all mankind. When we consider our unworthiness for such a mission, we may well be dismayed: but let us remember that it is the Risen Lord who sends us forth into all the world, that new life is not of our making, but is God's gift—*so thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ—and therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. [I Corinthians 15:57-58]*