

THE RANSOM FROM SORROW

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. A Pascha of delight, Pascha, the Lord's Pascha, an all-venerable Pascha has dawned for us, Pascha. Let us embrace one another with joy. O Pascha, ransom from sorrow! Today Christ shone forth from a tomb as from a bridal chamber, and filled the women with joy, saying, 'Proclaim it to the Apostles'. (from the stikhera Vespers of Pascha)

What is the deepest message of Christ's resurrection? Is it the end of death, sin, and alienation? Of, course! But the **joy** of the resurrection is that it brings an end to sorrow. It frees us from the crushing **sorrow** of death, sin, and alienation.

Death—the death of those whom we love and the anticipation of our own death—is a heartbreaking loss, a terror, the threat of annihilation. Indeed, death is the ultimate alienation and the knowledge of death is the ultimate source of sin (at least since the first sin was committed—the sin that lead to death). This knowledge is engrained into our very being. It expresses itself even in infants in the cry for food, the demand for attention, the requirement for care. Looked at this way, the knowledge and fear of death is a universal—extending even beyond human beings into the animal world.

Most of us spend our entire life *avoiding* the thought of death. When it happens to others we are speedy in making it go away. The body is shipped off to a funeral home where it is made to look as much like it is alive is possible, or it is cremated, or locked in a casket so that no one can see it (increasingly, at least among the non-Orthodox caskets are kept closed even at wakes). Once the funeral is over we urge mourners to 'let go' of their grief, to work it out and to move on with their lives. We Orthodox, with our open casket funerals, our forty day's memorials and Soul Saturdays are something of an exception to this cruel

practice. But even here changes are occurring; one of the Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States does not permit open casket funeral and more and more families are electing not to have the traditional memorials. Soul Saturday services are often attended only by the elderly.

The cruelty of our modern approach is that it artificially suppresses the natural sorrow and grief we feel in the face of what appears to be annihilation. Our modern approach is unnatural and perverse; it attempts to convince us of the lie that we can ever get beyond the catastrophic impact that death has on all of life.

Now that sounds like a terribly morbid statement. In fact, it is the modern attitude toward death or, rather, our denial of death that is morbid and unnatural because it deprives us of hope. In attempting to limit and ultimately deny sorrow we deprive ourselves of joy.

Against common sense and practical experience we are asked to treat death as natural, normal, and perhaps even good—and in doing so we repudiate the saving work of Christ and refute His resurrection!

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up--if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the

resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15: 12-26 NKJV)

Our modern attitude toward death ultimately rejects the possibility of resurrection. By attempting to make peace with death, or more aptly, by trying to push it aside and forget it, we have forsaken the resurrection. By denying our sorrow we have forfeited out joy!

The message of the resurrection is that, yes, death matters. It really is a terrible obstacle, the source of sorrow, the birth-giver of sin, and the ultimate alienation.

Christ did not make peace with death. He overcame it. He humiliated it. He destroyed it.

The incomparable St. John Chrysostom put it this way in his sermon on the Resurrection.

He that was taken by death has annihilated it! He descended into Hades and took Hades captive! He embittered it when it tasted his flesh! And anticipating this Isaiah exclaimed, "Hades was embittered when it encountered thee in the lower regions." It was embittered, for it was abolished! It was embittered, for it was mocked! It was embittered, for it was purged! It was embittered, for it was despoiled! It was embittered, for it was bound in chains! It took a body and, face to face, met God! It took earth and encountered heaven! It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen!" O death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is thy victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown!

Christ does not make peace with death; He does not surrender to it, He annihilates it!

Annihilation is annihilated, alienation is alienated, sin is erased, and sorrow is replaced by joy. At last we are liberated from the need to either tremble in the presence of death or to deny it because Christ has redeemed us from it.

This is the very heart of the gospel—the good news of salvation—that we have been set free both to mourn and to rejoice. Or, better yet, we have been freed to mourn in the knowledge and hope of joy. This is a great paradox, that the very source of our sorrow should be turned into joy.

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!

Our Paschal proclamation declares that the means of sorrow has become the means by which sorrow has been undone. Death is defeated by death and the life that emerges from it can never die again. This is the beginning and end of the Orthodox Christian faith, our hope and our joy. And it gives us good reason not to surrender to the great paradox of modern life wherein death is both embraced and denied. (We embrace death as the solution to life's problems through abortion, 'euthanasia', suicide, and the death penalty. We deny it when we sweep it away in the sanitized confines of our funeral homes, our desire for closed casket funerals, and our insistence that mourning be kept to a minimum and that it be very, very private).

In the Resurrection of Christ, we both acknowledge the reality and the unreality of death. It is real because until Christ comes again at the end of the ages, we must die. It is unreal because in Him death has been defeated. His resurrection is the promise of what is to come. Thus, we weep for our loved ones when they die and we dread the day of our own death and we rejoice because we know that death no longer has the last word.

The joy of Pascha has nothing to do with the cycle of life and death; the emergence of spring from winter. It has to do with the end of death; its complete destruction. Once we understand this we can be 'real'. We can shed real tears and experience real joy. We can have a truly sane (healthy) attitude toward death, free from both morbidity and from the false attempt to make friends with it.

Why? Because we have been set free from its power. We have been ransomed from its sorrow. Its bitterness has been made sweet for us and its fearsomeness has been transformed into hope.

This is a message worth proclaiming. In the end, it is the most important message of all.