

Easter Baptism

Romans 6:5

A sermon for Easter Sunday

Around the world there are many churches which have an Easter vigil, starting at midnight with Baptisms, looking for the dawn, the light from the East.

What is Easter? These three days. The days are counted from the evening. Thursday evening (Maunday Thursday), Friday evening, Saturday evening until dawn are called the Triduum. This is the pinnacle, the major point of the whole Christian faith, because we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Luke 24:13-32 tells about the two on the road to Emmaus. They meet a stranger and they start to talk to him and say (paraphrase): "We had hoped he was the one who would restore Israel. We had such hopes and now they are all gone."

The four Gospels point out that all Twelve Apostles fled when Jesus was crucified. It was a defeat, a complete loss. But then on Easter morning he appeared to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18). Luke 24:34 says he appeared to Peter. Of course he had appeared to these two on the road to Emmaus, and they knew him in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30-31). After that he appeared to the Twelve (Luke 24:36-43). They "disbelieved for joy" (Luke 24:41). There he was! Paul writes in 1 Cor 15:5-9 that he appeared to Peter, then to five hundred and many more.

This is not about ghosts. They knew about ghosts. Luke 24:41-43 says very specifically that he asked for a piece of fish and ate it. It was not about visions. They knew about visions. In two of the accounts (Luke 24:39, John 20:27) he says (paraphrase): "Touch me and see. I am not a vision. I am not imaginary." It was not a catatonic fit. (It was not an appearance of being dead and then coming out of it.) It was not, as in *The Da Vinci Code* and other such movies, that he did not really die but managed to survive and lived for many years.

They knew he was dead, that it was all over, and then something entirely new happened. It was a *novum*, to use the Latin, that which has no parallel, that which has never happened before. The resurrection does not have to do with the cycle of nature, with butterflies, bunnies, and chicks. Put in terms of physics: The second law of thermodynamics says the world is running down, that is the law of entropy. The resurrection says the law of entropy is reversed. Death is reversed. Everything is changed. Just as in the beginning he created out of nothing (Rom 4:17), so here

even more death is reversed into life. This is the event which determines all other events.

John 19:30 states: "It is finished." That can be taken in two ways. It can mean it is all over. We have lost. We are defeated. But in the context, it means the opposite. It is complete. It is successful. The cross is the successful carrying out of his mission. The resurrection is the guarantee. The resurrection by itself, without the cross, would be a fantasy. And the cross without the resurrection would be a tragedy.

What we have here is the key event for all time and all eternity.

Baptism is a perfect illustration of what the cross and resurrection is all about. You've heard people say: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." That is true, but you could also say that about someone when they are born, that is the first day of the rest of their life. But of course it goes downhill from there. We are all going downhill. You are either going downhill slowly or going downhill fast. And if you are not going downhill, you are dead. The best of all possible worlds is to go downhill slowly. In the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* the funeral service states: "In the midst of life we are in death." For every one of us there are defeats, tragedies, losses, and finally death catches us.

But your Baptism is the first day of forever. This is far more significant. You begin your life with Christ forever. In Luther's Small Catechism it says Jesus conquered sin, death, and the devil. They are all one and the same thing. They are conquered on the cross and in the resurrection. His victory is ours in Baptism. In Baptism we receive the Holy Spirit, faith, and life eternal.

This is really stating what Paul writes in Romans 6:5. "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (The Greek idiom requires the word "certainly.") That is its promise. That is why Baptism is an illustration of what Easter is about.

Even more striking, infant Baptism is the perfect illustration of what the Christian message is and what the Christian life is about.

We are wise to the fact that when we see an offer for a free gift, we reach for our wallets because we know there are bound to be hooks along the line. What is advertised as free turns out to be not so free after all.

But what we have in infant Baptism is a perfect illustration of what God does for us. It is truly a free gift. It shows itself in three ways.

First, it does not depend on the one doing it. It says in John 4:2 that Jesus baptized nobody. In 1 Cor 1:14-16 Paul writes (paraphrase): "I only baptized a couple of people, but that's not what I'm about." It does not depend on the one doing it whether that person is a priest/pastor or is holy. It depends on doing it according to God's command and promise. As Luther writes (Large Catechism 5:15-16; Kolb/Wengert 468):

"It is easy to answer all kinds of questions which now trouble people – for example, whether even a wicked priest can administer the sacrament, and similar questions. Our conclusion is: Even though a scoundrel receives or administers the sacrament, it is the true sacrament." (Donatism)

Second, Baptism does not depend on the situation of the one who is receiving Baptism. We get into discussions about having faith and what that means. Baptism does not depend on faith; it creates faith. Again, Luther (LC 4:52-53; Tappert 443):

". . . [W]e are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends on the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that Baptism is simply water and God's Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.

That is entirely different than the way we think about it. The Lord is the one who effects what Baptism does because of his promise.

In the third place, Baptism does not depend on the results, that is, the results as we look at them and think about them. We like to say: "Did it take? Did that person become a Christian, grow up as a Christian?" Baptism is God's magic. Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." As Luther said, we get caught up either into spiritual pride. We say: "Ah, we made it!" Or we fall into spiritual despair because we say: "We'll never make it." But it does not depend on us. It depends on his promise. That is why infant Baptism is such a perfect illustration of what God does. It is his business how it works.

In Isaiah 55:11 the Lord says (paraphrase): "My word is effective as I will it to be effective," and it does not depend on you. It is based on the premise that the Lord's promises do not fail. That is the promise in Romans 6:5: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Amen