

The Path to the Temple of Heaven
The Resurrection of our Lord
Colossians 3:1-4
April 21, 2019

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Dear Friends in Christ,

Christ is Risen, He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! On this most holy day we once again gather to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not reincarnation, but resurrection. Not a spiritual apparition, but a physical reality! The stone is blown away from the tomb so we can see that it is empty. Christ is risen, indeed! And his resurrection has real meaning for how we live our lives every day, as we now walk in the light of his victory and participate in his resurrected life.

When Nancy and I visited China a few years ago, one of the most beautiful places we saw is a building called the "Temple of Heaven". It's a round, domed structure of almost perfect proportions that's painted in the most beautiful heavenly blue colors topped with a golden knob. Officially it's known as the "Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests" and it is where the emperor would go twice a year to offer sacrifices and prayer for good harvests.

As you approach the temple you notice a raised pathway. Only the emperor was permitted to travel on this pathway. No one else could walk on it or even cross it. When you get close to the temple itself, there is a beautifully painted gate that has three large doors. The path the Emperor travelled went right through the middle (and largest) of the three doors. Once again, only the emperor could pass through that middle gate. Everyone else in his entourage had to pass through one of the other two gates. When the emperor was not present the gate was closed and sealed.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ travelled a road that no one else could ever travel. It's often called the *Via Dolorosa*, "the road of sorrows". It was a solitary journey that led him from the upper room on Maundy Thursday, to the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed and was betrayed by Judas and arrested by the temple guards. It took him before the Sanhedrin where he was condemned, and from there to the Palace of Pontius Pilate where he was judged, to the courtyard where he was flogged by Roman soldiers. The path of suffering continued through the streets of Jerusalem outside the city gates to the hill called Calvary where he was nailed to the cross. Ultimately that path ended at the tomb, sealed with that heavy stone.

No one escapes the tomb of death. That's a fact. Everyone has to walk their own solitary path through life, but for all of us it ends at the same place -- the grave. No one is exempt. The wages of sin is death, the Bible tells us. The grave is the price all of us pay for a life of sin.

There was another place we visited in China. It was the home of the first emperor of China. He was the most powerful and richest man in all of China, but he was terrified of death. So he ordered an army of clay soldiers to be manufactured from the local terra cotta clay. Thousands of life-sized warriors were buried standing in rank after rank to protect the emperor in the afterlife. You see, he didn't know what dark, spiritual army might attack him after he died, so he wanted to be prepared. A little silly, we might think -- totally superstitious. And yet, those who fear death and the grave may go to great lengths to protect themselves from what lies beyond. That's because the grave is so dark, so absolute, and there's no way to pierce its fearsome silence.

But on this day there is not silence at the tomb of Jesus, but a joyous good message. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?", the angels asked. "He is not here! He is risen!"

The emperor could walk through the beautiful gate on his way to the "temple of heaven", but only Jesus Christ could walk through the fearsome gate of death. Only Jesus Christ could pass through death's portal to enter the true temple of heaven. No emperor was ever so powerful as Jesus Christ. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me", Jesus declared after his resurrection. You see, Jesus didn't need an army of soldiers to protect him in the afterlife. He has an army of angels always ready to do his bidding. For he is truly King of kings and Lord of lords, Master and Ruler of all creation!

And he has opened death's portal for you and me too! That's the wonderful message this day for us. For we have been connected to Jesus' own death and resurrection through our Baptism — St. Paul says: "We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (Rom 6:4)

Now the portal of death is opened for us too! You know, today when you go to the temple of heaven in China, the center portal is no longer closed. All the people can now walk through the same gate that once was open only to the most powerful man on earth. That's what Jesus has done for us. He has opened heaven's portal so that ALL can pass through the gate of death unharmed. Our physical birth connected us to Adam and to Adam's sin. That's why we must die physically. But our Spiritual birth in Holy Baptism now connects us to the second Adam, Jesus Christ who has opened the fearsome door of death to reveal the glorious sight of heaven to all who believe in their Savior.

This is the promise of Easter to all who believe — victory over death and the grave and the

certain hope of heaven.

But we don't have to wait for heaven to partake of the new risen life in Christ. We have it already now in the present. In the 3rd chapter of his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul tells us that we have already been "raised with Christ". That resurrection, our first resurrection took place when we were connected to the resurrection of Jesus in our Baptism. Because of that vital connection, Paul writes: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

That doesn't mean that we're not to think about earthly things...we have to think about earthly things because we still live in this world. But as we deal with earthly matters, our minds are now set on heavenly things.

You see, in this life we can choose to be controlled by our sinful human nature. The problem is that when we make that choice we become "slaves to sin". Paul lists some of those old Adam activities in the verses immediately following our text: "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry; anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. All those things belong to the old nature.

But in our Baptism we buried those sinful activities. So now a new man, a new woman, can daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. Paul describes that kind of life, too. It's the new life that we live every day as God's chosen people. "Clothe yourselves", Paul writes, "with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another...and over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity".

That's the power of Christ's resurrection for our daily lives -- the power to say "no" to all those works of darkness that seek to put us back in the tomb -- the power to deny our sinful selves, take up our cross and follow him daily, living the risen life. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen