

Sermon: Died and Raised

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, on Easter Sunday, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

People crave for victory. A genuine victory is hard to come by. It is hard to replicate, and one cannot fake it. To get to a genuine victory, one must overcome a real struggle, a prolong period of hardship accompanied by a profound sense of loss. There is usually a turning point, against all odds and perhaps with a bit of luck, a bit of hard work and lots and lots of prayer. The tide turns, slowly at first, but the foe is definitely backing down. The momentum gathers as little wins quickly add up, triumph is at hand. When the foe is finally and decidedly vanquished, a genuine and spontaneous victory celebration ensues.

The VJ Day, or Victory Over Japan Day in World War II, was one such victory. The Allied had overcome the Axis, in a war that lasted four long years (or eight, depending on one's point of view), fighting on two separate fronts over multiple campaigns, with horrendous destruction to towns and cities and horrifying cost in human lives, that war was finally coming to an end.

In the ensuing victory parade at Times Square, there was this famous photograph taken of a sailor passionately and spontaneously kissing a nurse. That photo perfectly captured the mood of the nation, as people celebrated in exuberance, a hard-won victory. You know the photo I am referring to. I wasn't actually born yet, but I know some of you have lived it, you have tasted that victory.

For me personally, the victory that I remember, on a sillier scale was the 93 Stanley Cup parade of the Montreal Canadiens. Back then, Daisy and I were starting to date. She was living in an apartment right next to the old Forum arena, and we were spending a lot of time together watching hockey playoff on TV, and even attended a few games. That run to the Stanley Cup got both of us hooked on hockey. It was a most improbable run as no one, I repeat no one, except the most die-hard and dilution fans, would give them any chance of winning the Cup.

Oh I still remember Patrick Roy, the famed goalie of the Canadiens, holding up the Conn Smythe Trophy at the parade. What a sweet moment,

what a precious victory. Who would have known that was the last Stanley Cup ever since, for the Montreal Canadiens or for any other Canadian based hockey team. Yes, many are still waiting. A genuine victory is so rare, and its experience so profound.

Psalms 118 is King David's victory celebration. Although its authorship is not explicitly stated, most scholars attribute it to David. This Psalm was likely invoked the first time during a victory parade, and it was repeatedly recited during celebratory feasts in the Temple subsequently.

The Psalmist begins by calling on the congregation to declare God's never-ending mercy, "*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.'*" It is followed by a section of testimonial to God's enduring mercy, and then a section on being surrounded by enemies but helped by God. Then in verse 14-16, "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "*The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.*"

Jumping to verse 22 with a messianic undertone, "*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*" Cornerstone is the first, foundational stone laid of a building. It is how Jesus would describe himself, it is how the Apostle Paul and Peter described the Lord. For out of the house of Judah, God will raise up such a stone, rejected at first by many, it shall then be elevated by God. For in verse 23, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

One cannot logically explain the resurrection of our Jesus. For it is God's doing, it is a mystery. This mystery is not limited to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it extends to us, as the passage in Colossians 3:3 explains it, "*for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*" How does that work, that we have died with Christ? Let me try to explain it with this metaphor.

Imagine an oak tree, standing strong and tall and proud. Now imagine a poisonous vine growing around its base. It starts seemingly harmless, but the vine continues to grow over the years, wrapping around the base then up the trunk, as it would not stop growing. Pretty soon, the mass of tiny feelers is so thick that the tree looked as though it had innumerable birds' nests in it. Now the tree is in danger. This huge, solid oak is quite literally being taken over; its life being squeezed from it.

But the gardener has seen the danger. He takes a saw and severs the trunk of the vine, just one neat cut across the middle. The tangled mass of the vine's branches still clung to the oak, but the vine is now effectively dead. That would gradually become plain as weeks pass and the poisonous vine begins fall away from the tree.

How easy it is for sin, which begins so small and seemingly harmless, to grow until it has a strangle hold on our lives. And yet, Christ's death has cut the power of sin. Yes, sin still cling and have residual effects, but its power is severed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and gradually, sin's grip dries up and falls away. That's what it means to have **died and raised** together with Christ.

If we have **died and raised** with Christ, Apostle Paul concludes in Colossians 3:4, "*When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*" Resurrection is a mystery, not to be explained, but to be experienced. Having experienced it, we ought to set our minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth.

Let me finish with a story that I came across in a leadership magazine. Little Philip was born with Down's syndrome, and he attended a third-grade Sunday School class with several eight-year-old boys and girls. Typical of that age, the children did not readily accept Philip with his differences. But because of a creative teacher, they began to learn more about Down's syndrome and to accept Philip as part of the group, though never quite fully.

The Sunday after Easter the teacher brought to the class L'eggs pantyhose containers, the kind that look like large eggs. Each receiving one, the children were told to go outside on a lovely spring day, to find some symbols of new life, and put it in the egg-like container. Back in the classroom, they would share their new-life symbols, opening the containers one by one in surprise fashion. After running around the church property in wild confusion and loads of fun, the students returned to the classroom and placed the containers on the table. Surrounded by the children, the teacher began to open them one by one. After each one, whether a flower, butterfly, or leaf, the class would go 'ooh and ahh'.

Then one was opened, revealing nothing inside. The children exclaimed, "That's stupid. That's not fair. Somebody didn't do their assignment." Philip spoke up, "That one is mine."

"Philip, you don't ever do things right!" the student retorted. "There's nothing there!"

"I did so do it," Philip insisted. "I did do it. It's empty. the tomb was empty!" Silence followed, comprehension set in.

From then on Philip became a full member of the class. He died not long afterward from an infection that most normal children would have shrugged off. At the funeral, this class of eight-year-olds marched up to the altar not with flowers, but with their Sunday school teacher, each to lay on it an empty pantyhose egg.

Yes Christ is risen! Yes he lives, An empty tomb is there as proof that our saviour lives. It is the most fundamental and monumental victory, so grieve not for little Philip. Alleluia because Christ lives, sin and death no longer have power over us, for we have already **died and raised** with Christ. Easter Sunday is our victory parade.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.