

“What Then Are We To Say About These Things?”

EASTER 4

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This morning we arrive at the midway point of this post-Easter sermon series that responds to the apostle Paul’s question: What then are we to say about these things?

The third topics to be addressed, “Dying and Rising with Christ” comes from the fourth verse in the sixth chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

It reads as follows:

“Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

This particular verse appears in part of the beginning of the Christian life journey at the presentation for holy baptism and is heard in full at the outset of the funeral liturgy.

The placement of this verse in the Lutheran liturgical services marking the beginning and ending of human earthly existence says much about its importance for the spiritual life to be lived out between our figurative dying and rising with Christ.

Speaking of the Christian life, it is a sad
commentary that many people in our culture
perceive it as being a negative thing.

It is viewed as a series of don'ts:

"Don't drink; don't play cards; don't dance;
don't fool around; don't laugh too loud."

In fact, "Don't have fun at all," because,
if you do, God will frown upon you.

This perception of God and the Christian life
is inferred by Paul's rhetorical question:

"Shall we go on sinning so that
grace may increase" (v.1)?

"By no means!" Paul answers "How can we
who died to sin go on living in it" (v.2)?

That does indeed sound negative,
especially to a non-believer.

Death! and dying!

If we didn't know any better, we too,
would think that Christianity sounds
almost like "no more anything."

But that is not what real Christianity is,
of course.

In fact, it is just the opposite.

It is sin that is negative.

So to be freed from sin is to be freed
to a brand new life, which is positive.

One biblical commentator put it this way:

"The Christian way is not negative.
There is a death to an old way, it is true,
but as the believer identifies with
Christ in his death one enters into
newness of life."

The Christian way of speaking about this is
to say that, for the Christian, death is
followed by a resurrection.

And not just at the end of time!

True Christianity is living out a new,
joyful, abundant, resurrected life
with Jesus Christ now!

We are Christ's

Paul says much about baptism into Christ
in this text and how it represents dying into sin
and living to God.

In the writings of Martin Luther,
baptism was a powerful reminder of
the Christian's identity and the power to overcome sin

In a sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany,
Luther preached on the gospel text of Christ's baptism.

Luther identifies baptism as the place where the
'wretched old man is led to drown and die as
a sign and seal of our new life from God.

Luther also added the assuring words:

"Now if you fall into sin,
then remember to flee again to your baptism
For that is the little boat that can help us over. "

When we contemplate our baptism,
we contemplate the death of our old self,
what Christ has done for me,
and how Christ lives in me.

In the face of temptation, we may ask,

"How can I sin?

I am baptized into Christ!

How can I offer my body into the service of this sin?"

Baptism, from the scriptural to the sacramental,

should soak its way into our lives
and shape how we think of ourselves
and how we act.

Remember your baptism

Or as Luther, himself, used to do when he washed
daily in a basin and looked at himself in the mirror,
he would say, "Remember your baptism."

Remember you are baptized and
remember into whom you were baptized.

Who am I?

How many times have we asked this question of ourselves?

"Count yourself dead to sin," Paul says.

"Do not offer any part of yourself to sin
as an instrument of wickedness," he adds at
the end of today's text.

The problem is that sin often feels very much alive,
and we sometimes find ourselves conscripted into its service

But we have to regard ourselves as dead to sin
even when we think and feel alive to it.

The predicament reminds me of a story I read
years ago about ants.

The celebrated American entomologist and sociobiologist

E.O. Wilson did his early research with ants.

He and other researchers described how

ants communicate with each other through a

series of pheromones, chemical 'words'

they release to indicate certain states

like "danger approaches" or "I found food,"

or "I am ready to mate" or "I'm dying, so throw me out."

Wilson decided to do an experiment to see

what would happen if he sprayed some of

the "I'm dying" pheromone onto an ant

that was actually alive and healthy,
The result was rather amusing.

The ant got sprayed with the “I’m dying”
pheromone and immediately the other ants
from the colony picked him up and
took him outside of the colony to some
kind of ant graveyard.

The poor, sprayed ant then quickly walks back
to the nest only to have the same routine
repeated again and again.

The other ants smelled the death pheromone
on him and despite the fact that the ant was
not really dead, they kept throwing him out.

By analogy, we need to count ourselves dead
to sin, even when sin feels very alive.

We need to sprinkle the waters of baptism
on our sin, water that will make our sin
smell of death, so we can bury it
in the graveyard of our old self.

For Paul, this is the act whereby
we count or call or consider ourselves
dead to sin and alive to Christ (God)
and we begin to live out our true identity
as a follower of Jesus Christ.

The early church father and theologian
named Origen commented,
“Whoever thinks or considers that one is dead
will not sin.

For example, if lust for another person gets
a hold of me or if greed for silver, gold or
riches stirs me and I say in my heart
that I have died with Christ...the lust

is immediately quenched and sin disappears.”

In this chapter, Paul goes on at length
to emphasize that sin is no longer our master.
If we have died with Christ,
then we are freed from sin,
and Christ is our new master,
and we owe him our complete devotion.

One of the things we need to emphasize
in Christian living and our ethics is
that we are called to show our loyalty
to Jesus Christ in the type of choices we make
and the type of actions we undertake.

There are some things that are simply inappropriate
for a person who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord,
like murder, adultery, and theft.

Then there are some things that are
absolutely mandatory for believers,
like compassion, mercy, and kindness.

As servants we should bring honor to
our master by our life and works
rather than shame or disrepute.

This reminds me of a story
in a recent broadcast of a Father Brown mystery
that mentioned the name of a famous house
called Bucephalus.

I found it amusing that Father Brown
named his bicycle after Alexander
the Great’s mighty steed.

Alexander, one of the greatest military leaders
who ever lived, was on a campaign,
and on one particular night the young
conqueror had some trouble sleeping.

So he got up from his tent to walk around
the campsite to inspect the defensive barrier.

As he was quietly walking around,
Alexander came across a young soldier
who was asleep while on guard duty,
a serious breach of security that could
endanger the safety of the entire camp.

In fact, so serious was the offense that
in ancient times this usually warranted
the death penalty.

Alexander angrily roused the soldier from
his sleep and began to berate him.

The young soldier was surprised and fearful
for his life when Alexander confronted him.

Alexander asked him, "Do you know what
the penalty is for falling asleep on duty?"

"Yes, sir," was the anxious reply.

Then Alexander questioned him some more,

"What is your name, soldier?"

"Alexander, sir, my name is Alexander,"
came the meek response.

Alexander was a bit annoyed by this
and repeated the question,, "What is your
name? "three more times

He kept getting the same answer, "Alexander"
from the scared soldier.

Finally, Alexander looked at him with an icy
stare and said in a stern voice,
"If your name is Alexander, then either
change your name or change your behavior."

Beloved people of God,

our text from Romans reminds us
that we need to honor Christ as our Lord
and master by the way we live.

If we have been crucified with Christ
and if we have died to sin,
we can embrace the true meaning of our baptism.
secure in the trust and home that
because Christ has been raised from the dead,
we like Christ can offer ourselves in
service to God and others because
we know that we are “those who
have been brought from death to life” (v.13)

AMEN