



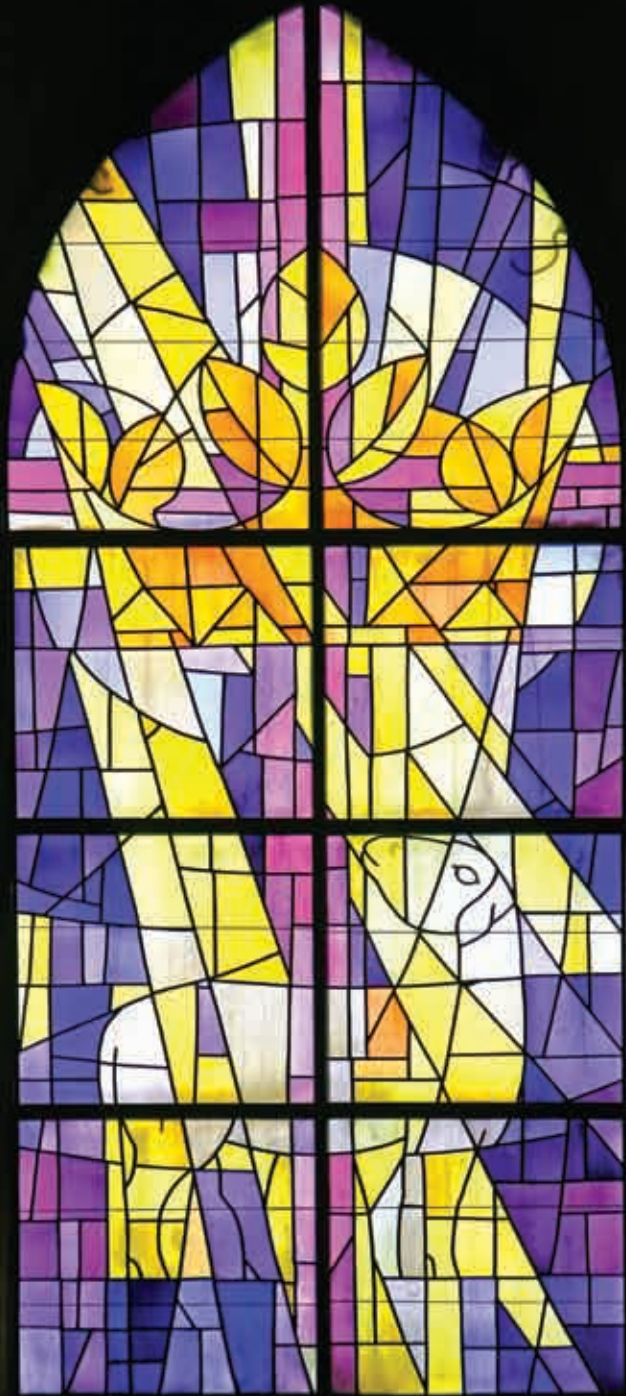
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The Meaning of Easter

By Reverend Timothy J. Heines

surrounded by the walking wounded. Some are persons who were victimized as children; those who while in the most delicate stages of life missed out on the nurturing they needed to become healthy adults. Then there are those who in their young adult life made choices, which haunt them to this day. There is an old proverb that says, “a man is not old until regrets take the place of his dreams.” I have seen many people who have ceased dreaming, consumed as they are by the weight of their own history. They carry something more than guilt – the acknowledgment of past error. They carry shame which is guilt

and maintain healthy relationships in our addicted and co-dependent world. The weight of their burden of loneliness is theirs alone to carry.

What does all of this mean for us at Easter? Yes, the celebration of Easter for orthodox Christians is a commemoration of the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the grave. It points to the defeat of death and the promise of eternal life in the world to come. But we should not stop there: Christ’s victory adds meaning and dimension to the totality of our lives. We reap the rewards of that victory throughout our lives, not merely at the end of them. The reality of the resurrection adds meaning to every choice we make and our entire outlook on life. The New Life for which Easter stands and the forgiveness and grace, which it celebrates, transcend both the historical memory of the resurrection of Jesus and the reality of life to come. It means, in other words, that our God is a God of Second Chances.

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THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS by which we might approach the celebration of Easter, but one way that speaks more profoundly to me is the manner by which Easter reminds us, in its celebration of life over death, that our God is a God of Second Chances.

Time and time again in my ministry I see people who are wounded not by events in their current life, but by the cumulative weight of the past. We are

coupled with a sense of personal failure and worthlessness.

There are also those whose burdens have to do with the pains and vicissitudes of life. Some of them have experienced serious illness; others live with constant and chronic maladies. Still others are the caregivers of the sick, probably the most neglected group around. Some have experienced great loss and know the dull ache of grief. Still others struggle to find

Sometimes people think that to lose faith is to stop believing in God. I believe that few “just stop believing in God.” Instead, people re-define their faith. With the disappointments of life, they stop looking for miracles and stop believing in God as a Lord or a Savior. Sure, they look forward to going to heaven some day. But they cease seeing the daily graces that bring meaning and joy to the mundane. Faith dies gradually

and in stages. The fullness of faith that is described in the scriptures is not merely an acknowledgement that God exists: even the devil knows that God exists. The “faith that saves” means that a believer is to live in such a manner that the disciple throws her entire self into the life of the living God. It means that the disciple’s relationship with God shapes and forms his perceptions and understandings of the world around us. It means that the disciple engages and embraces the world in God’s stead, reaching out in a special way to the poor, the outcast and the oppressed. At times, it means the disciple will criticize, cajole and condemn elements of that world as well.

The gradual death of faith comes when the love that animates faith, empowers and directs it gradually dissipates. The death of faith occurs when that disciple, while still believing in the existence of God, begins to doubt his friendship or benevolence. The death of faith quickens when we stop working to change the world, stop trying to reach out to the “poor little ones” because we doubt the difference it would really make. The death of faith is confirmed when we begin to believe that love and forgiveness are in short supply and we better save our own for a rainy day. At that point sacrifice, service, or connection with our neighbors as true and intimate brothers and sisters seems pointless.

And then we celebrate Easter. We enter into the story of Jesus once again,

recognizing that the actions of Holy Week, from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to washing the feet of his disciples, to his prayer in the Garden, to his torture and death – all of them mean that unlike the charlatans of this world, Jesus meant what he said. His words were not empty and his promises were not illusory. He lived what he said – he loved to the fullest extent.

Easter brings new life even in the here and now. It is a celebration of the destruction of death and futility.

To say that “our God is a God of second chances” means that Easter is an occasion to believe in the miracle once again, to look at the world and at life with eyes renewed by resurrection glory. Easter is an occasion to stop and to reassess ourselves and recognize once again that there is a purpose, a plan and a loving hand behind the unfolding story of our lives. Jesus of Nazareth looked at the futility of human existence, embraced it, and then – he conquered it. Life is worth living, he shows us. Love is worth sacrifice! Human beings are worth dying for and human life can be transcendent, powerful, meaningful and, indeed, divine.

The celebration of Easter does not take away the pain of life, but in reminding us of God’s love, in making a reality of God’s future promise, in defeating the ultimate limitation of human existence (Oh death where is thy sting?). Easter brings new life even in the here and now. Easter is a celebration not merely of the destruction of death, but of the destruction of futility. The hidden conviction in the futility of life brings people spiritual death long before their hearts stop beating. Yet, the story of the resurrection says that those burdens, which seem so heavy, will end. The story of resurrection reminds us that those pains that cause us to suffer will be healed. The story of the resurrection reminds us that the seeming futility of life – that all of our work, our effort and our sacrifice gain nothing is the true illusion. That being the case, even the smallest events in human life can be events that are filled with meaning and can be occasions of joy. We do not need riches, or power, or any of the false securities that seem so attractive: those realities are mortal and are futile. But the resurrection means that love and life transcend all these things and the simple pleasures of life then take on a whole new significance. Life is not futile, there is an end to suffering, love has meaning even in the midst of pain – these are the Truths that Easter brings to mind.

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