



GOSPEL FOR EASTER TUESDAY

Luke 24:36-47

As they were talking about these things, Jesus Himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate before them. Then He said to them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

1. First, this Gospel reading points out who hears about the resurrection of the Lord profitably and fruitfully, namely, those who sat there with the doors locked in fear and dread [John 20:19]. They are the proper ones to receive it, and they are the best students; we should preach only to such people, though it must be preached among all nations, as the Lord says at the end of this Gospel reading [Luke 24:47]. Therefore, let us first learn from this what kind of people hear the Gospel correctly.

2. The disciples sit there together secretly, afraid of the Jews; moreover, they have a bad conscience because they forsook and denied Christ. Thus they are despondent and terrified at sin and death. If they had been strong in faith, they would not have crawled into a corner in that way. Afterward they became courageous when the Holy Spirit came, strengthened, and comforted them, so that they stepped forth and preached publicly without fear.

This was written for us, so that we would learn that the Gospel of the resurrection of the Lord Christ is comforting only for those who are fearful and fainthearted, whose sins oppress them, who feel their weakness, who do not face death with gladness, and who are afraid and alarmed even at a

rustling leaf [cf. Lev. 26:36]. The Gospel comes to comfort them, and they also relish it.

3. This can also be observed from the nature of the Gospel, for the Gospel is a message and a sermon which proclaims how the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead so that He might take away sin, death, and all misfortune from those who believe on Him. When I recognize that He is that kind of Savior, then I have truly heard the Gospel, and He has also truly revealed Himself to me. Now if the Gospel teaches nothing else than that Christ has overcome sin and death by His resurrection, then we must indeed confess that this preaching can help no one except those who perceive sin and death. It is of no benefit at all for the others, who do not perceive or regard their defects and sin; they also do not relish it. Even when they hear the Gospel for a long time, it produces nothing in them, except that they learn the words and speak about them, but it does not go into their hearts and gives them neither comfort nor joy.

4. Therefore, it would be good—if it could be that way—that we would preach the Gospel only in those places where there were fearful and frightened consciences; but because we cannot keep such people away from the multitude—and for that reason must preach it out in public, commending to God whom and at what time it will strike—that is why it happens that it does not produce fruit everywhere. For that reason people accuse us of wanting to preach many new things, and yet our doctrine improves no one. The fault is not in the Gospel but in the students who certainly all hear it, but they do not all sense their misery and distress; they go on, secure and heedless, like dumb animals.

For that reason no one should be surprised that the Gospel does not bring forth fruit everywhere. Beyond these righteous students of whom we have been speaking, there are many others who take no interest in it at all, who have neither conscience nor heart and think neither of death nor of their soul's salvation. We have to govern them like donkeys and dumb animals: with force, the coercion of the Law, and fear of punishment, for which the secular sword was instituted. Likewise, there are some who do not despise the Gospel and indeed understand it, but do not improve their lives and do not strive to live according to it. Rather, they can only produce words and chatter much about it, but no deeds or fruit follow. The third and smallest group, however, are those who receive it correctly so that it bears fruit in them.

5. So the conclusion of this point is that the Gospel is a preaching about the resurrection of Christ, which is to serve to comfort and refresh poor, distressed, and terrified consciences. It is beneficial and useful to know this, especially in death and every other need, so that we are prepared for it and can grasp and retain this comfort.

If a person knows and understands this and believes, then Christ is already in his heart and brings him peace so that he is confident and says, "If my Lord Christ has overcome my sin through His resurrection and trampled it underfoot, why would I be afraid and terrified?" However, no one perceives this comfort, peace, and joy of the heart except the few people who previously were so frightened and full of sorrow and sensed their defects. Therefore, the unbroken, coarse people understand neither this nor any other Gospel, for whoever has not tasted the bitter does not relish the sweet, and whoever has not had misfortune does not understand happiness. It naturally happens in the world that whoever strives for nothing nor attempts and suffers anything is worthless; it is even more true in spiritual matters that it is impossible for someone to comprehend the Gospel unless he has such a fearful and terrified heart.

6. Therefore, it is not surprising that not all who hear the Gospel comprehend it and act according to it. Everywhere there are many who despise and persecute it, whom we leave alone and to whom we are accustomed. Wherever the Gospel is preached, such people will certainly be found. Accordingly, there are also many who do not persecute it and yet also do not receive it, for they bring no fruit from it but lead the same life as before. In short, even when the Gospel is preached and promoted for a long time, the complaint always comes up: "No one wants it! Everything remains the way it was." Therefore, we must not be troubled and frightened by that.

7. Look at what happened at Jerusalem when the Gospel was first heard. People write that there were so many people there that in the city at the Easter festival¹ there were one million, one hundred thousand men.² How many of them were converted? When St. Peter stood up and preached, they made a laughingstock out of him and regarded the apostles as drunken fools [Acts 2:13]. When they had preached most vigorously, the best they could, they brought together three thousand men and women [Acts 2:41]. What were they compared to the whole city? Compared to the other crowd, it was as if no one could perceive that it had worked anything, for everything continued to be done and governed as it was before. No one saw any change, and almost no one was aware that there were Christians there. It always remains that way.

8. Therefore, we should not measure the Gospel according to how many hear it, but according to the small group who comprehend it. They have no glory, people have no regard for them, but God acts in them secretly.

9. At this point there is one thing which the Gospel strongly conceals, namely, the weakness of the believers, which is described in this history of the

1 *Osterlich fest*. But see Acts 2, which describes what happened at Pentecost.

2 See Josephus (ca. 37–ca. 101), *Jewish War* 6.9.3 (Loeb 210 [1997], pp. 298–301).

disciples and later remained in the apostles even after the ascension of Christ. For example, though Peter was full of faith and the Holy Spirit [Acts 4:8], nevertheless he fell and stumbled with many who were with him, so that Paul had to rebuke him publicly [Gal. 2:11–14]. Many great, holy people clung to him, and they all stumbled with him. Likewise, we read that Mark journeyed with Paul but then deserted and ran away from him [Acts 13:5, 13; 15:37–38]. Likewise, Paul and Barnabas quarreled with each other and sharply disagreed with each other [Acts 15:39]. We read in the Gospels how often the apostles, who were the best Christians, erred in weighty matters [e.g., Luke 22:24].

10. These defects in Christians and believers obscure the Gospel most of all, so that the people who want to be prudent and wise are offended and scandalized by them. There are few who truly know how to handle this so that they are not scandalized. Therefore, they say, “Yes, they brag about the Gospel and want to be good Christians, and yet are so foolish, angry, impatient,” etc., and want to conclude from this that the Gospel is preached with no effect. Really that is taking offense at the weak and sick Christ.

11. This is what happened to the disciples too. At first, when Christ went about with bold and brave deeds in great honor, and no more began a work than it was finished, they clung to Him, though the high, great lords, the holy and the learned, were offended at Him because He would not side with them. On the other hand, the common man did improve, and the people clung to Him, because they saw that He did such miracles with great power, and also no one could find fault with His life, but everyone had to say, “He is a great and holy prophet!” [cf. Matt. 21:11]. But when it comes to His suffering, then they all stepped back and withdrew from Him, and not one of His disciples remained with Him [Matt. 26:56]. What was lacking in them? Only this: that they no longer saw in Him the strong but nothing other than the weak Christ, for He was now in the hands of the Jews, did no works or miracles, just as if He could no longer do them and was forsaken by God. His power and high name fell to the ground. Previously, they regarded Him as a prophet, the like of whom had never come; now they consider Him to be a murderer and a condemned man. Who could now see that this Christ was God’s Son? Here all reason must fall, even the true, great saints. They thought that if He were the Christ, then the fruits must also be there by which they could perceive that it was He; but now they see nothing in Him other than weakness, sin, and death.

12. Therefore, it is the highest wisdom on earth, known to very few people, that we can regard the weak Christ. If I see a godly, holy man who already leads a holy life, does anyone thank me for praising him and saying, “There is Christ, who does things rightly”? Even though that troubles the bishops and great lords, the common man is still improved. But when he

becomes weak and stumbles, everyone immediately takes exception to him and says, "I thought he was a godly Christian, but I see that I was deceived!" However, when we look around, we will find none who are not weak. Indeed, everyone will notice this in himself, but still they will think that the Gospel is finished. They think that God is not clever enough to conceal it, drawing a veil over Christ and pulling death and powerlessness over Him while Christ is underneath. Because no one could see that, He also says to His disciples beforehand: "All, all of you will be offended because of Me, so that you will no longer believe that I am the Christ" [Matt. 26:31]. This is the very greatest hindrance, as I have said, at which people take exception, thinking that the Gospel is without power, when they look at the defects and weakness of Christians who occasionally stumble.

13. Therefore, whoever wants to know Christ correctly must not be troubled by the veil. Even if you see someone else stumble, you should not despair or think that it is finished, but rather you should think: "Perhaps God will deal with him by bearing with the weak Christ, just as another bears with the strong." Both must be and remain on earth, even though the greater part are weak, especially in our times. Nevertheless, when you penetrate through such weakness, you will see that Christ lies hidden under that weak person and at His time will come forth and let Himself be seen.

14. That is what Paul means when he says, "I did not represent myself among you as knowing anything except Jesus Christ, the Crucified One" (1 Corinthians 2 [:2]). What kind of boast is it when he writes that he knows nothing except the crucified Christ? It is something that reason and human wisdom cannot comprehend. Moreover, those who have already studied and learned the Gospel do not sufficiently know it. It is a wisdom which is mighty, secret, and hidden. It appears to be nothing at all, because it is concealed under weakness and folly, just as Christ, after He emptied Himself of all God's strength and power [Phil. 2:7], hung on the cross like a wretched, forsaken man; it seemed as if God would not help Him. "I know how to speak and preach only about Him," says St. Paul. Christ who publicly does miracles comes and breaks in with power, so that everyone sees who He is and soon learns to recognize Him. But to know the weak Christ who hangs on the cross and lies in death requires greater understanding. Whoever does not know Him in that way must take exception and be offended at Him.

15. Yes, there are even true Christians who know the Gospel but nevertheless are offended at their own life. They think that they would like to become good, that they want Christ to be strong in them and to reveal Himself in great deeds, but they feel they are not making any progress. They begin to be afraid and to think that they have lost because they do not feel the strength they ought to have. But our Lord God does this to humble us, so

that we see that we are such weak creatures, wretched, lost, and condemned people, if Christ had not come to help us with His righteousness and to carry our weakness with His strength. That is the high wisdom which we have and at which all the world is offended.

16. However, in saying this we are not giving permission for people to go and remain weak forever, for we do not preach that people should be weak, but that they should recognize and bear with the weakness of Christians. It was not because of weakness that Christ hung on the cross as a murderer and villain, but so that we would learn how deeply strength lies hidden under weakness and that God's strength is shown in weakness [2 Cor. 12:9]. Thus it is not praiseworthy that we are weak, as if we should be and remain that way. No, we should learn that those who are weak should not for that reason be regarded as non-Christians, and whoever senses his own weakness should not despair [cf. Rom. 15:1]. This is done so that we recognize our weakness and always strive to become stronger. Christ must not always lie dead in suffering and the grave, but again come forth into life.

17. Therefore, no one should think that this is the right way and condition. It is only a beginning, in which we should increase from day to day. But we should see to it that we do not slacken and despair because of weakness, as if all were lost. Rather, we should work at it until we become stronger and stronger, until God takes it away. Therefore, even if you see your neighbor weak and stumbling, do not think for that reason that he is finished. God does not want one to condemn another and be pleased with himself, since we are all sinners. Rather, each one should bear with another's defects (Romans 14 [:1; 15:1]; Galatians 5 [6:2]), and if you will not do that, then He can certainly let you fall, throw you down, and lift up the other.

18. We have been speaking about the weakness of Christians so that we would learn to regard it rightly, for there is a great need to know it, especially at this time. If our bishops, pastors, and prelates had had this wisdom, which they ought to have most of all, how good things would be in Christendom! But now it has become so bad that we never look at any except only strong Christians and cannot bear with the weak; rather, we deal harshly and proceed with force. Formerly, when conditions were still good, the bishops were greatly lacking in this point; although they were holy people, nevertheless they forced and oppressed consciences too much. That is not the way it happens among Christians, for Christ wants to be on earth and to be feeble for a while in His Church.

He points this out by saying to His disciples here in the Gospel reading: "Touch Me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" [Luke 24:39]. He wants to have both—not bones only or flesh only, but both together, as it must be in the natural body of a man. So we read that

Adam said about his Eve (who had been made from a rib out of his side): "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis [2:23]). He does not say only flesh or only bones but also gives himself both because he says "of my bones and of my flesh."

As it is with Christ, so it is also with us, for which reason He says here: "I have both flesh and bones, and you will not find in Me only bones or only flesh," that is, "You will find both, that I am strong and weak."

19. "So I must also be among My Christians in such a way that some are strong and some are weak." Those who are strong go about, are vigorous and healthy, and must carry the others; they are the bones. The others are the weak who cling to the strong; that is the larger group, as we see that there is always more flesh than bones in a body. Therefore, Christ was both crucified and died, and also again made alive and glorified, because He is not a spirit as the disciples regard Him here to be a spirit, before whom they must be horrified, but a true, natural man and in every way like us according to the same flesh and blood, so that He may take up our weakness and carry it.

20. The apostles and Christ Himself greatly emphasized this wisdom, and besides this I know of no other book in which it is written. It is, indeed, occasionally touched upon, but nowhere emphasized. But this one book, the New Testament, always emphasizes it and is everywhere occupied with it, so that it may portray for the people both the weak and strong Christ. Thus St. Paul says to the Romans [15:1-3]: "We who are strong should bear with the failings of the weak and not please ourselves, etc. For even Christ did not please Himself." This should be the wisdom we learn from this.

21. All who are portrayed in the Gospel, whom Christ finds despondent and fearful, belong in this school. We can easily notice the others who do not belong here, since they completely ignore and despise the Gospel. Everyone can perceive in himself whether he is sincerely pleased with the Gospel. If you observe someone else acting in such a way that you can notice that he wants to be righteous, you should not despise him.

22. That is what this Gospel reading furnishes, one after another. First, the Lord stands among the disciples and is now strong, having overcome everything, sin, death, and the devil. They do not yet stand, but sit there, as He comes and stands among them. Where does He now stand? He stands among the despondent and weak group who are frightened and fearful. But He is strong and mighty, though it is not yet apparent to the world.

Second, He shows them His hands and feet, comforts them, and says: "See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see Me. For a spirit does not have flesh or bones as you see that I have" [Luke 24:39].

23. This is nothing else but the sermon which teaches that we should not be offended at the weak Christ. He does not speak angrily with the disciples;

He does not say: "Away with you! I do not want to have you. You should be strong and bold, but you sit there and are despondent!" Rather, He comforts them in a friendly way, so that He makes them strong and fearless. Therefore, afterward they have also become strong and fearless, and not only that but also happy and joyful. Therefore, we also ought not reject the weak but so deal with them that we may induce them to become strong and confident. This does not mean that it is proper for them to be weak and that they should remain that way, for Christ does not stand among them for that reason but so that they increase in faith and become fearless.

24. Something is also to be said here (because the Gospel reading mentions it) about appearing or wandering spirits. Here we see that the Jewish people and the apostles themselves held that spirits stray about and are seen at night and otherwise. When the disciples were in the ship at night and saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were frightened as of a ghost and cried out in fear (Matthew 14 [:24–26]). In this passage we hear that Christ does not deny it but confirms with His answer that spirits do appear, because He says, "A spirit does not have flesh or bones," etc. [Luke 24:39].

25. However, Scripture does not say or give any example that these are the souls of dead people and that they wander among people and seek help, as we believed previously in our blindness, deceived by the devil. Because of this the pope has invented purgatory and set up his shameful trafficking in Masses. We may easily regard this lying doctrine and abomination as the fruit, which is also the consequence of that on which it is built, namely, the wandering souls, which comes from the father of lies, the devil [John 8:44], who has deceived the people in the name of dead men.

26. We have reason enough not to believe such apparitions of spirits straying about under the name of souls. First, Scripture says nothing anywhere about the souls of dead men who have not yet risen going about among the people, though everything else we need to know is sufficiently revealed in Scripture. He wanted us to know not even one word (it is not even possible for us to grasp and understand) about what happens with spirits which have departed from the body before the resurrection and the Last Day, since they are now divided and separated completely from the world and from this time. Second, it is clearly forbidden in Scripture to ask anything of the dead or to believe them (Deuteronomy 18 [:10–12]; Isaiah 8 [:19–20]). It is pointed out in Luke 16 [:29, 31] that God does not want any to rise from the dead or to preach, because Moses and the Scriptures are present.

27. Therefore, we should know that all those ghosts and apparitions which are seen or heard, especially with rumbling and rattling, are not the souls of men, but surely devils who are playing either at deceiving the people with false claims and lies or at frightening and afflicting them in vain.

Therefore, a Christian should act toward these ghosts who pretend to be souls no differently than toward the real devil. He should be equipped with God's Word and faith so that he is not confused or frightened but remains with the doctrine he has learned and confessed from the Gospel about Christ and cheerfully despises the devil with his rattling. He also should not remain for long where he perceives that people trust in Christ and despise him. I say this so that we will be wise and not let ourselves be misled again by such deception and lies, since he previously deceived and fooled even excellent people such as St. Gregory by claiming to be a soul.