

6 April 2011
Lent 4 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Miraculous Raising of the Saints from Death”

Text: Matthew 27:52-53

(1 Corinthians 15:50-58; Matthew 27:11-26)

“The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matt 27:52-53).

This next miracle that happened when Jesus was crucified is, by far, the most mysterious. There is much we would like to know about this miracle. For instance, who were these saints who were raised? How many were there? For how long were they raised? Did they appear once or many times? Did they go to their homes or wander through the streets? Did they go to heaven, or live on earth a while longer and then experience death a second time? We are simply not told the answer to any of these questions. All we know - like with so many other things - is that *it happened*.

But this also we can say: like all the other miracles surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, it is a sign; a pointer to a greater reality. And what this sign is pointing us to tonight is **our future**. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, the bodies of all the saints here tonight - all of you and me - *will* rise from death, but not to go into the holy city of Jerusalem, but to go into the *real* holy city, the dwelling place of God in heaven. Because of Jesus, death will not be the end for us. We will rise and live again.

St. Paul spoke of this resurrection for us tonight when he said: **“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.** By that he did not mean that our bodies will not go to heaven, but that they cannot go to heaven in their sinful state. **[But] I tell you a mystery,** [Paul says] . . . **we shall all be changed!”** How? Well, he says that first **“this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. . . . [T]hen shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”** That is the victory of Jesus' resurrection. That by taking upon Himself our flesh and blood, and then taking upon Himself our sin and subjecting Himself to our death, His resurrection does this very thing: what is perishable become imperishable, and what is mortal become immortal.

And so when Jesus dies, we are told that this begins to happen *immediately!* Already death is being swallowed up. Already creation is changing. What looked

like the great finality of death is shown not to be so final after all! Jesus' death has changed everything. Jesus' death has provided a future for us beyond the grave.

St. Paul explains this for us as well, when he says: ***“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** What he means is this: death has no hold on us when sin is forgiven. And when sin is forgiven, the law has no claim on us. We are truly set free! Free from the law, free from sin, free from death, free to live in Christ Jesus, both now and forever.

Free, like Barabbas. He must have considered himself the luckiest guy on earth, that Jesus came along when he did. But just as the saints rising from death are a picture of our *future*, so the releasing of Barabbas is a picture of our *present*. For he represents us. We are the ones with whom Jesus has traded places. We are the murderers and sinners who are set free, while He is the one who is condemned to die in our place. *But it wasn't luck; it was grace.* This was the gift of God to us. Jesus came for this very purpose: to trade places with us. To die, that we might live.

Those saints being raised from the dead would have been a powerful witness to the Jews of that day as well, for among at least some of the Jews of Jesus' day, there was the expectation that when the Messiah came, there would be bodily resurrections of the dead. So did they then believe? Well, perhaps some. But not because of the miracles. Miracles cannot produce faith. Only the Word and Spirit of God can produce faith. For as Jesus had said earlier, *“They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them. . . . If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead”* (Luke 16:29-31).

And so it is for you and me. We do not believe the Word because we see the miracles, we believe the miracles because we have the Word. The *Spirit-filled* Word of God that is living and powerful (Heb 4:12); that gives us His promises; that works in us faith, and declares to us the forgiveness of our sins. And because our sin is forgiven in Christ, our death is defeated as well. And so like Jesus and the saints of Jesus' day, the Spirit, too, will raise you and me from the dust of death to live a new life. A life that will never end.

What will that life be like? Many want to know, but like the raising of the saints at Jesus' crucifixion, this resurrection and life too, we must confess, is shrouded in mystery. Until it happens for us, we simply will not know or be able to describe it.

But confident that this life is ours, that death is defeated and that the grave will one day be forced to release our bodies - this faith *does* make a difference in our lives *now*. Enabling us to live, as St. Paul said, ***“steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*** For

what we labor for here and now, we, in fact, already have. And so we labor and work not for ourselves, but for others. That we who have been so blessed may be blessings of God for others. That we who have been raised from the death of our sin might be powerful testimonies to the work of God here and now. That by His Word and Spirit, many may rejoice in Christ Jesus, our Saviour.

And so tonight, in looking at the miraculous raising of the saints, *we have gone back to the future!* For in looking back we have seen the future! The glorious future that now awaits us through the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.