

Ultimate Victory

A jar of clay, made from the resources of the earth, is rarely perfect. As a result, each one is unique, and each one is fragile, subject to breaking and ultimate destruction. On a Friday afternoon in approximately 30 A.D., there were three men hanging on crosses, broken, beaten, and hanging on to only a thread of life. One by one, they breathed their last – the first being the one known to the crowd as Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews – at least that’s what the sign above his head stated. The two thieves each had their legs broken to hasten their deaths before the coming of the Sabbath. The vulnerability of human existence was amazingly real on that day – especially for the one named Jesus.

If you had been a member of the Sanhedrin at that time, a member of the palace guard or Roman army who had beaten, humiliated, and crucified him, Pontius Pilate who figured that he had avoided a political disaster by offering them choice between Jesus and an insurrectionist, a Jewish zealot named Barabbas – if you had been any one of these, you would have certainly have felt a sense of relief and even satisfaction at a job well done. This man from Nazareth who had caused such a stir just a week ago with a triumphant entrance into Jerusalem that rivaled the arrival of the Roman governor was now dead – they had put him in his place, and put down a potential threat. They had won in the arena of public opinion: Jesus had died, and they were still in power, secure from any potential threat from this prophet from Galilee.

But there was another threat that Jesus had presented that, in his death, was eliminated. It was a threat that was voiced in the wilderness three years earlier, as Jesus had resisted the temptations of the devil, evil personified, and chose the way of God instead. Jesus left that wilderness to proclaim the coming of the kingdom, and multitudes had gathered to hear him preach, to be healed, and to witness his miracles, his love and his compassion. It seemed that the goodness of Jesus was winning, but then came Jerusalem, and betrayal, denial, and desertion replaced devotion; shouts of Hosanna – save us now – were replaced with “Crucify Him!” No matter how much goodness Jesus had shown the people, it was overcome by greed, self-service, and self-protection. Evil had won out.

And then there was the threat of abundant life. Jesus had brought this message a life that was to be found in him. It was a life unlike that offered by the religious rites of the Sadducees and Pharisees. He had raised Jairus’ daughter, the son of the widow from Nain, and Lazarus from the dead. Yet, when confronted by the forces of religious leaders conspiring with political governors, Jesus couldn’t manage to save his own life. The great enemy of life – death itself – had won the victory, aided and abetted by the power people of the day, and now his body was sealed in a cold tomb in a garden near the place of crucifixion.

But that was Friday. Sunday was another story. Mary Magdalene had come to the garden early in the morning, only to find the tomb empty and her spirit troubled. Who had taken the Lord’s body? Was this another defeat, another pain to endure? But this was not a morning of defeat – this was the morning of ultimate victory!

The cross of Christ is not a symbol of defeat – it is the symbol of ultimate victory. The cross is the symbol of the one whom the world had rejected becoming the cornerstone of a new creation.

The cross does not hold a lifeless, defeated Christ – defeated by sin and defeated by death. The empty cross of Christ celebrates that Christ is the victor, that death and sin are defeated, that only God's power is capable of this amazing gift. The empty cross of Christ is the ultimate victory not only for Jesus Christ who conquered sin and death, but for the world who, in spite of rejection, desertion, and betrayal, is forgiven and brought into right relationship with God. While Christ's death on the cross can be understood as a sacrificial offering, a substitute for us, and a moral influence that motivates his followers to change their hearts as they gaze upon the amazing self-giving love gift, his death cannot be understood without resurrection, and his resurrection is the ultimate victory for all people of all ages.

The ultimate victory of resurrection is not in what happened to Jesus almost 2,000 years ago. For while that was a personal triumph, the ultimate victory is in the saving act that brings us new life in Christ, a new relationship with God, and a new sense of what it means to be fully human. Resurrection is as real today, as it calls us to live fully, even with the scars of our woundedness, even with imperfections, knowing that in Jesus Christ, all things are made new, and we can be new vessels of God's love for a world that is in need. For people of the resurrection don't sit behind brick facades and worship a theoretical God – we are people who go into the world and make new life real to others. We are people who go forth to bring the bread of life to those who are hungry, to bring the resurrection and the life to those who are spiritually dead, to be the living waters for a thirsty world.

Seven weeks ago, some said that this jar was worthless – but that's the message of defeat that the world wants us to hear about ourselves. Today, as Easter people – we are given new life to go, to serve, to be alive for a world that believes that sin, evil and death are victorious. Absolutely not! This is the day of ultimate victory – and the victory is for all who will follow Jesus to the cross and beyond!.