

The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day
Sunday, March 31, 2024

QUESNEL

“I Will Give You the Crown of Life” (Revelation 1:4-18; 2:8-11)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

What a joyful day this is, this Easter Day, the greatest day of the year! For today we celebrate, with all the faithful and with all the company of heaven, the great victory Christ won for us when he arose from the dead, victorious over sin and death and hell, opening up for us righteousness and life and the kingdom of heaven. Easter Sunday is the proof of the victory Christ won for us on Good Friday, when he died on the cross to gain that victory and obtain those benefits for us. Easter shows that Good Friday was not a defeat but a victory, not a detour but the goal itself. “It is finished!” Christ cried on the cross. “The goal has been reached. The victory has been won.” That’s what the atoning death of Christ accomplished. Easter is the validation of that victory, showing the results in store for all of us who trust in Christ and have been joined to him in Holy Baptism. What a day this Easter is!

The victor’s crown, the crown of life—that’s what Christ is wearing on this day. And the good news is, that’s what he shares with us! We have his promise on it. Listen to what he says: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” “Come, take your crown!” Jesus is calling to you today. “I’ve won it for you. It’s already yours. And I will get you to the finish line, where you will be awarded the victor’s crown.” This is our Easter message today, the promise of Jesus: “I Will Give You the Crown of Life.”

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Some of you, I’m guessing, maybe many of you, received this verse as your confirmation verse on the day you were confirmed. It’s perhaps the one most commonly used. You may have gotten it in the old King James Version: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” But do you know where that verse comes from and what it’s about? It’s Revelation 2:10—actually, it’s “part b” of that verse. I’ve sometimes wondered what would happen if we gave kids the whole of verse 10, because “part a” says: “Do not fear what you are about to

suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.” Well, if we included that part, I don’t think that verse would be such a favorite! Suffering, being thrown in prison, having tribulation—the kids probably think that’s what they just experienced, spending two years in confirmation class. And now we’re telling them to expect more!

Well, actually, yes, that is what Christians can expect, throughout their life, if they are going to be “faithful unto death.” The life of the Christian is no walk in the park. It’s more like a marathon race, where you have to fight fatigue and pain and sometimes you feel like you’re running into a brick wall. It’s agonizing. The long-distance race we run is not easy. Sometimes we feel like we want to give up. Sometimes we get blindsided by enemies who try to trip us up—the devil attacks us, and the world persecutes us and throws obstacles in our way. We lose sight of the goal. We wonder if God is really on our side. This is tough going. Will we make it to the finish line?

The Christians in the city of Smyrna, in the late first century, must have wondered that as well. Will we make it to the finish line? The Christians in Smyrna were a persecuted minority in that town. The pagans and the Jewish unbelievers outnumbered them and did not make life easy for them. The church in Smyrna was poor and persecuted. And so to encourage them, to keep them going and give them renewed hope, the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ directs this message to the church in Smyrna, in Revelation 2:8-11:

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” This promise encouraged the Christians of Smyrna. And this is why Jesus gives us this same promise here today. “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of

life.” Christ is encouraging us. He is holding before our eyes the goal we are running for, which he already won for us, namely, the crown of life. And whatever the suffering, whatever the obstacles, however tough our race may be, Jesus is telling us: “You will make it. You will overcome. I will see that you get there. Come, take your crown!”

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” There are a couple of different words in the Greek language that can be translated as “crown.” One is the word “diadema”—“diadem,” the kind of jewel-encrusted crown that a king wears. But that is not the word that is used here in our text. Rather, it is another word, “stephanos”—“stephanos,” the laurel wreath, the garland that is placed on an athlete’s head when he completes the race and wins the victory. That is the crown, the victor’s crown, the crown of life that Christ will award to all Christians who have run the race and been faithful unto death. By using this word “stephanos,” the Lord is telling us that the Christian life is like running a race: It requires endurance, it can be agonizing at times, but the reward in store at the end will make it all worthwhile.

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” How can Jesus make such a promise? It’s rooted in who he is and what he has done. In his message to the church in Smyrna, Christ identifies himself as “the first and the last, who died and came to life.” This is saying that he is true God in his nature, “the first and the last,” and that as true man he died a real death and then literally came back to life—he died on Good Friday and arose on Easter Day. This is the same Jesus who now is the exalted Lord in heaven, speaking to the church of Smyrna and to the churches of all times and places. That’s who this Jesus is, that’s what he has done, and this is why he can make such a great promise.

The words of Jesus here in Revelation 2 echo those he spoke in chapter 1. There the apostle John is given a vision of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, appearing in his heavenly glory. John is overwhelmed. But our Lord tells him: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” The reassurance: “Fear not.” The person of Christ, true God and true man, who has life in himself: “I am the first and the last, and the living one.” The reality of the resurrection: “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.” And what that saving death and victorious resurrection accomplished: “And I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

To “have the keys” of Death and Hades means that Jesus has full authority over them. He rules over them—that’s what it is to have the keys. Death and Hades here are seen as real powers that would threaten us. Death is the dark shroud that is cast over all peoples. But now Christ has swallowed up death forever. Hades—that’s hell, the very real place of eternal damnation, prepared for the devil and his angels, and where all those who spurn Christ and thus are stuck in their sins will go. But after his victory on the cross, because Jesus had defeated the devil and destroyed his power, Christ descended into hell to proclaim his victory even there. “I have the keys of Death and Hades,” says our risen Lord, the Lord of all.

This is why Jesus can say to us Christians: “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” The first death, physical death, will take us down, one at a time. But the second death, the big death, Death with a capital “D”—that has no power over us. Christ has taken care of that. He has the keys of Death and Hades.

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Christ won the crown of life for us by wearing the crown of thorns. By his innocent suffering and his atoning death on the cross, the holy Son of God shedding his blood for us lost sinners, Christ Jesus paid the price we owed, died the death we deserve, and obtained the forgiveness we so desperately need. “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.” Praise to Christ for this redemption, which gains us the crown.

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Will you get there? Can you do it? “Be faithful unto death,” I mean. Yes, you can. For Christ is giving you everything you need to be faithful. He will strengthen your faith through all adversities and temptations. The Lord does this through his means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. Through these gospel means, the Lord of the church sustains his Christians. Be nurtured in your faith, be strengthened in your faithfulness, be toughened for the struggle, through the ministry of the church, which Christ has established for your benefit, so that you will remain “faithful unto death” and so reach the finish line.

Today our risen Lord is reassuring you in the midst of all turmoil and tribulation. He is renewing your strength to run the race that lies before you. Christ will get you to the finish line, dear Christian! He’s cheering you on,

encouraging you today. The victor's crown, the "stephanos"—that Easter crown, the crown of life—Christ has it ready for you, and he is calling to you, "Come, take your crown!" Listen to his promise and run straight toward him! "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."