

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Sunday after Ascension Day¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirtieth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.³

“And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath driven thee, And shalt return unto the LORD thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. And the LORD thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee. And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the LORD, and do all his commandments which I command thee this day. And the LORD thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the LORD will again rejoyce over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.

“For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

“See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; In that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

Or,

Here beginneth the thirty-fourth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.⁴

“And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo [**KNEE-bow**], to the top of Pisgah [**PIZZ-gah**], that is over against Jericho. And the LORD shewed [**SHOWD**] him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan, And all Naph-tali [**NAFF-tuh-lye**], and the land of Ephraim [**EE-frih-eeem**], and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, unto the utmost sea,

*also to love one another.... We love him, because he first loved us.”*²²

For a brief while they did not see Him, and then they saw Him. “*A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.*”

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The Rev'd Robert Hart²³
April 29, 2012.

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Third Sunday after Easter, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 38 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (CIPBC 1963).

³ Deuteronomy 30:1-end (KJV).

⁴ Deuteronomy 34:1-end (KJV).

⁵ Isaiah 65:17-end (KJV).

⁶ St. John 16:5-end (KJV).

⁷ Chesterton, G.K., *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, 1933, London.

⁸ Isaiah 53:10.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ St. Luke 24:39.

¹¹ St. John 20:27-28.

¹² Romans 8:11.

¹³ St. John 6:54.

¹⁴ I John 3:2.

¹⁵ I Corinthians 15:20-23.

¹⁶ Leviticus 23:15-17.

¹⁷ Romans 6:9-10.

¹⁸ I John 3:2b.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 15:19.

²⁰ Hebrews 13:14.

²¹ I Peter 2:11-12a, 15-16.

²² I John 4:10-11,19.

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died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.”¹⁷

You see, “*when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*”¹⁸ Easter is history and future. It happened and will happen. The third day, the day after the Sabbath, was Christ’s Easter. The day when He comes again shall be our Easter; and like Him, all who have looked for His appearing again, all who love God, will enter into His immortality. Though we will have died, we will die no more; Death shall have no more dominion over us; for it has no more dominion over Him. This is our future if we remain *In Christ*.

Paul also wrote, “*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*”¹⁹ Modern religion all too often is about feeling good in this life, or being successful in this world, or even about health and prosperity; all of which things, though, they may be good for a time, are ultimately worthless; for this life ends. “*Here we have no abiding place.*”²⁰ These words that Jesus spoke mean so much more. They mean everything.

Without this hope of the Gospel, St. Peter’s words in his First Epistle General would come across as mere moral platitudes. But, in the context of Christianity, of the Gospel and our Risen Living Lord, they take on lively and powerful meaning: “*Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having your conversation honest among the Gentiles.... For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.*”²¹

In the context of eternal life, every commandment takes on new meaning. That meaning is, “*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought*

And the south, and the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, unto Zoar [**ZOE-urr**]. And the LORD said unto him, This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither.

“So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor [**beth-PEA-are**]: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.

“And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.

“And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days: so the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

“And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the LORD commanded Moses.

“And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, In all the signs and the wonders, which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh [**FAY-row**], and to all his servants, and to all his land, And in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses shewed [**SHOWD**] in the sight of all Israel.”

Or,

Here beginneth the seventeenth Verse of the sixty-fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁵

“For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old

man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them. And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith [SETH] the LORD."

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Verse of the sixteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁶

"... But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew [SHOW] you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew [SHOW] it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of

Easter past and future

Easter is a fact of history, and therefore also is our Lord's Ascension. But they are also the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to come. The Resurrection is a fact that was accomplished on the Third Day, and a promise that will be fulfilled on the Last Day. "*Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.*"¹³

For "*we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is,*" wrote St. John.¹⁴ St. Paul, writing to the Church in Corinth, says: "*But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.*"¹⁵

The imagery is from the harvest. In spring we have the first fruits, that first growth of the field; it is a foretaste of what comes later in the harvest. It fulfilled the meaning of the feast of the firstfruits in the Book of Leviticus.¹⁶ The feast of the first fruits was directly after the first Sabbath that followed the Passover. No coincidence that.

After the Sabbath they were to present the first fruits, just as Christ would rise and appear to witnesses *after* the Sabbath, on the first (and eighth) day of the week. The first fruits are a pledge of the future, a promise of what is to come. As Christ rose from the dead in the Springtime of the world, He will come again at the time of harvest. As He rose from the dead never to die again, so also shall those who love God and look for His appearing rise again at His coming, and enter into His Easter life, His resurrected and eternal life, His immortality, never to die again. St. Paul in his Epistle to the Church in Rome, writes: "*Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he*

The Lord encouraged faith too; but He also made known His will that they should accept the proofs He showed them, that He was alive. As I said on Easter, this was not about some mystery called “the empty tomb.” It was about the facts declared by eyewitnesses; and not just any eyewitnesses, but those witnesses who gave the word *martyr* (witness) its new meaning. They stared down death as the only people in the world who could now laugh at the terror of the grave—or, rather, the former terror; for they feared death no longer.

The other thing we may be moved to do with these words of Jesus is to apply them to our own emotional ups and downs, or to our own fears and the comforts that come by God’s grace in this life. That is fair enough, as long as we see all that as a mere shadow of their true meaning. And, when we consider the implications of the resurrection of Christ for us, the literal meaning of His words is far greater for us.

Because He rose again from the dead the third day, your hope is not in this world only, but in the world to come when God makes everything new. St. Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, “*But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.*”¹²

We do not believe merely in a symbolic resurrection, something to help us feel good about worldly things, about transient emotional turmoil or desires. Our hope is not about this world that passes away, or the things of this world that so easily draw away our love from God to carnal affections. Besides, it is not always the will of God to deliver us from our perceived problems or to give us what we think we want for ourselves. Frankly, some of our desires are petty, some are sinful and selfish, and some are simply irrelevant to the things that God would have us pay attention to.

mine, and shall shew [SHOW] it unto you. A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father. Then said some of his disciples among themselves, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? They said therefore, What is this that he saith [SETH], A little while? we cannot tell what he saith [SETH]. Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew [SHOW] you plainly of the Father. At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God. I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father. His disciples said unto him, Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb. Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God. Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye

might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.*” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

These words must be taken quite literally, for they were fulfilled literally.

For a brief while they did not see him, and then they saw him. We must hear in these words their blunt, literal, objective meaning. They are echoed in words we say every morning and evening: “*He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose again from the dead.*”

In my younger days I was among people who wanted to be very spiritual, and some who wanted to *appear* to be very spiritual. The words I have quoted above were treated all too mystically by some people. They wanted to interpret them in terms of spiritual or religious experience. I want to be careful not to rob anyone of the significance of real experience of that kind, nor of a spiritual sense in which these words describe it for them: “*A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.*”

However, I recall the words of G. K. Chesterton writing about the Thirteenth Century, and the prevailing mysticism of that era. In his biographical sketch of St. Thomas Aquinas, Chesterton wrote: “When Religion would have maddened men, theology kept them sane.”⁷ So, these words of Jesus, “*A little*

while, and ye shall not see me; and again, a little, and ye shall see me,” must be treated first and foremost by the “Queen of the Sciences”—by which I do mean theology. It is a science, based on facts, facts that amount to revelation. And, if I may intrude upon the religious nature of a church service with the science of theology, let me encourage everyone here to examine the facts.

The scientific approach

Within a few days after the Lord spoke these words, the Apostles’ situation was this: Their Lord was dead. Several times He told them how it would be. He said several times that He would be handed over to the Gentiles and be crucified, and die; and that He would rise again the third day. But their minds blocked out what He told them until they went through the worst of it. That is understandable. Their hope was shattered. They mourned and wept while the world rejoiced.

But, after three days, He appeared to them alive again. He had not conquered Rome; He had, instead, conquered the *real* enemy. He had overcome sin and death. He had been the Suffering Servant spoken of by Isaiah the prophet; now He was the man who died as “*an offering for sin,*”⁸ and then rose again to “*prolong His days*”⁹ as the one in whose hand the will of the Lord would prevail (all just as the prophet had said).

Those are the facts, as witnessed by His disciples. That is theology as science, based on facts of Revelation. And, indeed, Jesus encouraged the scientific approach, as St. Luke records: “*Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.*”¹⁰ And, as St. John reports: “*Then saith he to Thomas, ‘reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.’ And Thomas answered and said unto him, ‘My Lord and my God.’*”¹¹