

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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## INTRODUCTION

*Our homiletical studies coordinated with the 1966—67 church year are based on texts selected from a pericopic series appearing in the 1842 edition of the Perikopenbuch of the Evangelical Church in the Province of Saxony. While the selected texts for our studies up to this point were taken from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the texts assigned to Easter Sunday and the balance of the church year are taken exclusively from the New Testament. The studies appearing in this issue are not the product of a team of authors but were prepared by a single writer, Professor Edward Schroeder, chairman of the department of theology of Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Ind.*

## EASTER DAY, THE FEAST OF THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

LUKE 24:1-9

### I. Thematic Reflections

The truth about Easter is the truth about ourselves. In St. Paul's great resurrection chapter (1 Cor. 15) his point is that if Christ has not been raised, then the truth Christians hold about themselves, *their* faith, is a fraud; *they* are still stuck in their sin.

The first of the two Introits presented in *The Lutheran Hymnal* accentuates this focus on Easter's truth about "I, me, mine." Eight times in the brief text of the first Introit the first person singular pronouns appear. The same kind of frequency is observable in the Collects offered for the day. Easter "opens unto *us* the gate of everlasting life"; therefore Christians pray that the good desires God has bestowed *on them* may come to good effect *in them*, that "*we* who celebrate . . . may ever thirst for the Fountain of Life, Jesus Christ," and that as they celebrate they may indeed be resurrected "from the death of the soul" by the renewal of the Holy

Spirit. Finally, the Epistle (whose main motif is reiterated in the Gradual) is emphatic in asserting that the purgation of my corruption and wickedness is the "new deal" of the Easter Passover. And since "indeed *our* Passover has begun; the sacrifice *is* offered—Christ Himself, so *we* who observe the festival must not use the old leaven . . . , but only the unleavened bread which is sincerity and truth" (NEB). The truth about Easter is what happened to us—our own passing over from sin to faith, from God's verdict of condemnation to His verdict of forgiveness, that is, from death to life.

### II. The Text: Luke 24:1-9

The text is the Sunday segment of Luke's Easter weekend sequence in his "connected narrative" of "the whole course of these events in detail" "that have happened among us" (Luke's prologue, NEB). To hear the fuller message of the text naturally requires listening to it in the context in which it is embedded in Luke's Gospel and also in the matrix of his concluding chapter (24).

For the entire Gospel, Chapter 4 constitutes a kind of Christological keystone incorporating many of the dominant themes of Luke's theology as they come to the fore both in his Gospel and in Acts. Following Jesus' temptation, where His baptismal identity as "Son of God" is the central focus, Luke presents the Nazareth synagog episode of fulfillment of the Old Testament. The very Spirit of Yahweh is now present in the person and work of Jesus from this very town of Nazareth. Although His fellow townspeople are infuriated by such self-proclamation and seek to take action commensurate to their fury, the demons recognize and acknowledge: You are the Holy One of God; You are the Son of God. With the stage thus set, Jesus speaks His motto

for the rest of His ministry: "I *must* give the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, for that is what I was sent to do." Here we can pinpoint four Lukan themes: (1) the Holy Spirit as in a sense the chief *actor* in the life and ministry of Jesus, and also of the church (see Acts, which represents, as someone has said, not so much the Acts of the Apostles, as the Acts of the Holy Spirit); (2) the Jewish political community as "false" Israel and the incipient church as the "true" Israel, although even these true Israelites "seek the living among the dead"; (3) the necessary Old Testament context for interpreting what is really happening in the life and ministry of Jesus (and vice versa), which of course intensifies the conflict with the official guardians of the Old Testament, the Jewish theocratic leaders; (4) the divine "must." Jesus' ministry in whole and in part is, stage for stage, the execution of a plan of rescue designed to go "to the ends of the earth," by the Creator Himself.

When the Easter pericope is viewed in this fuller Lukan context, and more specifically now in the matrix of Chapter 24, we see more than just a newspaper reporter's account of what happened on a Sunday morning. In Chapter 24 we have the following elements: (1) The gift of the Holy Spirit is presented in the Pentecost preview (24:49), which when received will make the Easter disciples spirited agents of the divine "must" just as Jesus Himself has been throughout Luke's Gospel. (The truth about Easter is the truth about them.) (2) Even the "true Israelites" are "dull" and "slow to believe," startled and terrified, so dense that they "search among the dead for one who lives." (3) The big change comes not by some special inspiration or insight or vision on the part of any leader, but by the double thrust of their encountering the resurrected Christ *and* having Him "open their minds to understand the [Old Testament] Scrip-

tures." Reencountering the Scriptures after encountering Christ gives the truth about them, Him, and finally *me*. (4) The divine "must" comes into the open again as Jesus interprets the Old Testament both to the Emmaus disciples and to the Jerusalem disciples (24:26 f. and 44 f.). In fact, the entire apostolic kerygma in its basic constituent parts (the Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection, repentance and forgiveness in His name proclaimed universally) is, according to Jesus' exegesis, the content of the Old Testament, "everything written about Me in the law, . . . the prophets and the psalms." Ultimately everything written about Him is what is written about us. The predicates that apply validly to Him (for example, the central one, "Son of God"), apply validly to us, not simply analogically but directly. That is the truth about Easter (see John 1:12 f.), the truth about us.

### III. Preaching This Gospel in 1967

(1) In the face of our own condemned confusion in seeking life where nothing but death reigns, it is the role of the Spirit today to rescue us right at this point. He continues to be the "Lord and Giver of life," proceeding to us by virtue of Christ's Easter. Whether the predicate *life* or *death* is appropriate to any reality we seek must not be decided by external appearances of the reality itself—be it pleasant, friendly, progressive, conservative, beneficial, or even religious—but can only be determined by having it rebound from Holy Scriptures *and* from the Easter Christ. If it comes back to us after having been tossed to them, then it comes back with God's own label of *life* on it. (2) Even as the true Israel, so we the church are troubled by blindness as to what is really alive and dead, by our dullness and slowness to trust, by being startled and terrified as the divine "must" moves forward in both church and world. What is needed is not simply more clarification, but excision,

having the unbeliever within ourselves crucified by having God Himself designate the points of death within us (which we still not only seek but strive to preserve) and condemn them to death so that this piece of death gets dead. Empirically this is still the truth about us. But it is not the whole truth, which comes into being when we too again (3) encounter the risen Christ in apostolic preaching and in sacramental action. The authenticity of this encounter rests also not in empirical data but in the faithfulness of "the Word of God," God's (and Christ's) own self-commitment that when we listen to this kerygma (both vocally and literarily) and participate in the sacraments, He Himself is there coming to us with the Gospel's truth about our own existence. This leads then to (4) the divine "must." The paradigm for our resurrected life, animated by the Holy Spirit, is Christ's own life. Its components (and this comes as no surprise for a son of God) will be conflict, suffering, opposition, going through what looks like hell itself. Yet when this life is lived under the lordship of Christ, resurrection and survival is what "must" happen to us even as we walk along through the valley of the shadow of death. If Christ is with us, we fear no evil, since death itself is dead. *Our* death is dead. That is the truth about Easter — the truth about us.

ment Israel and by this creative talk kept Israel alive. In the Collect we specify that it is the very Word of the Lord's resurrection which vivifies us and about which we beseech the almighty Life-giver that He would have that Word come to fruition in our life and conversation. The standard Old Testament Lesson shows that Job's assurance of life, like ours, is based on the existence (external to himself) of the Word of his living Vindicator. The Epistle together with the day's Gospel presents us with almost the entire Johannine vocabulary for the theology of Easter. We hear in a series of equations that new birth from God equals victory over the cosmos; that victory equals our faith; this faith equals that Jesus is the Son of God; faith that Jesus is the Son of God equals "having" the Son; having the Son equals having life, eternal life (life of the Eternal One, i. e., God's own ζωή). Thus the Epistle leaves us with the reminder that continuous Christ-contact is what counts for this life. The Gradual, taking a note from last Sunday's Epistle, recalls for us just which Christ it is with whom we must keep contact: Christ the sacrificed Passover Lamb. In the Gospel for the day Thomas serves as the sample "babe" who after Easter needs to be brought to and kept in contact with the crucified Messiah. Trusting that this crucified Messiah is "my Lord and my God" constitutes, says John in the concluding verse of the text, "having Life in His name."

## QUASIMODOGENITI, THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

JOHN 14:1-6

### I. Thematic Reflections

For "Newborn Babies" Sunday it is not a squealing infant but doubting Thomas who is the model for the functional life of the newly-born. The Introit designates the milk on which the newly-born thrive as the Word, the Word of the same God who talked (frequently in vain) to Old Testa-

### II. The Text: John 14:1-6

John's entire gospel appears to be a winsome address, written after considerable theological reflection, calling on Jewish hearers to do the very thing indicated at the close of this gospel: to listen to his presentation of the "signs" of Jesus so that they may believe Him to be the Christ, the Son of God, and thereby become themselves the beneficiaries of His gift (God's core promise to Old Testament Israel): "Life in His

name." One might observe that John appropriates the whole gamut of Old Testament terminology and significative imagery (father — son, life — death, Moses, vine, wine, temple, Jacob's well, bread in wilderness, and so on) and focuses it exclusively on Jesus. This is already the case long before the radical exclusivism of v.6 of the text. Already back in Chapter 1 Moses is labeled incomplete; grace and truth (whether this truth is God's keeping faith — "troth" — or the exposed truth about ourselves both as sinners and as sons) came not through Moses but through Jesus Christ and Him alone (1:17 f.). Such exclusivism characterizes almost every chapter. Perhaps 5:21 ff. constitutes a high point: the Father has life per se and bestows it to whomever He wills. He has granted the same "exclusive franchise" to the Son. Yet others may still participate in this divine life if they hear Jesus' words and confide in the God who sent Him. By that very fact they "have eternal life," or more vividly, they have "passed from death to life."

Besides this christological exclusivism, John emphasizes the cruciform character of the christology throughout, beginning in the very opening chapters — God's "sacrificial Lamb" (1:29,36); the destruction of the temple of His body (2:19 ff.); His being lifted up like the wilderness serpent (3:14), etc. Whoever is no beneficiary of this cruciform christology is not merely without benefit, he is in trouble. He comes "into judgment" (5:24), a judgment consisting of the continued abiding presence of "the wrath of God." (3:36)

The sermon text is one of many Johannine pericopic summaries of the overall theology sketched above. In John the "troubled" state (v. 1) is always the state of unfaith, unfaith in God, which, since the Word (God) became flesh, now always entails unfaith in the words of Jesus. Thomas in v. 5 speaks the

words of the unfaith-full one (as he also does explicitly in the day's Gospel). How can God be considered trustworthy if all He sends us is a cruciform Messiah? Even if this crucified Messiah comes back from the grave, what does that have to do with me and my life? That may well have been "His way," but I cannot possibly make something like that "my way." My way is one-way and when I go down, I stay dead.

What is needed here is exposition of Christ's *way* when He went "away." It is Christ's "going away" that remedies Thomas' unfaith. "Going away" and "going to the Father" are in John's Gospel references to Christ's death first of all and not to His ascension. It is by this very act of "going away" that He remedies Thomas' blindness and ignorance about Thomas' own *way* with the heavenly Father. A position in the Father's family (we interpret the room and house language as personal relationship and not spatially in terms of square feet of living space up in heaven) comes only via Christ's "going away" actively. His "going away" prepares that relationship with the Father. The end result of that "preparing a place" on Jesus' part is that all His predicates with reference to the Father become predicated to us. By Christ's taking us to the Father He puts us in the same "place" where He Himself is.

Here three central textual monosyllables come to the fore. Way, truth, and life are all three "active" nouns designating God's movement with benefits to men. They might even be combined into this sentence that condenses John's *kerygma*: Jesus is God making His *way* in keeping faith (*truth*) with His ancient promises to Israel (and to all nations through Israel) to bring His own *life* to men. Once more, "coming to the Father" and "rooming in the Father's house" are not language for what happens when a Christian dies. They are not meta-

phors of spatial transfer. But "having the Son" equals "having God's own life," and that equals "having come to the Father," "rooming in the Father's household" right here and now, this side of the grave, even within this conflicting cosmos. That is the functional life of a child of God—of a newborn babe.

### III. Preaching This Gospel in 1967

The text and propers suggest the following themes for contemporary sermonic development:

1) Continuous contact with the "Word" of Christ is the lifeline for the newborn babe, every Christian, whether 6 days or 60 years old. In terms of God's eschatological biography for each child our earthly time of cradle-to-grave hardly exceeds "infancy." St. John still talks to adult Christians as "little children."

2) The "troubled" state of our own unfaith focuses on the cruciform character of God's redemptive work *then* (in the absence of obvious splendor in Christ's own biography) and *now* (in the similar state of our own biographies) in the face of the assertion that both He and we are living an existence designated as "son of God" existence. There are a variety of contemporary symptoms of this form of unfaith.

3) Christ's cruciform "going to the Father" is the very remedy for our offense at the lack of splendor in His and our lives. It is the father, not the son, who determines and maintains the father-child relationship. Similarly, it is the parents who come to the maternity ward and claim one infant as "their" child and not vice versa. And the heavenly Father by the resurrection designates this crucified Jesus as the fatherly way, truth, and life to us and for us. As we today (and on until the Parousia) receive His Word and confess Him as "my Lord and my God," we are "alive (as sons) in His name."

## MISERICORDIAS DOMINI, THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

MATT. 18:10-14

### I. Thematic Reflections

The shepherd-sheep-flock imagery dominates the propers for the day. God the Father is the Shepherd. Jesus is alternately the sacrificial Lamb and the Shepherd Himself. And the people of God are individually the sheep and corporately the flock. The Introit, besides giving the name of God's tenderheartedness to the day and finding the earth full of it, sees the same creative dominical word throughout the whole universe and calls upon the community of its beneficiaries to respond with "proper" joy and praise. That propriety is forthwith boldly expressed in the text of the Collect, where the firstborn Son's humiliation and the resulting exaltation of a world previously laid low become the basis for the now elevated faithful to pray for perpetual (sic!) gladness and everlasting participation in the joy of deliverance from death. The Old Testament Lesson (Ezek. 34:11-16) presents the eschatological day of the Lord wherein Yahweh announces, "I myself will be the shepherd of My sheep" to seek them out from their scattered habitats and restore them to a pastorally-pictured paradise. The Epistle develops one New Testament perspective of this image in proclaiming Jesus as the guiltless, nonretaliatory, God-trusting, sinbearing Sufferer (sacrificial Lamb motif), by whose wounds men are healed from their straying and are returned to God, the guardian Shepherd. The actual contact the restored sheep have with the sacrificial Lamb is spotlighted in the Gradual. Here the bilateral relationship of "knowing" that obtains between Jesus and His sheep (taken from the day's Gospel) is tied in with Luke's account of the Emmaus disciples' "knowing" the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread. The Gospel presents another of Jesus' "I am" statements, wherein

the words from Ezekiel predicated to Yahweh as Good Shepherd are predicated to Jesus. He is the *life-giving* Shepherd, who *gives up His life* for the sheep. The bilateral relationship exists not only between Him and His sheep, but between Him and the Father. In claiming the sheep as His own property (the opposite of the hireling) Jesus continues the line of thought implicit in the "I am" assertions, namely, I am Yahweh.

## II. The Text: Matthew 18:10-14

Matthew's Gospel, like all the Synoptics, is centered on the "kingdom of God." Matthew presents the Kingdom by presenting Jesus to the reader as the true Israel, the authentic bearer of that label which was Israel's distinction, viz., "son of God." This designation does not refer initially to metaphysical divinity but to a type of humanity, namely that kind of human being who unrestrictedly trusts the promissory words of the God of Israel. A "son of God" is such a *faith-full* man. Hence the clash between Jesus and the Jewish political community in Matthew becomes especially sharp. Jesus *is* what the contemporary Jewish political community *ought to be but is not*. The mere fact of His being such a man in their midst is condemnation of them and the highest personal offense.

One prominent place where the conflict is focused is in the question of Jesus' authority, especially His authority to be a sin-forgiver (7:29; 9:6 ff.), which is also actually Israel's own destiny. At stake here is not merely the issue of Jesus' being authorized to do what everyone admitted was only the "Father's business"; the crucial question is: Just what is the Father's work and, above all, His *will*? Jesus' favorite answer to this in Matthew is Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (9:13 and 12:7), and in the latter reference He indicates that the Jewish political community does not even know what this cardinal statement means. What it clearly

means for Matthew is that the will of God is not first of all what God wants men to do for Him (sacrifice) but what He wants to do for them (mercy). And what God wants to do for the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," for His "children" (Matt. 15), is to find them with forgiving mercy.

This sermon text from Chapter 18 is inserted between an initial presentation of the kingdom "for children only" and the concluding extensive material on forgiveness—the "church discipline" passage, Peter's "seven times" question, and the pericope of the unforgiving servant.

The final verse of the text indicates that the focal point of the pericope is: just what is the *will* of the Father? His will really is that lost sheep be found. As the Lukan parallel indicates—and, for that matter, Matthew's entire gospel—it finally turns out that there is no one who is not a lost sheep. The ninety-nine who ironically are supposed to "need no repentance" do not exist in empirical human reality. If they think they do, they are even more "lost" than the obvious "stray." The Good Shepherd "came not to call the righteous but sinners" to repentance. Preliminary to being a found sheep of Christ and of God one must have been a sinner "in truth" with no pretenses to the contrary. Jesus' polemic against the Pharisees, which runs throughout Matthew's entire gospel and culminates in the scathing woes of Chapter 23, orbits constantly around this theological nucleus.

Jesus' mission as "Son of Man" is to "come to save the lost." Those who have "found" themselves will not be "found" by this Good Shepherd. Yet *miser cordia domini* ("Yahweh's tender-heartedness") really is *the will* of God in action in Jesus.

## III. Preaching This Gospel in 1967

1) The Christian's problem is how to be a "good," that is, a truthful, lost sheep. The flock of the Good Shepherd is the fellowship

of forgiven sinners. Their contact with the Good Shepherd is not that He once upon a time spoke to them a "saving" word of forgiveness; rather, they constantly "hear His voice," receiving this identifying designation from Him again and again. Not their immaculate moral appearance, nor their dedicated presence at the watering place makes them *His* sheep. The constitutive factor that makes them His sheep is only His calling them and saying: "You are mine!"

2) The problem of "straying" is not some sort of running away into the moral morass of law-breaking; it is getting sidetracked into a disregard of the Gospel of mercy. The Christian is "astray" when he thinks he is one of the ninety-nine "who need no repentance."

3) The church today needs to understand repentance "theologically" and escape the distortion of repentance psychologically understood as "feeling sorry" for sins (a definition of repentance unknown in the New Testament). Regardless of the believer's psychological "feelings," repentance means accepting God's verdict about my existence in terms of *His* "feelings" (both condemnation and mercy) rather than my "feeling sorry for what I did to God." No one who claims as part of his tradition Luther's battle with monastic penitential piety should get caught psychologically undermining God's work of repentance.

4) The "found" sheep is one who lives by faith in the word of forgiveness from the Good Shepherd and nothing more. That makes him 100 percent a "son of God."

spite the cross, yes, finally because of the cross. The Introit's antiphon sounds the jubilation theme honoring God's name in explicit conjunction with the conflict motif of the psalm. Since joy in suffering is central to our fellowship with Christ, as the subsequent propers make even more explicit, the Collect asks for God's power to aid the Christian in avoiding those things (such as flight from joy-full suffering) which are contrary to the fellowship and in appropriating such things as conform to it. In the Old Testament Lesson (Lam. 3:18-26) the believer reflects on the affliction and faded glory of the chosen people, and he takes hope not at the prospect of escaping from it all but at calling to mind God's *chesed* in the very midst of it all and confessing the "goodness" of simply "waiting quietly" in such torment for God's act of salvation. St. Peter's message from the Epistle also envisions the Christians in a conflict context. They live as God's aliens and exiles in an ungodly milieu under human institutions that embroil them in suffering for the simple fact that they are living out the righteousness of their faith. Although the "natives" persecute them, God approves of them.

With the words of the Gradual telling us of the appropriate tie between Christ's suffering and death and His entry into glory, we quite literally step up to the joy and sorrow theme of the Gospel. Jesus' "going to the Father" (that is, His crucifixion and exaltation) is the key event that turns sorrow into joy. Sorrow and joy are two antithetical *theological* realities (a man's factual relationship with the Father) and not psychological labels for the state of a man's feelings. Irrespective of how the disciple "feels," Good Friday changes his factual theological sorrow into theological joy, even if at certain times in life he cannot stop crying his eyes out for grief or pain. It is of this joy that Jesus assures them, "No one will take your joy from you."

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## JUBILATE, THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

JOHN 12:24-26

### I. Thematic Reflections

The propers for the day highlight joy in an unlikely context, that of conflict and suffering. Joy is the Christian's possession de-



## II. The Text: John 12:24-26

John's collection of "signs" (as he designates his gospel, 20:30 f.) seeks to present Jesus for what He really is—the radically exclusive access men have to the life of God, solely by virtue of His cruciform ministry in Jewish Palestine. (See the brief general Johannine survey under Section II in the Quasimodogeniti study above.)

Chapter 12 of John's Gospel is the finale of Jesus' public verbal controversy with Pharisaic Judaism. The chapter concludes with Jesus interpreting His rejected exclusivist claim as now being judgment upon them. Since all of Jesus' talk was at the explicit command of the Father, rejecting Jesus' talk is rejecting the Word of the Father. Furthermore, since the Father's commandment coming via Jesus "is eternal life," when Judaism rejects this commandment and clings to what it still claims is a commandment from the Father, it can only be clinging to a commandment of eternal death. And so it is! Death is finally the reality present in the "darkness." Jesus as light and life offers people the opportunity for escaping this reality and for becoming living sons of light. He accomplishes this through the strange theological biochemistry of His death. (23 f. and 32 f.)

The text proper opens with the biological "sign" of the "dying seed." In applying this to Himself, Jesus designates it the moment of His glorification (v.23). Such association of death and glory is incongruous for unregenerate thinking and frequently even for the thinking of the regenerate man. But the heart of the matter is what Luther also was seeking to express in his distinction between *theologia crucis* (God's suffering weakness in Jesus' biography) and *theologia gloriae* (the notion of God in grandeur). The genuine *doxa* of God—as John takes pains to "sign" to us—is the glory of the crucified. Even men of religion at times prefer

human *doxa* (*theologia gloriae*) to God's *doxa* (*theologia crucis*). (V.43)

As Jesus carries through His botanical image, death is necessary in order for fruit to arise. Without death, no fruit; but with death, especially this death, there is fruit. The actual creation of this fruit is one major element of the glory taking place in the crucifixion.

The same seed paradigm applies to everyone. If a man resists this sort of "planting," he not only bears no fruit, but he also loses that life which he sought thereby to preserve. The terms which Jesus contrasts are man's ψυχή (life with a small "l") "in this cosmos" with the ζωή "of eternity." As John's Gospel emphasizes throughout, this eternal ζωή is the divine quality present in any ψυχή ("normal" human existence) already this side of the grave. This is the message of the entire preceding Chapter 11. (Jesus and Lazarus)

Any person who would serve Jesus must follow Him in this seed-dying, fruit-bearing paradigm. He and His servants are always in the same (cruciform) place. And right in this place Jesus is "glorified," and His accompanying servant is also "honored" by the God who is the Father of them both.

## III. Preaching This Gospel in 1967

1) Suffering has surely not abated in the modern world. To combat it only with the resources of ψυχή (as John informs the term) and not with God's ζωή is to approach the problem unrealistically.

2) God's purpose in suffering, however, is more than just to have us understand His hand in the problem of pain. His will is to eliminate it, to take our suffering and sorrow and turn it to joy, and then to have that joy endure.

3) The center of such joy is the confidence that God is our Father and that His unalterable and invincible will for us is life and not death.

4) This is no more obvious in our lives than it was in the life of Jesus. It entails faith contrary to the appearances, but not a faith contrary to the facts, if Jesus Christ and His glorification are included in the facts of the case.

5) The joy in sorrow and suffering is an eschatological reality. It is a present fact that is still in progress, moving toward completion in the final resurrection. Along the way God continues to give us "signs," which, like the ones St. John has gathered, are not obviously convincing, but do always point us to Christ and thereby to the resources for another day of undeterred theological joy in the midst of any conflict situation.

6) Serving Christ is joyful, suffering fellowship with Him in whatever place we both happen to be.

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## CANTATE, THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

JOHN 5:28-29

### I. Thematic Reflections

The "new song" motif in the Introit for the fourth Sunday after Easter signals the fulfilled reality of Easter in terms of the worship language of the Old Testament people of God. The "new song" the Christian sings celebrates Christ. The new song is a Christ song. He is the new and living reality that constitutes, in the words of the Gradual, God's own "right hand." Not only *was* He once alive, but He *is* arisen and stays that way; "He dieth no more."

In the Collect God's people pray for single-mindedness and for hearts focused on that one reliable spot where true joys may be found in the midst of the manifold changes of this world. The Old Testament Lesson (Is. 12) envisions almost intoxicated singing in the great eschatological day because of one fact, namely, "for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." In fact, the prophet

identifies the Lord God Himself as "my song."

For careless Christians whose focus is getting blurred, James sounds a *caveat* in the Epistle. The constancy of God the Father is the source of every benefit men have. His unalterable will toward us is that by His word of truth we be the initial "produce" in His new creation. As such it is our assignment to be actively "working the righteousness of God" as we continue in meekness on the receiving end of the "implanted word," which has the power to save. What God supplies to His Christians who are out in the world and at considerable distance from Easter is the subject matter of this Sunday's Gospel. The high point of Christ's Messianic work, His "going away," makes possible the sending of the Paraclete. The Paraclete as the Spirit of Christ fulfills His role in the world and in the church. With the latter the task is to lead men into "all truth," which of course in John's Gospel is into the fullness of the reality of Christ. That means the Paraclete keeps them connected with Christ and serves to connect Christ to their unfolding individual biographies (as well as to the "biography" of the church) as they move on into the future. By keeping connected they continue the celebration of Easter. They are attuned to the new song.

### II. The Text: John 5:28-29

In view of the brevity of the sermon text it is all the more important to recall the overall contours of John's Gospel as surveyed in the Quasimodogeniti and Jubilate studies above. Especially in view of the apparent legal criterion by which life or judgment is dispensed in the final verse of the text, the entire context of Chapter 5 becomes all the more important for understanding the pericope as John's *Gospel*.

Chapter 5 gives us John's presentation of the Sabbath controversy. Jesus' justification for breaking the Sabbath is expressed in

v. 17. He claims that the Sabbath regulation was broken by God's own life-giving work. It is because of this claim that the people "sought all the more to kill Him," not because of what was actually a rather insignificant breach of the Sabbath but because He justified His law-breaking as a fulfillment of God's own will.

If for no other reason, this clash over law and law-breaking would disallow the legal interpretation that is initially apparent in v. 29 of the text, as though the "do-gooders" get eternal life in the resurrection and the "do-evilers" get judgment. As is manifestly clear, beginning at v. 21 ff., a man's attitude toward Christ is the one criterion of life or judgment. Verse 28 says that the "hour is coming" for this resurrection, but in Jesus' own words in v. 25 that "hour" is not the final resurrection, but the reality of resurrected life now occurring in His person and work. "I am resurrection and life." Even if the final resurrection is included in the meaning, the important decision about the ultimate destinies is not made at that final day, but on the day when a man encounters Jesus. In this sense, "the Father has given all judgment to the Son" (22). Whoever "hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life; he does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life" (24). For him judgment day is already a past event. To hear the Word, believe God, and have the eternal life constitutes the Johannine content for "doing good." To ignore and reject that Word of Jesus is to "do evil," to refuse life and to choose judgment. There is no third alternative.

### III. Preaching This Gospel in 1967

1) God's goal for His world and the people in it is what Christians celebrate and sing on Cantate Sunday, the *doxa* of God and not the *doxa* of men, although the two are chronically confused even with the most faithful disciples.

2) God's goal for His world and the people in it is the resurrection of *life*.

3) It is the chronic problem of God's world and the people in it that death rather than life dominates and that people (often even "religious" people) prefer death to life.

4) The new song of the church celebrates the initial point in history where the reverse was true. In Jesus Christ life overcame death. His resurrection is the singular "sign" of the possibility of God's goal being achieved in human existence, as well as of the factual occurrence of this goal in human history. In fact, all "authority" on this life-or-death issue has been given to this firstborn Son.

5) It is God's intention that the Firstborn not be an only child, but that all men become His brothers, animated with the very same life by "hearing *His* Word" and thus having in God a Father and not a Judge.

6) This resurrected life is a reality now; it is yet to be completed in the final resurrection. As men let this Word of Christ identify them when they go about their daily work, their Father is working still and Jesus is working. In the words of the Epistle, this is "working the righteousness of God."

7) Finally the new song also marvels about us: "Look what God is doing to me!"

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