

“God’s Triumph!”

One of thrills of life is to be able to win a *championship* – whether it is winning a blue ribbon at the farm show, or placing first in a track event at high school, or a youngster winning a spelling bee, or having your favorite professional sports team win the playoffs. All my life I've rooted for Philadelphia teams – and championships have been hard to come by! But I remember the Flyers skating around with the Stanley Cup (1973-74 and 1974-5), and the Phillies receiving their World Series Trophies in 1980 and 2008. Winning a championship is all about being able to *triumph* over an opponent.

Easter is God’s triumph! There's an atmosphere of celebration; the smell of victory is in the air! Jesus’ death on the cross seemed to be the apparent defeat of God. After all, in some mysterious way it was *God Himself* hanging limp on that cross, and dying. But early in the morning of the third day after Jesus was executed, there is a stirring in His tomb, and Jesus is alive again! The huge stone at the tomb's entrance is moved away. A little later some women go to the tomb. They're shocked to see that the entrance to the tomb is open!

Listen to how Luke describes that moment: "While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!'"(Luke 24:4-6a). Can you sense the drama? The excitement? That victory is in the bag!

Easter is God’s victory over everything that destroys the goodness of life! Oh, the game’s not over yet. God's kingdom has not arrived, not *completely*. We're all painfully aware that sickness, sorrow, evil and death are still with us. But the outcome is already sealed. We know who’s going to win in the end. And it’s *God!*

The good news for today is that God invites each of us to share in the victory He has won through the resurrection of Jesus! Growing up, I followed the Hershey Bears and went to many of their games. My sister Sandy did too. She came to especially like one of their defensemen, Howie Yanosik. He was small for a defenseman, a skinny young man, but he was a good player. After the games, my dad and sister and I would go to a place in the arena where you could meet the players as they came out of the dressing room after the game. After awhile, Howie got to know us, and would often talk with us.

This one year the Bears got into the playoffs. We attended the deciding game of the Calder Cup finals, where if Hershey they would get the playoff trophy. The score was close. The Bears were up by one goal. The other team pulled their goalie and put an extra skater on the ice. We just a few seconds left, the Bears scored an empty net goal – I think it was Howie who scored the deciding goal. Well, bedlam broke loose! The organ blared loudly, players threw their sticks and gloves in the air and hugged each other! The game was not officially over – there were a few seconds left - *but it was over!*

We were sitting near the ice. In the middle of the celebration, Howie skated over towards us,

pointed to my sister, and handed his stick over the glass to her. It was *his* victory, but he wanted her to share in it!

In a way, that's what Jesus does for us. He invites us to share in God's triumph.

Jesus' resurrection is God's victory of love over hate. If you check out the news – however you get it - so much of it is about how we human beings hate and hurt each other: telephone and email scams, shootings and robberies, bullying in our schools, road rage incidents. In our families, our work places, our neighborhoods, we push others aside to get ahead, we criticize and put people down, we hold grudges. Most (if not all) of world's problems are rooted in our inability to love one another.

The Bible says that “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Jesus, as God in human flesh, was perfect Love incarnate – He embodied the compassionate, gracious, redeeming love of God. And what did we do with that? *We nailed it to a cross!* We killed the most loving Person who ever walked this earth! That Good Friday it seemed like love was no match for the hate and animosity of world.

Aren't there times when kindness and a generous spirit seem to be dwarfed and overwhelmed by malice and ill will? But then Easter came, and Jesus showed that love is more powerful than hate. He forgave the men who were crucifying Him: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing", He prayed. He forgave and restored the disciples who had chickened out and abandoned Him during His arrest and trial.

1 Corinthians 13 says love never ends. Love abides. When we come to Jesus we get a new capacity to love people. We come to realize that the bullies, the selfish, the hateful people of the world won't have the last word. Because in the end, forgiveness, kindness, love will triumph!

The resurrection of Jesus is also God's victory of hope over despair. There are so many things today that can cause us to feel hopeless. The economy, inflation, the rising cost of just about everything. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and all that's done to disrupt world order. The mess at our southern border. The hostile political climate. On top of this, all of the things in our personal lives that push us towards despair. How many people today are feeling depressed and hopeless!

One of the great things Jesus has to offer people is hope!

One of my favorite Scripture verses is 1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Through His resurrection, Jesus wants us to share in God's victory of hope over despair! Living as a follower of Jesus can breathe new hope into us! Because when we give ourselves over to Jesus, He comes and lives in us. And when Christ lives in us, we access a Power beyond our own! He can do the unexpected!

Father Richard Carton of New Jersey was speaking to a group of 2nd graders about the

resurrection of Christ. One student asked him, “What did Jesus say right after He came out of the grave?” Immediately the hand of one little girl shot up: “I know what He said, Father.” “What was that?” Father Carton asked. The girl said, “Tah-Dah!” The resurrection is God’s way of breaking unexpectedly into the world, saying, “Tah-Dah!”, and offering us hope!

For some years South Africa had been one of the most turbulent places on earth. The late South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu was once asked if he remained hopeful as he looked at the pain of an uncertain future. He responded, “I am always hopeful. A Christian is a prisoner of hope. What could have looked more hopeless than Good Friday? But then, at Easter, God says, ‘From this moment on, no situation is untransfigurable.’” Archbishop Tutu continued: “There is no situation from which God cannot extract good.” I love his phrase, “A Christian is a prisoner of hope”! The resurrection of Jesus is God’s victory of hope over despair!

The resurrection is also God’s triumph of goodness over evil. All of the forces of evil gathered themselves against Jesus as He hung on the cross. But He met sin and evil head on and beat it! Colossians 2:15 tells us: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

There are times when it seems like evil rules the world. The world always seems to have its Hitlers and Stalins and Osama bin Laden’s. And Vladimir Putins. Evil systems and governments enslave and victimize people, and bad people often do seem to have more than their share of good fortune. On a more personal level, who of us has not wrestled with the dark side of our own nature – habits, addictions, attitudes we just can’t seem to conquer.

But the resurrection of Jesus is a sign that over the long haul, goodness will outmatch evil. And Jesus can help us in the battle against evil that is around us and inside us! Nicolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a man of great power in the Communist movement. He took part in the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda (which means “truth”). He was a full member of Politburo. As a Communist, he wrote influential works on economics and political science.

In 1930 he went to Kiev to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. He talked for an hour, hurling insults at Christianity, presenting arguments and supposed proofs against it. When he was finished, he looked out over what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of peoples’ faith and demanded, “Are there any questions?” There was stunned silence. Then one man approached the platform, went to the lectern, and stood by the Communist leader. He eyed the crowd, first to the left, then right. Then he shouted that ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: “Christ is risen!” En masse, the huge crowd stood as one and thundered, “He is risen indeed!”

We saw what happened to the Communist state – and even though Putin seems bent on reviving the old Soviet Union, it’s not going to last over the long haul. But the ancient sound will forever be heard: “He is risen! He is risen indeed!” The resurrection of Jesus is God’s triumph of goodness over evil.

Finally, the resurrection is God's victory of life over death. The late humorist, Erma Bombeck, said she wanted these words on her tombstone: "Big deal! I'm used to dust!" But death *is* a big deal! Death is the ultimate enemy! Who of us has not felt the sting of losing someone we dearly love? Who of us has not been anxious – even fearful - as we've considered our own death and the end of our life here on earth?

But even that great enemy death could not hold Jesus for long! 1 Corinthians 15 speaks of Jesus' resurrection and what it accomplishes. It says, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" 1 Corinthians 15:26. Jesus once said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life and will not be condemned; he has (already) crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).

Maxie Dunnam tells of the grief he experienced when friends lost their 18 year old son in an auto accident. Out of that tragedy the father of the boy wrote this: "On the wall of the examining room in the emergency ward where we waited for further word, the poster said it all: 'When you don't know what else to do, ***scream!***'" And yet there was no place to do it. I was told by the social worker that there once had been such a place – thick carpet and plush couches into which one could bury the head – but in the hospital's rapid growth, the room had become a storage area for medical records. They thought of almost everything except a place to scream.

"Out running early yesterday morning I was drawn to the high school from which Stuart had graduated just two weeks before his tragic accident. Climbing the high chain-link fence, I repeatedly ran around the track, remembering those nearly 700 robed seniors on the football field. Finding a discarded graduation program, I climbed to the place in the bleachers where we had sat when his name was called. Through swimming eyes, I found his name with the two stars, which mean gold seal bearer. Now it was time: I stood up and shouted into the empty stadium, 'Yea, Stuart.' How weak and pitiful it sounded. I tried again – a little louder and then louder and louder still, until the sounds of my screams came echoing back from the distant school building.

"Finally, I went back to running. Football fields are made for yelling and screaming. I had finally found my place. There are times when words are just not enough, and in the face of death, up from the depths comes the scream of life. Thank God for life, and thank God for Stuart. 'Yea, Stuart!'" *The resurrection of Jesus is God's victory, even over death!*

How do we share in the victory Christ has won? Not just by having some vague belief in God or Jesus – but by a *personal faith* in the victorious Christ, and a *personal relationship* with Him! The only reason my sister could share in the triumph of Howie Yanosik that night at Hershey-park Arena was because she had taken time and made the effort to get to know him. And he was interested enough to offer his friendship to her. The mighty God has offered to be *friends* with us through Jesus Christ. Our part is to put our faith in Jesus and turn our life and will over to Him.

Illust. Some years ago, when Dan Kuykendal was a U.S. Representative from Tennessee, a man

walked up to him after he had won a hard-fought battle for election. The man slapped him on the back, pumped his hand vigorously and said, “If I’d know’d you was going to win, I’d of voted for you”

I can imagine on Judgment Day, some people will face Jesus and say, “If I’d know’d you was going to win, I’d have followed you.”

We don’t have to be a loser. Christ wants to share His victory with us!

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