26/04/2022

Archbishop Elpidophoros of America At the Vespers of Agape, Holy and Great Pascha



My beloved Christians,

Χριστὸς Ἀνέστη! [in response: Ἀληθῶς Ἀνέστη!]

Christ is Risen! [in response: Truly He is Risen!]

Χριστὸς Ἀνέστη! [in response: Ἀληθῶς Ἀνέστη!]

With our triumphant Paschal proclamation, I greet each and every one of you in the joy of our Risen Lord. This truly is the Day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice together and be glad in it![*]

As the Prophet David says in the Psalms, we have come through the fire and water of Holy Week, and arrived at the refreshment of Holy Pascha.[†]

Now, we are gathered on the evening of Pascha, together with the Disciples who were in hiding, for fear of the authorities. You can imagine what Jerusalem must have been like, as word of Jesus' disappearance from the tomb spread throughout the city. And in this moment, we meet in a special way, Thomas, the Disciple of Unbelief.

It is the third portion of this famous Gospel Reading, that we enjoy in as many languages as we can muster. The Lord appears to only the Ten Disciples; for Thomas is not with them. I have often wondered where he was. Remember, this was the enthusiastic Disciple who said to his brothers – as Jesus prepared to return to Jerusalem and raise Lazarus from the dead:

"Let us go also, that we may die with Him!" [‡]

And this is also the same Thomas who implores the Lord at the Mystical Supper, when Jesus tells the Disciples that they already know where He is going and the path to get there:

“Lord, how can we know the way when we do not know where You are going?” [§]

If you think about Thomas – his unbridled and, as some might say, unconsidered, enthusiasm – his queries to the Lord, together with his unbelief at the report of his fellow Disciples about the reality of Jesus’ Resurrection, might seem more understandable. He was a twin, as Scripture says,[**] but whose? Where was his mirror image? Perhaps, in his own heart.

Before the Crucifixion, one Disciple betrayed the Lord, and another denied Him. After His Resurrection, one disbelieved Him. There is a lesson for us in this, my beloved Christians, even as we celebrate in gladness His Three-Day Rising from the grave. And it is this: Faith should never be taken for granted. Faith is not information about God, or His divine doings.

Faith is formation within – in our hearts, our minds and our souls. It is the work of building and forming our experience to trust in God and in His promises. When Jesus said to the Disciples: “You know where I am going. You also know the way,”[††] He was not challenging their knowledge of directions on a map. He was calling them to a deeper experience of Himself.

Therefore, today, in the midst of our Paschal elation, we are reminded by the beloved Apostle Thomas that Faith is not something learned, but something known. “Known,” as Saint Paul means it, when he writes to the Christians of Corinth:

Ἐν παντὶ ἐπλουτίσθητε ἐν αὐτῷ, ἐν παντὶ λόγῳ καὶ πάσῃ γνώσει.

You have been enriched by [Christ] in every respect – in your every utterance and in all knowledge. [‡‡]

Thomas – of whom it is said that he traveled the farthest journeys to preach the Gospel before his martyrdom – celebrated the very first Pascha with less than a full embrace of the truth of the Resurrection. He has the information – the story – from the other Disciples, but he does not yet have the experience of it. He will have to wait eight days for that, and we will hear his utterance, and we will behold his knowledge, when he cries out next Sunday, “My Lord and my God!” [§§]

And so, let us also strive for the experience of the Risen Lord in our lives, by filling our hearts and minds with the love, mercy, forgiveness and generosity that flows from the Empty Tomb.

In this way, then, when we speak these words, they shall not be a mere piece of information, or at minimum, a salutation. They shall be the truth of our souls and

the reality of our lives:

Χριστὸς ἀνέστη ἐκ νεκρῶν, θανάτῳ θάνατον πατήσας, καὶ τοῖς ἐν τοῖς μνήμασι, ζωὴν χαρισάμενος.

Ἀληθῶς ἀνέστη ὁ Κύριος!

[*] Psalm 117:24 (LXX).

[†] Cf. Psalm 65:12 (LXX).

[‡] John 11:16.

[§] John 14:5.

[**] John 11:16.

[††] John 14:4.

[‡‡] I Corinthians 1:5.

[§§] John 20:28.

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