

The Greatest Escape

In the name of him who has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, dear friends in Christ: Harry Houdini was considered in his day to be the greatest escape artist ever. Many people today think he still deserves that title. He began his career, not so successfully, as a magician performing sleight of hand tricks; but his promoters encouraged him to develop his talent for escaping from various forms of confinement. Following their advice he made a name for himself escaping from handcuffs, manacles, strait jackets, and prison cells all the while claiming that nothing devised by man could hold him. He went on to create conditions for more elaborate escapes that involved threats of death like being locked in a safe thrown into an icy river or tied up in a chest buried under ground. As his fame grew, so did the need for increasing ingenuity in devising ever more spectacular and dangerous escape stunts. And Houdini always delivered, never failing to thrill and amaze his audiences.

But Houdini had another passion, and that was his keen interest in what we hold to be the darker side of spiritual matters. He would go (often disguised) to mediums, spiritists, and necromancers (those who claimed the ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead) in order to study them and their methods. As a trained magician, he knew the tricks of the trade and how to spot fakes. Thus he exposed as frauds many famous and highly regarded mediums of the time. But, you see, it wasn't the fakes he was after. That's not what was driving his quest. What he was looking for was the real thing. He was searching for legitimate proof of life beyond the grave—which he was convinced was out there, if only he could find it. What he was after was the greatest escape of all: the escape from death.

And in this he is not alone, not by a long shot. Indeed, this has been a major concern of humans throughout our history. From the Egyptians who 5000 years ago erected pyramid mountains of stone in the hope of achieving it, right down to the present day, death is the thing we fear the most and from which we most seek to escape. A few weeks back I read an article about how some computer scientists think that within the next decade or so the technology will exist that will allow you to transfer your memories and thought processes – your consciousness, if you will – to a machine, thus giving you virtual immortality. Though your body die and decay, your mind could live on in the circuitry of a super complex computer: your own electronic brain. Personally, I don't think I'd want that. And I don't believe it will be possible. Even if you could program your thought processes into a machine, would it really be *you* in there? Or just a simulated replica? But for argument's sake, let's say that it were possible. Then what? "Okay ... now I'm here in the computer ... thinking big thoughts ... really fast ... Huh ... I guess I could play some solitaire ... forever." Or until there's a power outage or someone accidentally trips over the cord and pulls the plug. *Zzzt! Lights out.*

Harry Houdini never did find the proof he was looking for. What he did instead was make a pact with his beloved wife, Bess. The deal was that whichever of them died first was to do everything possible to make contact with the living partner from the other side. This was to be verified with a short message kept a secret between the two of them. As it turns out, Harry died first. Thereafter, each year on the anniversary of his death, Bess would hold a séance in the hope of hearing from him. She never did. After ten years of silence, she gave up. Others, however, did not. It may interest you to know that a number of séances conducted by spiritist groups and diehard Houdini fans are held in various places throughout the world both on the date of his death and on Halloween (that's Reformation Day for us Lutherans). So far, no one

has heard from the great Houdini. The man many hold to be the world's greatest escape artist ever has not been able to achieve the greatest escape. Nor will he. Ever.

On a much happier note, we are here this morning to celebrate and honor the man who did accomplish the greatest escape. We know this not because he sent some coded message from beyond the grave; but because after three days in the tomb his living spirit returned to his dead body, reviving it. And then he got up, neatly folded and set aside the shroud that had covered his corpse, and he left the grave behind. Left it behind forever, for having died once for all, death no longer has dominion over him.

This is the single most important truth in our Christian faith. It's the one upon which everything else stands. This is the point that St. Paul has been stressing in the verses leading up to today's Epistle reading. Apparently there were some nominal Christians at the Corinthian church who were denying that the dead will be raised in their bodies. It's possible that they were saying that this life is all there is. Once you're dead it's over. There isn't anything else. Or they might have been saying that any life after this is only spiritual; that there's no physicality to it, no bodily resurrection. Both were heresies that sprang up quite early in the Church. It isn't clear which one the false teachers at Corinth were peddling. It might have been both. But it doesn't make a difference. Paul writes telling them, "Look, if the dead aren't raised, then Christ hasn't been raised either. And if that's true, pack it up. Go home. There isn't anything to Christianity. It's a false religion. And we who teach the faith have been lying to you."

This is where today's text picks up, where Paul adds to his argument, "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." He's speaking of the hardships and persecutions that he and others have suffered on account of faith – and in particular that Paul and his fellow missionaries suffered in their zeal to spread the Gospel in order to save as many people as they can. At this point, about midway through his missionary career, Paul has been stoned and left for dead, beaten with whips, imprisoned, and nearly torn in two by an angry mob. Everywhere he goes he encounters hostility, insult, and persecution. And he knows there's a lot more in store for him. His point is this: the Christian life is the call to carry a cross. But if there's nothing to it, if the faith is a joke, if this life is all there is, we are to be pitied for being such fools. Who faces such hardships and risks life and limb for what he knows to be a lie? It doesn't make any sense – unless there's another explanation, which Paul immediately turns to:

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead". Paul knows it. He's actually seen the risen Lord with his own eyes. And when he did, he was no friend and follower of Jesus. He was persecuting those who believed in him. What changed him was seeing Jesus alive after he had been crucified, dead, and buried. The disciples knew it too. And it's necessary to stress that they weren't expecting to see Jesus alive anymore than Paul was. Though Jesus had told them repeatedly that he would be crucified and rise on the third day, they didn't believe it. It didn't fit their presuppositions about the Christ and what he had come to do. So they were shocked when he was arrested. They were horrified when he was condemned and crucified. And they lost all hope in him when he was dead and buried.

The women who went to the tomb early on Easter morning weren't going there to greet the man they called Lord. They went there to finish the sloppy embalming job performed in haste the Friday before because the sun was setting and the Sabbath upon which no work could be done was about to begin. They fully anticipated dealing with his cold, bloody corpse.

But as we heard, they didn't find the body they were looking for. Instead they found the tomb open and empty. And while they stood staring at each other wondering what had happened, two angels appeared to tell them. "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." Oh, yes, now that you mention it. He did say something like that.

They rushed back to deliver the good news to the eleven disciples who heard their fantastic account and decided that they had to be making it up. Don't be silly. Dead people don't rise. No one escapes from death. Funny, later that day they were all singing a different tune. What changed their minds? Actually seeing, hearing, and handling the body of the risen Lord Jesus – the man who freed himself from the bonds of death, the man who performed the greatest escape ever.

And not just for himself. This is Paul's greater point in today's Epistle. Yes, it's a fact that Christ has been raised, but he is the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep. Anyone who's got a fruit bearing tree knows that there are a few blossoms that open earlier than the rest. Maybe because of their position on the tree, they get more of the warm afternoon sun. So they get a jump start. They pollinate earlier and their fruit ripens earlier than the main harvest. Paul calls Jesus in his resurrection the firstfruits of the final harvest. His escape from death guarantees that the rest will follow in due season. His bodily resurrection proves that we too will be raised in our bodies.

Interestingly enough, for the Jews, the firstfruits of the harvest were to be presented as an offering to the Lord. And so Jesus was. It's precisely his death for our sin that makes our new life possible—no, more than possible; it makes it certain. When Jesus escaped from death, he left the door open for everyone. That's what I'd call the greatest escape.

The playwright Eugene O'Neil was a contemporary of Harry Houdini. In 1925 he wrote a stage play entitled *Lazarus Laughed*. It's a whimsical account of what might have happened to Lazarus of Bethany in the years after his experience with death. Recall that he's the guy whom Jesus raised after he'd been dead for four days. In the play, all kinds of terrible things happen to poor Lazarus. It's something like the tribulations of Job. But no matter what happens to him, Lazarus can't stop laughing. Toward the end, to get at him, the Roman authorities poison his wife, killing her. And Lazarus laughs. Finally the Emperor Tiberius has him stand trial before him. He's beside himself in rage. "I'm going to have you executed!" he threatens. Lazarus finds this absolutely hilarious. He can't stop laughing. Even when they tie him to the stake and light the fire, he's still laughing. Why? Because he knows that in Jesus the door of death's prison is standing wide open.

And so did those 21 Coptic Christians in Libya whose heads were so brutally severed by ISIS adherents of the so-called "religion of peace" last month. They weren't laughing. It wasn't a play. Instead, they were witnessing the name of Jesus to those who were murdering them. They could have spared themselves by denying Christ and confessing their belief in Islam. But they knew how foolish that would be. They put their trust in the man who performed the greatest escape ever. They knew that in Christ death could not hold them either. And in Christ, through his love and forgiveness, they wanted their captors to know it too. May God give us all the grace and faith to be such faithful witnesses to the truth of Christ's resurrection both by our lives and by our deaths. Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"] Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!