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Archpastoral Letter for Great and Holy Pascha 2017

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Great and Holy Pascha
Sunday, April 16, 2017

Dearly Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is Risen! – Indeed He is Risen!

Today we celebrate the Feast of Feasts! Today we recall the greatest event in human history, without which St. Paul tells us, “our faith is in vain” (I Cor. 15:14). Today we rejoice in the incomparable news of the Resurrection of our Lord from His three days in the tomb: “CHRIST IS RISEN! – INDEED HE IS RISEN!”

The Scriptural accounts of the Resurrection, given us by the four evangelists, were written in the second part of the first century – between the years 50 and 100 A.D. They are the work of the same generation who had witnessed the event ... the apostles themselves and their immediate successors. They bear testimony to the faith held by the earliest Christian community at Jerusalem from the very beginning of its existence (Mark 16:6).

Like all sincere and authentic witnesses, the evangelists and St. Paul give us accounts of the Resurrection that confirm each other, yet they differ in details. Each author has a personal point of view. Each one, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wants to emphasize this or that aspect, or some particular point which impressed him the most. While their perspectives vary, three main points stand out clearly in all of the accounts.

First, **the Empty Tomb**. At dawn, the first day after the Sabbath, meaning Sunday, some of the women who followed Christ came to Jesus’ tomb, bringing perfumes to anoint His Body, as was the Jewish custom: they were Mary Magdalene, Mary the Theotokos – described by St. Luke as “the mother of James” – along with Salome, Joanna, and “the other women”. They found that the huge rock which had blocked the tomb had been rolled away, and the tomb was empty! Mary Magdalene immediately went to tell Peter and John, who came running to the tomb. John, the younger, arrived first but did not enter without Peter. Peter “went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself” (John 20:6-7). While Peter returned home very pensive, John “went in also; and he saw and believed” (John 20:8).

Second, **the Announcement of the Angels**. The holy women were to be witnesses of an event attested to by all four evangelists: the appearance of angels. These messengers from God were the first to announce the good news of the Resurrection to the myrrh-bearing women: “Do not be afraid ... You seek Jesus Who was crucified ... He is not here, for He is Risen, even as He said ... Come, see the place where He lay.” And then they instructed the women, “Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Lo, I have told you” (Matthew 28:6-7; Mark 16:6-7; and Luke 24:5-7).

Third, **the Appearances of the Risen Christ**. Our Lord appeared many times to several different people after His glorious Resurrection from the dead. The New Testament records at least 13 such times when He appeared after rising from the tomb. He appeared to: Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-17); the myrrh-bearing women (Matthew 28:9-10); St. Peter the Apostle (Luke 24:34; I Cor. 15:5); the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-32); His disciples while they were sitting at the table (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23; I Cor. 15:5); St. Thomas the Apostle (John 20:26-29); His disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1-24); more than 500 of His followers at one time (I Cor. 15:6); St. James the Apostle (I Cor. 15:7); the

Apostles at Bethany before His Ascension into Heaven (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:4-6); the Eleven Apostles on the mountain of Galilee at His Ascension (Matthew 28:17); Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle (I Cor. 16:8); and the Apostle, Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephen, while he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:55-56). From these historical facts, we see that Christ did rise bodily from the dead, that He is truly risen from the grave; that He does live forever (Hebrews 7:25; Revelation 1:7).

So great were these confirmations of the Savior's Resurrection that Melito of Sardis would write this in his Homily on Pascha in the second century: "The Lord, having put on human nature, and having suffered for those who suffered, having been bound for those who were bound, and having been buried for those who were buried, is risen from the dead, and loudly proclaims this message: '... I am your pardon. I am the Passover which brings salvation. I am the Lamb slain for you. I am your lustral bath. I am your life. I am your resurrection. I am your light, I am your salvation, I am your King. It is I Who bring you up to the heights of heaven. It is I who will give you the resurrection there. I will show you the Eternal Father. I will raise you up with My own right hand.'"

Now, after nearly two thousand years have passed since the Crucifixion and Resurrection of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, how are we affected by this event today? How does the "forgiveness of sins" for which Jesus died upon the Cross become the forgiveness of *our* sins today? How does the eternal life of the Risen One, Who will never die again, become *our* eternal life? How does Christ's victory over death deliver us from death? How does everything that the Lord Jesus did for men whom He loved so much benefit the people of our time? How can the gift of God which He brought be effectively received by us today? How can we appropriate it, make it our own ... such that *His* Resurrection becomes *our* resurrection ... so that *His* union with the Father becomes *our* reconciliation with God ... such that *His* Life becomes *our* life?

The answer is given in the Nicene Creed which we recite so often: "I believe in one baptism for the remission of sins." The Death and Resurrection of Christ are made real to us through our Baptism. It is through our Baptism that we are united to His Death, so that we may participate in His Resurrection (Romans 6, which is read at everyone's Baptism). It is in the Sacrament of Baptism that we are "planted together" with the Risen Christ; it is the Mystery of Baptism which grafts us unto Him.

Beloved, Baptism is not an act of magic. The great mystery which the Holy Spirit accomplishes in Baptism becomes part of one's consciousness only through "synergy" – literally, *working together* with God – on the part of the baptized person. In order for the baptized individual to truly attain the image of Christ, to really become a Christian, a whole lifetime in the Church is needed. During this lifetime of faith, the action of Christ and the Holy Spirit in cooperation with the baptized person can gradually penetrate into all the nooks and crannies of the Christian believer's heart and soul, body and spirit.

On this Glorious Feast of Pascha, let each one of us recommit ourselves to the Risen Savior through the renewal of the promises made at our Baptism. We need to do this, for we have all fallen short of the Christ-like life we should live every day; we have often forgotten Our Lord by neglecting to be constant in prayer, in divine services, in fasting, in almsgiving, in obedience to the commandments. We have allowed ourselves to be pulled away from Him by the world, by our schedules, by our will. Let us repeat on this Day of Resurrection and every day the words of the Sacrament that was our Personal Pascha, the beginning of our personal salvation: "I renounce Satan and all his works ... I unite myself to Christ ... I believe in Him as King and God ... I worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, one in essence and undivided."

It is my sincere hope and fervent prayer that, in return for this renewal of our personal faith in our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on this Day of His Resurrection, He Who is the God who loves us more than we love ourselves, will bless each and every one of you with all the good things that come from His hands.

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing and my sincere love,

f Michael

Archbishop of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey