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ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR GREAT AND HOLY PASCHA 2019

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Great and Holy Pascha
Sunday, April 28, 2019

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

One surprising fact about the first Pascha is this: After Jesus' Resurrection, there are at least three times when His followers do not recognize Him!

First, on the morning of Pascha, near His empty Tomb, Mary Magdalene mistakes the Risen Christ for a gardener. Later that same day, Cleopas and Luke fail to recognize the unknown traveler, journeying with them on the road to Emmaus, as the Resurrected Savior. And while they are fishing, the Apostles are visited by the Risen Lord ... but at first they simply see Him as a stranger. One might rightly wonder, how could all this be?

The Gospel of Mark offers important insight: "He appeared to them in another form ..." (Mark 16:12). We know that after our Lord's Crucifixion and death, the myrrh-bearing women went to the tomb to anoint the crucified corpse of Jesus – looking for His battered Body. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified" (Matthew 28:5). In St. Luke's account, the women were asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5).

Cleopas and Luke were still consumed with what had happened to Jesus on Great and Holy Friday. As He walked with them, He noted that they were "sad" – because they were thinking of Him as the victim of the Crucifixion, not the victor in the Resurrection. The Fathers explain: "Their eyes were obstructed, that they should not recognize Him until the breaking of the bread. And thus, in accordance with the stance of their minds, which were still ignorant of the truth (that the Christ would die and rise again), their eyes were similarly hindered. It was not that the Truth Himself was misleading them, but rather that they were themselves unable to perceive the Truth" (Augustine's "Harmony of the Gospels" 3.25.72).

Indeed Mary Magdalene and the myrrh-bearing women ... and Peter and the other Apostles ... were not focused on their faith in the One Who had told them that He would rise on the third day. Instead, they were looking for the One they loved Whose body had been buffeted and beaten, Whose back had been scourged, and Whose head had been crowned with piercing thorns ... but on Pascha the Lord Jesus no longer looked like that. He is Risen, as He had said, and His Resurrected Body is Glorified! Except for the nail prints in His hands and the spear mark in His side, which He chose to retain to show to doubters like Saint Thomas, all those other signs of His suffering and death are gone. He is able to appear amidst His friends and then disappear, enter and leave through locked doors, and eat broiled fish and a honeycomb. He is not a ghost or a spirit; He truly has a body -- one that reflects His identity but is now in the form of the glory of God.

So, how did Mary Magdalene and the Apostles first recognize Him? Based on their relationship with Him, they saw Him with the eyes of faith. The Gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene had been possessed; Jesus had cast out seven demons from her. When no one else had cared for her, Christ had treated her as a human person; He healed her of her terrible possession. So in the garden, on that first Pascha morning, when He called out to her by name, "Mary ...", she knew it was He, the One she had followed faithfully ever since He delivered her from the demons, and she called Him, "Rabboni!" -- her Teacher. Immediately she tried to embrace Him, as she had no doubt done before, but He cautioned her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father, but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17). He was now in a glorified state -- as the Risen Son of God.

Likewise, even while the Risen Lord walked and talked with Luke and Cleopas and opened the Scriptures to them, even though their "heart burned within (them)", they did not know Him. It was when He took the Bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them -- the very thing He alone had done at the Mystical Supper on Holy Thursday night ... the thing He had asked His disciples to "do ... in remembrance of Me" -- "then their eyes were opened and they knew Him, and He vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:31).

Finally, when He appeared another morning to seven of His Apostles at the Sea of Tiberias, and they did not recognize Him ... He repeated the miracle of the haul of fish ... asking them if they had caught anything (they had not), instructing them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, and filling their net so full they could not lift it (John 21:6). This was a repetition of the miracle that had happened years before -- the miracle by which the Apostles became the "fishers of men" -- a miracle that established the special relationship between the Lord and His Apostles that would last forever. And that morning it would be John, the beloved disciple who stood beneath the Cross with the Theotokos and the other women, and who would write the fourth Gospel, who would be the one to proclaim, "It is the Lord!"

These lessons for us are telling. From the beginning, the Resurrection does not appear as a dazzling visual event, but a truth announced by word that one must accept and believe. One can just as easily reject or deny it ... as many have before and as many continue to do even today. For as it was with Adam after his creation, so too concerning the Lord's Resurrection, our free will is respected by the God Who loves us. The Risen One does not force Himself into our hearts; rather, He appeals to our faith.

Mary Magdalene eventually recognized the Lord -- in a deeply personal way -- through her identity, given by Him. It was a much deeper level than mere physical recognition. He had returned from death, from another world. He no longer belonged to the world in which one grows old and dies. He was already again part of the eternal world from which He came. He returned into this world in such a way that only those who love and believe in Him could recognize Him -- through a personal relationship full of faith and love. Even though they did not at first believe her, Mary would go and proclaim that "He is Risen" to the Apostles; and even though he never believed her, Mary Magdalene would go all the way to Rome and proclaim to the Emperor Tiberius himself that "Christ is Risen!"

The Apostles on the road to Emmaus recognized Him in the Breaking of the Bread. This is faith! They no longer had to see Him physically, for in fact He had disappeared from their sight after offering the Eucharist to them. But they were left with the Body of the Resurrected One in their hands, just as we are when we receive Holy Communion. How do we know that the bread and wine are actually the Body and Blood of the Risen One? Because He said, "This is My Body ... This is My Blood ...".

To believe Him is to have faith, and the Holy Spirit confirms the Word and changes the bread into the Body of Christ. True faith is ... faith in the creation of the world "ex nihilo," faith in Jesus' birth of the Virgin, faith in the Resurrection of our Savior from the dead, and faith in the transformation of the bread into the Body of Christ in Holy Communion. The fact is that the two disciples believed: They recognized the Risen Christ when they received the transfigured Bread ... and they went back to Jerusalem to announce that Jesus is truly risen.

The first miraculous catch of fish three years before became the turning point in the lives of four fishermen; on that day, they left everything to follow Jesus. By calling to mind that first catch, which bound them to the Lord for life, the miraculous catch after the Resurrection re-established the personal link with Him and allowed them to recognize Him: "It is the Lord!" When the Holy Spirit came and confirmed that faith, as Christ promised He would, those men who had been cowards, hiding behind locked doors out of fear for their safety, would be transformed into bold and brave witnesses, knocking on doors, unafraid of being rejected and imprisoned and even martyred. They would be Christ's witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

My beloved, my prayer for you is that you have such a relationship with Christ, that enables you to see the Risen Lord with the eyes of faith, follow His teachings and live a Christ-like life, and share your faith and joy in the Resurrection with your family, friends, neighbors and even strangers, all of whom need the blessings and the salvation that He offers. The Church that He established is here to help you in this life-long commitment to Him -- through prayer and fasting, in the divine services and the sacred Scriptures, in the Holy Mysteries, especially the Holy Eucharist, and by the acts of mercy and kindness to others which He asks us to do in His name.

May this Pascha be a renewal of your relationship with the Risen Savior, the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves, Who proves His love for us by His Sacrifice on the Cross for us and our salvation ("Greater love than this has no one, that He lay down His life for His friends ..."). May it be an opportunity for you to witness and share your faith and joy in the Resurrected Lord. And may it be another occasion for you and your loved ones to receive the bountiful blessings from the hands of the crucified Savior Who is resurrected from the dead. *Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!*

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael".

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