

Easter I Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are all born losers! Yes that's right, born losers. You may be familiar with the amusing comic strip by the same name. We chuckle because we recognize something of the same unexpected disasters in our own lives. But there is a more serious side to being born a loser, for we all do, and shall, lose battles against sin and sickness and death. We struggle, sometimes valiantly, but in the end every one of us, despite an innate will to live, shall die. We are born losers, and we die losers. And we feel this.

The story of our fall records this common human defeat, which has first this moral dimension and then a consequent mortal dimension. We are born then into this humanity and world, losers to sin and death.

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But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can be winners, that he himself has won the victory over sin and death, once and for all, and we may receive a share in his victory, first of all a moral share and secondly a mortal share. We may be born losers, but we are born-again winners. This victory is ours in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Quite simply, that is the Easter proclamation of this day. We proclaim that Jesus has overcome sin, by his sinless bearing of our sins on the cross, and has overcome death by his immortal bearing of our death and rising again, and so we proclaim the forgiveness of sins and gift of eternal life in the name of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord.

In 1st Corinthians, Paul quotes the prophets, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our

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Lord Jesus Christ.” The victory of Jesus Christ is the victory of light over darkness, of love over hatred, of forgiveness over sin, and of life over death. That victory he won by his sinless self-sacrifice in love for us, and by his glorious resurrection. That victory, Paul says, God gives to us. So in this morning’s Epistle, St. John tells us how that victory becomes ours, by faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

John speaks of three witnesses to Jesus who died and rose again for us: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. We think, of course, of how there issued both water and blood from Jesus’ pierced side on the cross. This water of washing, and this blood of atoning, are, as we sing in the hymn *Rock of Ages*, sin’s double cure. There is also the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit to Jesus, our God and Saviour. These agree in proclaiming, “that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life.”

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This threefold witness of the Spirit, the water and the blood, to Jesus who died, who gave up his spirit, as water and blood flowed from his pierced side, and who rose again, is reflected in the sacramental witness of the Church. For we have a sacrament of water, the washing of Baptism. We have a sacrament of blood, the Communion of Christ's atoning sacrifice. We have a sacrament of the Spirit, the laying on of hands with prayer, for the gift of the Spirit on believers in Confirmation. These three agree in their witness to Jesus the Son of God, who died and rose again for us, and we receive this witness, we accept and trust it by faith.

St. John refers to this faith not only as a means to victory, but as a victory itself. Losers despair, losers wallow in bitter cynicism, but winners believe, and that faith is a victory over every kind of worldly darkness and despair. Jesus said, "in the world you will have troubles, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." This, then, is the victory which overcomes the world: our faith. Who

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is it that overcomes the world, but he who believes Jesus is the Son of God? Winners who believe will not be, and cannot be, held down by the world. The world could not defeat him, the grave could not hold him, and we have that same victory by faith in Jesus the Son of God.

Our last enemy is death, and our final victory shall be eternal life, the eternal life that God gives us in his Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour. The message of that Epistle is victory by faith in Jesus the Son of God, victory even over death.

The parallel message, then, of that holy Gospel, that holy good news, is peace by faith in Christ crucified. The victory is eternal life, which we know and receive in Jesus the son of God. The peace is the forgiveness of sins, which we know in him who died and rose again for us. In that gospel, the disciples are hiding away in fear, just like Adam after he had failed. On one level, they fear that they might suffer the same fate as Jesus, but their fear stems from guilt.

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Jesus invades their dark, guilty hide-out, and they must have been even more fearful, facing the one they had denied and deserted. But he will send them out with courage. They move from hiding in fear, to stepping out in courage, by the knowledge and assurance of the forgiveness of their sins, which they are commissioned to share and proclaim. Jesus speaks peace to them and shows them their peace, which is himself given on the cross for them. We have this peace through faith in Jesus Christ, who died for us and is alive for evermore. So the proclamation of Easter is this: the forgiveness of sins.

The simple message of these readings is the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life through Jesus Christ the son of God, who died and rose again for us. Sin did not defeat him, death did not hold him. And sin will not defeat us, and death will not hold us, who put our faith in Jesus. The Easter message has to do with this twin victory over sin and death. There is a moral defeat and a mortal defeat,

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which all humanity has suffered. But Jesus Christ has won for us all a moral victory on the cross, and a consequent mortal victory in rising from the grave. We have peace in the forgiveness of sins, and we have victory in eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

You are not a loser. It is the world and the devil that would hold you down and oppress you so. Rather, there is this twin victory which is ours in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In that double V, we are all winners. We have been granted a share in his victory and in his mission to extend that victory.

Here today we claim the prize, not of our earning but of his deserving. Here by faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God who died for us, and who rose again for us, we claim victory moral and mortal over sin, over guilt, over sickness and division, over loneliness and despair, over darkness and hatred, and even over death itself. We have known defeat and loss. We gather today to claim and proclaim his victory. That victory is his, but it is also ours, by faith. So

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