

4.9.2023 Easter Day (Colossians 3:1-4)

“Burn the ships.” This is a saying that reportedly dates back to 334 B.C., when Alexander the Great arrived on the shores of Persia and gave the order to destroy the ships that had safely carried his men on this journey. Historians tell us that Alexander’s forces were greatly outnumbered, and by burning his ships, he set an irreversible course for these men, for retreat was now impossible. Centuries later, in the year 1519, Hernan Cortes and his men arrived in Veracruz, and facing a similar situation, against what appeared to be insurmountable odds, he ordered his fleet to be destroyed for the same reason - to make retreat impossible.

Whenever we’re facing a difficult challenge, retreat can be a tempting option. Alexander the Great was aware of that fact. Cortes knew it as well, and so they gave the order to destroy the ships that had safely carried them on this difficult journey, and to this new battle. Burning the ships marked a point of no return. The only direction they could go was forward. Retreat was impossible.

On Ash Wednesday, we set out on our own difficult journey, a 40-day journey through the season of Lent in which we walked with our Savior on the road to Calvary. This journey has brought us to the joy, and the challenge, of Easter Day - the unspeakable joy of rising to new, resurrected life in Christ, and the difficult challenge of never retreating, never “*looking back*” (Luke 9:62) to the old life we left behind. As we reflect on how far we’ve come, and consider the challenge we face, the question I’d ask you to think about carefully is this: Have you burned your ships? When your difficult Lenten journey ended with the Son of God, on the Cross, declaring His infinite love for you, did you come to a point of no return? Is retreat now impossible, or have the subtle whispers of our enemy convinced you to leave a ship docked safely in the harbor, so that you might climb aboard from time to time and sail back to some aspect of your former life.

Is there a ship waiting for you? This is an important question to ask ourselves, especially when we consider the many biblical examples of those who chose not to burn their ships, those who in thought, word, or deed chose to retreat, to sail back to their former way of life rather than boldly and

faithfully moving forward. As an example we might think of the Israelites and their exodus from slavery in Egypt. As you know, God set His people free, He gave them a new life through a series of miracles and plagues that culminated with the parting of the Red Sea. Their journey through the sea, on dry ground, brought them to the joy of freedom, and to the challenge of pressing on to the Promised Land, but sadly, the Israelites didn't "burn their ships," and after only three days of walking in the wilderness they wanted to return to Egypt.

The people of Israel had seen the God of Heaven and Earth stretch out His mighty hand to deliver them from oppression and slavery. They had experienced what can only be described as a super-natural and extra-ordinary manifestation of His Omnipotent power and Divine love. They'd been given new life, and yet, after just a few days of hardship they began to think of retreat as not only an option, but as a far more desirable option than boldly pressing on to the Promised Land. They wanted to sail back to the old, natural, ordinary life of captivity and slavery that they'd been living, and this desire to retreat, to turn away from God and to return to the usual, the oppressive, and the ordinary, led to an entire generation dying in the wilderness. Those whose hearts sailed back to Egypt, never made it to the Promised Land.

So we see that even when God clearly and miraculously brings us to the journey, retreat is often a tempting option. "*Many are called*" (Matthew 22:14), and many have chosen to sail back to their former life, but Scripture also provides us with examples of people who chose to make retreat impossible by burning the ships that could carry them away from the challenge of the upward call of God. Think of Job, who faithfully endured through the unimaginably painful events of his life, a man who spoke the truth about God, and his commitment to the Almighty when he declared, "*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him*" (Job 13:15). Consider the Blessed Virgin Mary, though a sword would pierce her soul (Luke 2:35), she obediently responded to God's plan and purpose for her life by saying, "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word*" (Luke 1:38). Remember the perfect example of our Lord, who suffered in agony beyond anything we can even begin to imagine, whose "*sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood,*" yet still He prayed in the Garden, "*Not*

My will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42-44).

When God brings us to the journey, to the challenge of rising to new, resurrected life in Christ, He invites us to burn the ships of disobedience that would carry us back to our old life, and in the Epistle for this Easter Day, St. Paul’s inspired words encourage us to move deliberately and faithfully in the same direction. In the context of this sermon, you might say these words express God’s desire for us to view those ships of disobedience as already destroyed, already *dead*. Paul writes, *“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory”* (Colossians 3:1-4).

You are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God, or in other words, when our Savior died on the Cross, you died with Him. You were *“crucified with Christ”* (Galatians 2:20). When His Body was laid in the tomb, Scripture describes the Christian as *“buried with Him,”* and when He rose in victory, you were *“raised to new life”* (Colossians 2:12). Therefore, St. Paul declares, since you have been *crucified, buried, and raised to new life* with Christ, live and act like resurrected people, be Easter Christians who have burned their ships, who have cut off every means of retreat, and have set an irreversible course for the kingdom of God by seeking only *“those things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”*

Our difficult journey through Lent has brought us to the joy, and the challenge, of Easter Day - the unspeakable joy of rising to new, resurrected life in Christ, and the difficult challenge of burying what is dead, burying the old life completely. We must remember that the message of Easter is not only one of new life in union with God, but also one of death. The death of all that once separated us from Him. Sin and death are dead, and Scripture encourages us to bury what is dead by giving our selves, our souls and bodies completely to Christ. We bury what is dead by burning the ships of disobedience that would carry us back to the life we left behind.

Whenever we’re facing a difficult challenge, retreat can be a tempting option. Alexander the Great was aware of that fact, Cortes knew it as well, and so

they ordered the destruction of their ships to eliminate that option. In doing so, they committed themselves entirely, they risked everything, and from an eternal perspective, gained nothing. Alexander the Great, by conquering others, created an empire that stretched across three continents and covered about two million square miles, but none of that belongs to him now, and Cortes lost his fortune years before his death. These men gave everything, and gained nothing.

God calls us to *set our affection on things above, not on things on the earth*, to the end that we may avoid such a costly error. We burn our ships, not as some sort of bold plan to gain the world, but to gain Christ. We burn our ships as an act of humble obedience, a loving response to all that Christ gained for us on the Cross, in the tomb, and when He rose from the dead on Easter Day. *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*, and you are risen with Him!