



The bottom panel of the altarpiece in St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg (Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1547).

Easter and the Reformation Faith

by Kurt Lantz

Easter is a good time to celebrate the Reformation. Martin Luther at least would not want us to forget about the reformation Gospel on this great festival. In an Easter Sermon, preached at the parish church on April 13, 1533, the good doctor confided, “It is my greatest concern to sustain your interest in this article so that when I’m dead and gone, I might have left you with this treasure. For it is very evident that when those of us who are now preaching are dead, factious spirits and fanatics will arise to destroy, spoil, tear down, and break up what we have built.” What “article” is he referring to? The Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ who ... rose again from the dead...”

Even before Luther died, “factious spirits and fanatics” had arisen, denying the one death and resurrection that makes all the difference. Luther identified them as those who “preach about Christ as just another prophet and allude to him as a visionary.” We also can identify such factious spirits

and fanatics in our day. They include not only those who deny that Jesus is the Son of God and that He rose from the dead, but also those who choose not to preach on this article of faith, preferring to focus instead on philosophies drawn from the teachings and example of Jesus, and expounded independently of His death and resurrection for sinners.

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Reflecting upon his time under the papacy, Luther knew that the Gospel was present in the liturgy he had learned since childhood. But he also knew our thoughts were too often directed to matters of personal virtue and not to Christ. Knowing that our sinful nature always

wants to keep the focus on ourselves, Luther realized that even Lutheran preachers would grow lazy and fail to give the article of Jesus’ death and resurrection for our justification its due attention. We must confess that here, too, the good doctor hit the nail on the head.

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Lutheran reformers used their God-given abilities not only to preach and proclaim this gift, but also to safeguard it for future generations, including our own. This is done especially well in the catechisms, with their explanations of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. All serve to lead us to Jesus Christ crucified and risen in order to justify us by His holy body and blood given to penitent sinners.

We need the catechisms, the hymns, the liturgy, the visual arts, and the call words of the Reformation to keep us focused forever on Christ alone. We need faithful preachers to continue to place the emphasis on that article of Jesus crucified and risen for the justification of sinners. We need hymn writers to continue that tradition of leading the Church in singing the confession. We need artists of all kinds whose primary concern is to keep our focus on Jesus. We need to echo the call words of the Reformation and continue to proclaim *Christ Alone, Christ Forever*.

We need the Reformation Gospel at all times because the most dangerous factious spirits and fanatics are those that arise from within ourselves. I don't only mean those that might arise from within Lutheran Church-Canada, or from within one of its congregations or seminaries, but those that arise from within my own person. As surely as I see them arise within myself, so too they can easily arise within the structures of this church body composed of members like me.

The factious spirits within point us not to Christ but to what gives pleasure in this life. The evidence of joy, wealth, and fame are where we are tempted to look to see whether God smiles upon us. When these are lacking, where there is sadness, poverty, and isolation, we conclude that God has abandoned us. These deceitful spirits would lead us away from Jesus when His bloody cross and empty tomb need to be our point of focus. And there is no status of fame or wealth there. There is no prescribed state of emotion. The witnesses to the resurrection felt both fear and great joy. The only sure testimony is Jesus risen and coming to His own. If we look to personal pleasure as more important than Christ, then we have left the Gospel.

The fanatic within us also points us to look at the good things we accomplish rather than to look at what Christ has done. If we find the proof of our justification in the satisfaction of a job well done, we are being misdirected. For

our salvation is not something we force in from the outside—the good we have done pressing righteousness into our hearts. Rather, it flows the other way. Christ's righteousness, freely given and received by faith, exudes outwards from the heart. It is not apprehended by focusing on either hand or heart, but on Christ crucified and risen for you.

When it comes to our salvation everything that has to do with us must be buried in the tomb from whence Christ alone arises. Our works and our piety cannot give life to themselves, neither can they be the source of our life in Christ. Jesus alone, Son of God and Son of Man, crucified for our sin and raised for our justification, is our only source of comfort and hope. When we are attacked by the factious spirits and fanatics within ourselves—when we are stuck in sin, temptation, and condemnation—Jesus is still risen. And He is risen *for us*.

Crucified for our sins and risen triumphant from the dead, He calls us brothers and comes to gladden us with His presence. This Gospel cannot be surrendered to the factious spirits and fanatics within or without.

When God is angry with us for overlooking the death and resurrection of His Son, should we bring forth our own efforts before Him looking for pardon, or flee to His grace and mercy in Jesus? Christ alone conquered sin, serpent, death, and hell. He is the sure and only Saviour. He is the one hope and salvation of sinners. He rose from the dead and directed: "Go, tell My brothers." If He called them "brothers" who denied Him and ran away in His hour

of need, then we who have denied Him and turned away to focus on ourselves may hear Him say the same to us. Crucified for our sins and risen triumphant from the dead, He calls us brothers and comes to gladden us with His presence. This Gospel cannot be surrendered to the factious spirits and fanatics within or without.

To fight off these factious spirits and fanatics, Luther prescribes, even in the Easter Season, that "a Christian ought to acquire the custom of praying the Lord's Prayer, firmly crossing himself and saying in thought: Keep me, dear Lord, from the sin against the Holy Ghost, that I may not fall from faith and thy Word, and may not become a Turk, a Jew, or a monk and a papal saint, who believe and live contrary to this brotherhood; but that I may hold fast to a little fringe of the garment of this brotherhood."

God give us this Reformation faith this Easter and always.

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