

Letter to a prisoner.

Paschal letter. What did the Incarnation Accomplish,
Concerning Holy Saturday, The Descent into Hades, “all is well”.

The Bright and Saving day of Pascha, April 6/19, 2020

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From: Priest Seraphim Holland, PO 37, McKinney TX 75070

Dear brothers and sisters: I greet you in this bright and holy day of Pascha. You are always very close to my heart, and I pray for you every day and think of you often. You will be able to see this when you see the sermon I am including in this letter, below which I preached on Holy Saturday before the tomb. I didn't intend to, but I talked about your life some. I also talked about how with the resurrection, all is well, even when our external circumstances are not well. I hope you will agree with me.

Let me explain a few things to you. One of the problems with prison ministry, is that it is very hard to expose you to the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. I have two hours at most with you, and often times some of that time is taken up by the chaplain coming in and by people arriving late because of problems getting out, etc. And we might be in a room where somebody else is playing a bass and drums, or watching a movie or whatever. One of my favorites is when it's very hot outside and they run the fans which basically just push hot air around, and make it almost impossible to hear. In the midst of all these things, I try to persevere and give you some experience of the Orthodox Church. I always feel like I have not given you enough, but something is better than nothing. I've told many of you that I think the Christian life should be described by this aphorism: "90% of life is just showing up". Don't ever forget that most of our "showing up" is when we pray before God for those we love. You make sure to be praying for those you love.

The word Pascha is the Greek for "Passover". The Scripture says that Christ is our Passover. He is our Passover from death to life. The reason why the Son of God, God before the ages, the One Who participated with the Father and the Spirit in creating the world, and thereby created everything that is created, chose to become "created", in that He chose to become a man, while remaining God. His purpose was to redeem us, to make us capable of conquering death and sin, and having pure union with Him. This is a task that only God could do, therefore God became man, and lived a perfect life as a man, and taught us how to live this perfect life and made us capable of living this perfect life through baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and all of the grace that God gives us through the church.

Because of the infection of false theology regarding the incarnation, and what Christ did subsequent to His incarnation, I want to remind you that Christ did not become man merely to take the punishment of sin upon

himself, to appease his Father. That is a novel doctrine, now over 500 years old, but still foreign to true Christian understanding. God became man to raise man up. He didn't become man merely to be punished so that man would not be punished.

Therefore, the feast of Pascha is the most triumphant of all days. We teach from experience, from the inner knowledge of the Holy Spirit enlightening the church, that after His death, while His body lay in the tomb, Christ, with all the fullness of His divinity and His human soul went down to the tenements of Hades and broke the bars of sin and death. He was crucified as a king deprived of His kingdom, but this was only an appearance. When He went down to Hades He went down with the full majesty of the Divinity, along with His fully perfected human soul, and paved the way for us to be truly alive. At His resurrection, His human soul reunited with his dead, but not corrupt human body, and invigorated and resurrected it from the dead. His body was so perfect that He could pass through the doors of the upper room, and go anywhere he wished at any time He wished. From that time till this day and through eternity, the second person of the Trinity remains fully God and fully man, and perfect in every way. He is the Alpha and the Omega, and the model for us to strive for, so that we may become truly human. No person is completely human until they have complete union with Jesus Christ, the perfect human.

I've tried to write to many of you personal letters, and I am continuing this task. Please continue to write to me, showing faith that I will eventually reply to all of you. During this pandemic, I've been busier than any other time. There been many things that I've had to do, and at the end of the day I never feel like I have done enough, so I at least wanted to send you all of you this personal letter although general, for all of you. In God's time, I will be able to start coming back to the prisons. Several of you are under lockdown now. My heart is with you, although my flesh remains far away. There is so much that I want to tell you, but I also want to get something in the mail to you via J pay so that you have some chance of getting it by let's say, Tuesday. My intention was to do it earlier in this week so that you would get it before Pascha, but the tasks piled up, and there are times when I was quite tired. Truly, the spirit is very willing, but the flesh is often weak. I will now include a few things for your edification and reading. The first is a sermon that I mentioned that I preached before the tomb.

I will explain this custom first. My favorite liturgy of the entire year is the Holy Saturday liturgy, which is according to custom served late in the morning on Holy Saturday. It is a liturgy that is served as part of Vespers, and there are 15 Old Testament readings before we get into the actual part of liturgy where we read the epistle and the gospel. These readings are all about some aspect of the resurrection. We believe that on Holy Saturday the Lord went down to Hades, as I described above. Although the tomb was closed and appeared to be filled with a dead man, this was only partially true. Our Lord's body lay dead, but His soul was very much alive and with His divinity as He went out to Hades. His body also was incorrupt. On Holy Saturday, we conduct much of the service in front of the tomb, with a beautiful icon of Christ before us, showing Him in repose after He has been taken down from the cross. The tomb is basically a piece of furniture which is built so that the "epitaphios", or the winding sheet can be put on it. I realize that I need to get pictures of all these things because just describing them doesn't do them justice.

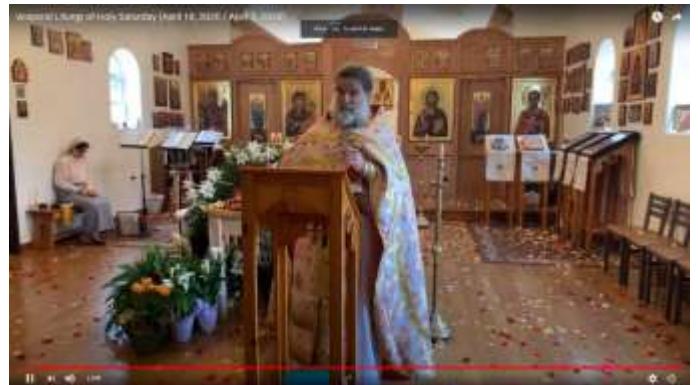
The gospel that is read in the liturgy this day is from St. Matthew, the first account of the resurrection. After we read this Gospel selection (Matthew 28:1-20), it is customary to preach a sermon before the tomb. I was very moved by the story about the Shunamite woman (4 Kings 4:8-37) and the resurrection of her son, and pretty much on the spur of the moment decided to preach on this scripture. I like things very much in the Scripture to talk about

the resurrection but also with realism, recognizing that we, although we have the kingdom of heaven within us, still toil in a world that is in large part overcome by sin and death, and even we are still subject to dark passions. The resurrection is occurring in us, and even has occurred, we have not realized its full potential. The sermon is below, and after that some of the text that I referred to. May God bless you and help you in all things! Pray for me!

Holy Saturday. The Shunamite Woman. All is well.

4 Kings4:8-37

Synopsis: Homily before the tomb after reading of the Gospel which proclaimed the resurrection on Holy Saturday. All is well. These were the words of the Shunamite woman AFTER she had lost her son. We all have problems, sadness, regret, but if we are Christians who live according to the resurrection, all is well. 2020-04-18



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In the name the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. I sing "Christ is risen" and the whole sequence that opens the service tonight and that we do during Bright week; I sing that to my grandsons all the time. Recently Monster was being put to bed, and they have the sequence they go through with him. And then he said "sing Popa song". "Popa song" is "Christ is risen" and "Let God Arise" and everything. I sing in this peculiar Appalachian dialect. It's sort of a mixture of what it really is and what I've made it to be. My grandsons love it and the reason I am telling you this is because the resurrection is always with us, even when there are difficulties in our life.

If you'll indulge me for a minute, I wanted to talk about one of the parables. It always hits me very hard, and even harder, to be honest with you, as every year that goes by. There are many difficulties as a priest, and I encountered, not quite 3 years ago now, a great difficulty when my son died suddenly. There is sadness in all of our lives. Some of us have greater or lesser troubles; some of us cope with them better than most, or not so good. We all have these difficulties in our lives, but in the end, "all is well", because the Lord is risen and because He abides in us and we are getting perfected.

Of course, the steps that we're taking to perfection -every single one of them - is an imperfect step. And sometimes it's a very difficult step and a very hard time. This is a hard time of life for a lot of people, both Orthodox and not, believers and unbelievers; some people are really struggling with what's happening in the world today. There are worries about what's happening now, what will happen later: "what about my job, what about my

business, what about my older grandmother, will she get sick, I'm missing the Mysteries". There's so much that's happening, so much difficulty.

And to me all of these things are encapsulated in this reading from the Fourth book of Kings about the Shunamite woman. She had a son, who was promised to her by Elisha. She didn't believe him. She was old, and she didn't believe that she would have a son. So, she said: "don't play tricks with me." But it came to be true; in the season that was promised, she bore a son. The son lived, I think, about 10 years, and he and his father were working in the field, and he got a headache. He probably had a cerebral hemorrhage, and he died in his mother's lap. His mother had said 10 years before "Don't fool with me, don't tell me something that you're not going to do. Don't do that". But then the son was born and she loved the son more than air, and then he dies!

She reacts very peculiarly. She wants to go to the Elisha, and it's not the right time of the month. There is a certain time when he she would go see him, and it was not a new moon, it was not a Sabbath and her husband asks why she is going, but she won't say anything, except that she says: "all is well".

All was not well! It wasn't well at all. She had a dead son in the upper room of our house. She was hurrying to see Elisha. And of course, he's aware that something's wrong but he doesn't know what it is. Nobody in the world knows what's wrong, only God. Even those closest to you cannot really know what's wrong; they can't even figure themselves out, so they certainly can't figure you out. There are all these troubles in the world, and you have troubles and your loved ones have troubles - but all is well.

As Christians believe that. We don't pretend that everything that we go through in life is good and wonderful: we don't pretend that at all. We're not playing mind games with ourselves, but truly all is well. This woman had great faith that her boy was going to be resurrected. She didn't exactly completely comport herself like she believed that, but I tell you, she did. She was working through human grief and doubt, but she believed because that's why she had the servant saddle the ass, and she went to see Elisha. He had Gehazi go ahead, with his staff, which symbolized the cross. But he needed to be touched, this boy needed to be touched not just by Gehazi, and not just by the wood of the cross, but by Jesus Christ Himself. And that's who Elisha is in this instance, as a type.

He went to the boy to the boy and put his eyes on his eyes, and his nose on his nose, and his lips on his lips, and his hands on his hands. I envision that he's making a cross when he's doing that. After 7 times the boy comes alive. It was well now, but it had been well before because the mother had said "all is well".

Is all well with you? I hope it is. I hope that you live as a Christian. And I hope that despite sadness and difficulties in life, that you always believe that all is well. Because it is - not from wishful thinking, but you are growing to become perfected, so all is well.

Whatever you go through to become perfected, you won't remember the pain, or at least not in a painful way. I talk to my people in prison about this all the time. Prison is a diabolical, terrible place. I am not saying that people shouldn't be put in prison, although I know some people that I don't think should be. In general, there's a need for prison because of the misbehavior of men, and how humans can act beastly, and they need to be shut off from society, either to repent and reform, or to be safely away and sequestered from society.

Prison is a hard place. It's a hard place because of the isolation and the time, and the reminders time and time again that in the prison, the prisoner is really not a worthwhile human being. They don't even call them by any name other than "offender". There's a lot of pain for these men and women. I'm not saying they have not caused pain. I am not pretending that they have not done bad things, but even for those who have repented, there is still pain: their dad died when they were in prison, and their sister and brother don't talk to them anymore, and they did a terrible crime but they're not able to make amends for it. There is a way to do that in the prison but if the people don't want to talk to a prisoner, he can't talk to them; that's probably a felony. They're living with this isolation and pain. Some of them are getting very much older, many of them are going to die in prison.

I tell them something that I completely believe, completely with every pore of my being. If I didn't believe it, then I wouldn't be a Christian. In the next life there will be no sickness or sorrow or sighing; there will only be life, there will not be sadness. If we remember what happened in the previous life, all the pain that we went through, whatever it is, we won't remember it with pain. How can that be? I don't understand. I really don't, but I know it's true.

The resurrection allows that, the resurrection causes that, because the resurrection becomes imbued into us. We become resurrected, and we become all light, no darkness. That's what we're celebrating today.

This Shunamite woman who lost a son and felt all of the grief that a human being would normally feel because of the loss of a son, could still say that "all was well". Now one could argue if you want to that she was just trying to get people not to talk to her because she didn't want to talk to people in her grief. I know exactly how that is. When I was full of grief about +Daniel, I didn't want anybody to bother me. I wanted to do the things that I wanted to do: I wanted to pray, I wanted to come to the services. I didn't want people to come up and express things to me. It was a very difficult thing for me to have people talk to me. I know how that is, but that's not why she did it. She did it because it was well because she believed, even though her emotions didn't believe. She didn't exactly greet Elisha in the most proper way. She basically upbraided him, but that was her emotions, and he knew it. But it was well with her because she knew that her son would live. This I believe this with all my heart.

This is a perfect story, to be read among the 15 that we read in this Vesperal Liturgy, because it's very realistic story. The resurrection is beautiful and holy and it leads to perfection. But we're not perfect now, and we're not beautiful now, and we are not holy now, but we're going to be. That's what makes me very happy. We are going to be holy. in the midst of all this we are going to be holy, so all is well. If we lived in this way, that all is well, even though we go through difficulties, then we will have joy in our heart. Nobody can take that joy from you, no matter what happens, whether you are free or not free (in a worldly sense). Nobody can take that joy from you, if all is well in your heart. That is what we are celebrating today. No matter what your troubles are, believe, and live as if you believe that all is well, because it is, because of the resurrection. God bless you and help you. Amen.

Reading from the Fourth Book of Kings

(IV Kings 4:8-37)

A day came, when Elisha passed over to Shunem, and there was a great lady there, and she constrained him to eat bread: and it came to pass as often as he went into the city, that he turned aside to eat there. And the woman said

to her husband, ‘See now, I know that this is a holy man of God who comes over continually to us. Let us now make for him an upper chamber, a small place; and let us put there for him a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall come to pass that when he comes in to us, he shall turn in thither.’ And a day came, and he went in thither, and turned aside into the upper chamber, and lay there. And he said to Gehazi his servant, ‘Call me this Shunamite.’ and he called her, and she stood before him. And he said to him, ‘Say now to her, ‘Behold, thou hast taken all this trouble for us; what should I do for thee? Hast thou any request to make to the king, or to the captain of the host?’’ And she said, ‘I dwell in the midst of my people.’ And he said to Gehazi, ‘What must we do for her?’ and Gehazi his servant said, ‘Indeed she has no son, and her husband is old.’ And he called her, and she stood by the door. And Elisha said to her, ‘At this time next year, as the season is, thou shalt be alive, and embrace a son.’ And she said, ‘Nay, my lord, do not lie to thy servant.’ And the woman conceived, and bore a son at the very time, as the season was, being alive, as Elisha said to her. And the child grew: and it came to pass when he went out to his father to the reapers, that he said to his father, ‘My head, my head.’ and his father said to a servant, ‘Carry him to his mother.’ And he carried him to his mother, and he lay upon her knees till noon, and died. And she carried him up and laid him on the bed of the man of God; and she shut the door upon him, and went out. And she called her husband, and said, ‘Send now for me one of the young men, and one of the asses, and I will ride quickly to the man of God, and return.’ And he said, ‘Why art thou going to him today? It is neither new moon, nor the Sabbath.’ And she said, ‘It is well.’ And she saddled the ass, and said to her servant, ‘Be quick, proceed: spare not on my account to ride, unless I shall tell thee. Go, and thou shalt proceed, and come to the man of God to Mount Carmel.’ And she rode and came to the man of God to the mountain: and it came to pass when Elisha saw her coming, that he said to Gehazi his servant, ‘See now, that Shunamite comes. Now run to meet her, and thou shalt say, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child?’ and she said, ‘It is well.’ And she came to Elisha to the mountain, and laid hold of his feet; and Gehazi drew near to thrust her away. And Elisha said, ‘Let her alone, for her soul is much grieved in her, and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told it me.’ And she said, ‘Did I ask a son of my lord? For did I not say, ‘Do not deal deceitfully with me?’’ And Elisha said to Gehazi, ‘Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thy hand, and go: if thou meet any man, thou shalt not salute him, and if a man salute thee thou shalt not answer him: and thou shalt lay my staff on the child's face.’ And the mother of the child said, ‘As the Lord lives and as thy soul lives, I will not leave thee.’ And Elisha arose, and went after her. And Gehazi went on before her, and laid his staff on the child's face: but there was neither voice nor any hearing. So, he returned to meet him, and told him, saying, ‘The child is not awaked.’ And Elisha went into the house, and, behold, the dead child was laid upon his bed. And Elisha went into the house, and shut the door upon themselves, the two, and prayed to the Lord. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and bowed himself upon him, and the flesh of the child grew warm. And he returned and walked up and down in the house: and he went up, and bowed himself on the child seven times; and the child opened his eyes. And Elisha cried out to Gehazi, and said, ‘Call this Shunamite.’ So, he called her, and she came in to him: and Elisha said, ‘Take thy son.’ And the woman went in, and fell at his feet, and did obeisance bowing to the ground; and she took her son, and went out.

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