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Easter Day
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Destroying Death

I just skimmed over the front page headlines in the Washington Post: “Lethal Chemical Attack in Syria;” and then, just 5 days later, last Monday, “Two Egyptian Churches Bombed”—on Palm Sunday. I didn’t really want to read the details of the stories. So I waited until Good Friday, the day we observe the killing of Jesus, a day we might say is, in part, about a horrible political system that also condoned killing as a way to rule, another day where we see the power of death.

The articles were filled with details that seem beyond our 21st century experience, at least here in the U.S.

“Airstrikes...began just after day break, delivering an unidentified chemical agent that killed at least 58 people, scores of them women and children, and filled clinics across the area with patients foaming at the mouth or struggling to breathe...video footage showed lifeless bodies...the youngest were wearing diapers....”

And then, from Egypt,

“...at least 44 people died and more than 100 were injured in the two attacks, the deadliest single day to strike Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority in decades....”

Many of us don’t need to study world events to know the power of death. It strikes close to home. The cancer diagnosis. The tragic fatal accident or horrible deadly illness. It’s hard enough to lose those we love who die of “natural causes” or “sickness” after 80 years of life. Even losing a beloved pet can be traumatic. Human beings have known the power of death since there have been human beings.

The Romans hoped to make an example of Jesus by publicly torturing and crucifying him. The Jewish leaders thought that eliminating Jesus for his alleged blasphemy would help their fragile balance with the Roman authorities. Both the Romans and the Jews wanted to use the power of death to control others. Caiaphas, the High Priest, told his Council it was “expedient” for Jesus to be executed. (John 11:50)

Today we celebrate the victory over death—in every way death comes at us. We believe Jesus’ resurrection destroys death. It doesn’t end death. We’ll all die, death is a part of life. Easter takes death’s power away. Easter says to all who would try to use death, “No...it won’t work...” The Risen Christ is eventually recognized, by Mary, by others, even by us, defeating death once and for all.

The testimony of the early Church in the scriptures affirms this victory even during the first 300 years of persecution and oppression.

“...life in Jesus Christ has set me free from the law of sin and death....If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also....” (Romans 8:2-25)

“...Jesus...partook of the same (human) nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage...” (Hebrews 2:14-18)

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was an astute student of the scriptures and he, himself, knew that Jesus had destroyed the power of death once and for all. So, as Cranmer compiled the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549, he found in 2 Timothy the words for the proper preface introducing the Eucharistic Prayer on Easter Day. Jesus "...destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light." (Timothy 2:10)

Easter shows us love is more powerful than death. Jesus risen from the dead, through God's love, gives us hope, always, hope that we can experience the defeat of death. The Resurrection is recalled every time we share in Holy Communion, every time we celebrate Holy Baptism: we "die" to death; we move from death's power to love's reality. This is the love that sustains us and gives our lives meaning, now and when physical life is over.

Live with this hope, live with this reality, live with this confidence. And pass it on to those who fall under death's power; pass it on to those who don't know love or have lost love; pass it on to all those who, like the disciples and Mary Magdalene, felt like life and hope had been taken, stolen from them. We know Christians are celebrating this hope, this reality all around the world this Easter, even in Syria and in Egypt and in the darkest of all places.

Christ lives. Christ is alive. Christ makes us alive!