

First Sunday in Lent (March 6, 2022)

Text: Romans 8:31-39

***“Called to Be Conquerors”***

Back in 2007, James Cameron wanted us to believe that he had found the bones of Jesus. He had scholars all lined up to attest to this “fact;” he had multiple ossuaries to bolster his claim; he had inscriptions on those ossuaries that “prove” what he said: he had found the archeological artifact of the ages — he was, he claimed, once again, *“the king of the world!”*

Most of you, I assume, heard the reports of this “dig.” In an apartment complex near Jerusalem, workers unearthed a burial cave that had several bone boxes on which names were inscribed: among them, “Jesus” “Mary” and “Judah.” Cameron insisted that these could no other than Jesus of Nazareth, his consort, Mary Magdalene, and their offspring (so designated by Cameron), “Judah.”

Over the last five decades, hundreds of such burial caves have been unearthed, in which scores of names such a Jesus, Mary, and Judah were inscribes on bone boxes (those three names were among the most common names in use in the First Century). To folks like Cameron, the evidence will be viewed in only one way (as I must confess, will be so in my case, as well); but the James Camerons of this world are not content simply not to believe; they see it as their duty to debunk — because nobody made headlines not believing, ah, but debunkers become world famous.

There will be Christians who will succumb to the debunking. They will wonder if what they have believed is, in fact, based on a hoax. Did Jesus really die and that was the end of it? Did the disciples steal away His body? Was the resurrection narrative all pretense? A fairy tale? Wishful thinking on the part of Jesus’ friends? Those of fragile faith may in fact be led stray by such a “discovery.”

But I can hear St. Paul: ***“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”*** There is a fundamental faith-premise

in that question. It is a rhetorical question. It is asked in Greek in such a way that we know St. Paul anticipated that the answer would have to be: *“Why, no one! If God is for us, there is no one who could possibly be against us.”* Yet, we know that there are many who are opposed to the Christian faith and to those who espouse it.

In fact, St. Paul goes on to list several things that very well might oppose us in our faith: hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. I find it interesting that he lists seven items; that’s his way of saying that this list represents every possibility in the universe that could oppose us and separate us from God. But the import of this question really comes down to this: *“So what if anyone is opposed to us? God is for us!”*

That is a foundation upon which one can build a solid faith life. It’s not that we don’t care that there is opposition; it is just that whatever opposition there may be cannot be powerful enough to dissuade us from trusting God. *“In the world you will have trouble,”* Jesus told His disciples, *“but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). That word “overcome” in Greek is νικᾶω (nikao); it can also be translated as “conquer.” Jesus announced that He had beaten back all that would come against us from in the world [here He uses the word κόσμος (kosmos), which encompasses the realm of the spiritual, as well]. So no physical, material, emotional, or spiritual force can come between us and Jesus.

This does not mean that we will never face physical, material, emotional, or spiritual trials; of course we will. Indeed, in a sense, St. Paul recognizes this (almost predicts this) when he writes: *“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* This time it is a listing that numbers ten, so all bases are covered. Seven, the number of completion; ten the number of perfection.

Between these two lists, St. Paul has accounted for everything that could possibly interfere in our living out our life in Christ. In so doing he has warned us for what we should be looking that will pose the risks. I would probably not have led off with death, but Paul did: and let's face it, it probably is # One on the fear Hit Parade. Living can be downright scary at times, too. Angels always seem to frighten the bejeebers out of folks whenever they show up in the Biblical record. Some of us get positively panicky when we think about what our rulers might be planning next. Most people are uncomfortable high off the ground; I know I have a deeply-imbedded fear about being buried alive, nightmares about being trapped under ice and sinking in fathomless depths on black seas (so, yeah, "depths" does it for me).

***"I am convinced,"*** Paul proclaims, that none of these can ***"separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** Convinced: *πειθω* (peitho) — in the form Paul uses it here it means *"I have come to trust."* This word is not a product of argumentation, but of experience — Paul has not come to this point of view because of some logical conclusion or cleverly-devised syllogism. ***"I have been persuaded,"*** he is saying, *"because I have had dealings with death and life, angels and demons, powers, and all the rest of what the world can throw at me, and never once has any of it come between me and the love of God in Christ."* Paul is testifying that, for him, Christ has overcome the world — every time.

Of course, it would have to be every time. One defeat is a final defeat; which is why it so critical that we understand that whatever victory will be will not be accomplished by us. We have not the resources to defeat anything the world throws against us; we're practically powerless to defend against our own flesh. Our desires are often enough to drive us away from God's love; we love more what lures us into the world's embrace. God never deviates in His love toward us, so we must trust that whatever will overcome the world, the Devil and, yes, our own sinful impulses, is going to have to come from God.

Which is, I believe, why Paul uses this term in reference to us:

ὑπερνικωμεν (hypernikomen) — we “hyper-conquer.” Because the victory comes from outside of us, ***“we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”*** We are recipients of the conquest. We cannot boast: *“Look what I did.”* Our chant is not *“I’m the king of the world!”* Our exultation is: *“Look what Christ did! He is King of all!”*

There is, then, great humility in our calling to be conquerors. There is also great peace. I know I do this; I know some of you do also (I suspect you all do) — I stew about things. Just the other night, I was getting ready for bed, and something clicked into my consciousness, got me thinking (stewing), and I could not shut it off. I was up until three. Some of us stew about what is coming (or what we dread to think is coming); some of us stew about what is past.

There is no question that the past has shaped and formed us in many ways — plus and minus. There equally no question that we all have an uncertain future. So some attachment to both past and future is inevitable. But we go way beyond that: the past haunts us with feelings of unforgiveness, regret, anger, sorrow, heartache; the future threatens us with dislocations, upheavals, worst-case scenarios that our minds twist into horrid monsters over the horizon.

We need do none of that. We cannot reshape the past; we cannot alter the future — we can, however, trust in the One who holds both past a future in His hands. We are Called to Be Conquerors — in fact, Hyperconquerors. We are called to embrace the victory that Christ has won for us by His sacrifice on the cross.

Many things can hurt us; one does not conquer without somehow being enjoined in the battle; but nothing can destroy us. No challenge to our faith . . . no assault on our persons . . . no fear in our hearts . . . no upheaval in our lives . . . no misbehavior by us or toward us . . . nothing can keep God from us. Now . . . we often give in to fears . . . and threats . . . and worries . . . and prejudices . . . and actions . . . and a whole host of things that turn us aside from where God wants us to be. This is why our status as conquerors is a calling . . . we must grow in our

understanding of who we are and what cannot come against us and prevail.

***“In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*** Because Christ is Conqueror, so we who have been drafted to Him in Baptism are Conquerors. Now we are called to become what we are . . . more than conquerors — we are Christ’s conquerors!

Amen.