

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

There are no warnings in our Gospel text. There are no exhortations. When the Son of Man comes again in glory, it is not to encourage people to believe or to do the right thing. When the King comes in glory he will gather all nations unto Himself, around His glorious throne, and every knee will bow at His name and every tongue will confess him as Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). When Jesus comes again in glory with his angels around him, He comes to judge the living and the dead, that is, “on the last day, He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

This is the day that we, as Christians, are all looking forward to, the day of our resurrection, when “*the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*” (1 Thessalonians 4:16) as St. Paul describes it, or when he says shortly after our Epistle: “*Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality*” (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

And it’s not just at Easter that we think about it. We confess it all the time: we believe in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” We proclaim it as one of our loved ones dies. We think about it as we remember the anniversary of their death. Our hope in Christ is not for this life only, without hope for eternity — that would be a pitiable teaching. Our Christian hope is not in some eternity of the spirit, an ethereal, wispy existence in the clouds.

Our hope is in resurrection — ἀνάστασις — standing up again. Our hope is in the resurrection of Jesus as “*the firstfruits,*” something without which “*our faith is in vain.*” And our hope is in our own resurrection and the resurrection of our loved ones “*who have fallen asleep*” in Christ. For this is what we believe: that since “*Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep*” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Indeed, on that great day of the Lord, “*every eye will see him,*” who comes “*with the clouds*” (Revelation 1:7). “*Even those who pierced him*” (Rev. 1:7) “*will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*” (Matthew 24:30). Yes, His coming will be as obvious as “*the lightning [that] comes from the east and shines as far as the west*” (Matthew 24:27). And when He comes, He “*will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*”

(Matthew 24:31). And those who died in Christ “*will rise first*” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). But then, also those elect “*who are alive, who are left, [at His coming] will be caught up together with [the others] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The elect of every nation—those raised from the dead and those alive at His coming—will then follow Jesus down to earth as He takes His place on His glorious throne.

Others will be there, too, already gathered up by the angels. This all happens at the harvest, so that no wheat might be uprooted. Who are these others? They are the tares Jesus tells us about parabolically, the “*sons of the evil one*” who have been living side by side with the righteous. They are “*all causes of sin and all law-breakers*” (Matthew 13:29, 38, 41); they’re the unfruitful trees (Matthew 3:10), they’re the chaff (Matthew 3:12), they’re the goats, they’re the unbelievers.

And when the books are opened for them, no good deeds will be found, for without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). All that will be found is failure to live up to the demands of the law: failure to give food to the hungry, failure to give drink to the thirsty, failure to welcome the stranger, failure to clothe the naked, failure to visit the sick and imprisoned. And their names will not be found written in the Lamb’s book of life. As sons of the evil one, it’s not annihilation that they will receive in the unquenchable fire prepared for the devil and his angels, but an eternal punishment filled with torment, weeping, and gnashing of teeth.

The elect, too, will be judged according to the books, although their judgment is sealed at death (Hebrews 9:27). The elect — living branches of the true Vine — will be seen to have borne much fruit; they are wheat, producing 30, 60, or 100-fold; they themselves are the fruit of the Gospel (Colossians 1:6), doing the good works that God prepared for them to do (Ephesians 2:10), feeding, giving drink, welcoming, clothing, visiting.

These are God’s elect building hospitals and orphanages, universities and schools, helping the poor and needy, working to save the lives of the unborn and the unwanted, welcoming the stranger, who understand that loving and serving the least of these, is loving and serving Christ Himself. These are God’s chosen who truly trust in their Lord and Savior, who listen to Him and seek to do His bidding. They are the sheep who have heard the voice of their Shepherd and have followed Him who laid down His life for them.

They are the elect whose names are found written in the Lamb’s book of life. They will be accounted righteous as they trust in the work of the Lamb slain for them, but standing again in victory. Christ is risen; He is living! Worthy is the Lamb whose blood ransomed for Himself a people from “*every tribe and language*

*and people and nation” and made them “a kingdom and priests,” who “shall reign” forever in the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:13), the kingdom prepared for them “from the foundation of the world.” These are the ones who were faithful unto death, and their inheritance is a crown of everlasting life (Revelation 2:10), resurrection and life.*

This is our hope. This is most certainly true! Therefore, Lord, keep us as Your sheep, steadfast in Your word, eager for Your return, yet ever seeking how we might love and serve our neighbors, the least of these whom You place in our lives. Grant that we may *“run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to [You], the founder and perfecter of our faith, who ... endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).* And grant us, having run the race to the end, the victor’s prize, the imperishable wreath, when You come again in glory with Your angels. Grant that we hear the blessed words, *“Come, ... inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.