

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Easter is a big deal in the Church; it's the Feast of Feasts. On Easter all around the world, Christians gather to let their alleluias ring out, having fasted from them during the season of Lent. One shouts for joy: "Christ is risen! Alleluia!" And others respond, "He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Easter is a big deal in the Church. We did celebrate it this year, for since darkness could not overcome the light and since death is swallowed up in victory, then a novel coronavirus was not going to stop our shouts of victory. Still, our Easter celebration was more subdued. We did gather together, as you recall, but in small groups. And we know that that's still church, for "*where two or three are gathered in my name,*" Jesus said, "*there am I among them*" (Matt. 18:20), but the festive character of Easter is harder to capture with just ten persons gathering in worship. Nevertheless, the truth of Easter was not silenced. We proclaimed then and we proclaim today: Jesus Christ, crucified, died, and buried, "*has been raised from the dead,*" and He is "*the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*"

St. Paul, in our Epistle for today out of his great resurrection chapter, is quite clear: "*in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.*" And so, in some ways, this service can be the Easter celebration that we did not have last April. Indeed, how I wish that I had been thinking this way as I chose the hymns for today. I would have included an Easter favorite or two. "Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!" (LSB457) "Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands for our offenses given" (LSB458). "Now all the vault of heaven resounds ... Christ has triumphed! He is living" (LSB465). "I know that my Redeemer lives" (LSB461). "Jesus lives! The victory's won. Death no longer can appall me." (LSB490).

Still, it's not Christ's resurrection that is so much in view today; it's ours. Again as St. Paul reminds us: Jesus is the "*firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*" "[B]y a man has come ... the resurrection of the dead." "[I]n Christ shall all be made alive...: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." "[T]hanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).

For "*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 Cor. 15:51-53).

Today we hear Jesus Himself describe the day of our resurrection, that great and glorious day when the Son of Man comes again in glory. On that day, He will gather all nations unto Himself, around His glorious throne. On that day, when "*the*

Son of Man [comes] on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, ... 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” (Matt. 24:30-31). Those angels, who accompany Him, are His harvest angels, and they will gather in the harvest and will separate the wheat from the tares (Matt. 13:30, 39), or in this case, the sheep from the goats. And, to be sure, every knee will bow at His name and every tongue will confess him as Lord (Phil. 2:10-11), but for the goats it will be too late. There is an eternal fire awaiting them, but a glorious inheritance for the blessed sheep.

This is the judgment of “the living and the dead” that we confess. It’s the day of our resurrection, as Luther describes it: “on the last day, [Jesus] will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true” (Small Catechism, Creed, 3rd Article).

We Christians are all looking forward to this day of our resurrection. We don’t just think about it at Easter. We confess it constantly: we believe in “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” We proclaim it as one of our loved ones dies — our funerals proclaim Jesus, His resurrection, and ours. We think about it as we remember the anniversary of their death. We think of it on festivals like All Saints.

Our hope in Christ is not for this life only; that would make us pitiable (1 Cor. 15:19). Neither is our Christian hope in some eternity merely of the spirit, an ethereal, wispy existence in the clouds. No, our hope is in resurrection — our bodies rising again to life. Our hope is in the resurrection of Jesus as “*the firstfruits,*” something without which “*[our]faith is in vain ... [our] faith is futile*” (1 Cor. 15:14, 17). 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 Thess. 4:14). We believe that when “*the Lord [descends] from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, [then the] dead in Christ will rise first*” (1 Thess. 4:16) to join Jesus in the sky as He processes to His glorious throne.

Of course, there will be others around the throne, too, already gathered up by the angels. Who are these others? These are the tares Jesus tells us about in His parable, 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*” (Matt. 13:38, 41); they’re the unfruitful trees (Matt. 3:10), they’re the chaff (Matt. 3:12), they’re the goats, they’re the unbelievers. They will be gathered first at the harvest, so that no wheat might be uprooted (Matt. 13:29). And they will be cast into the fiery furnace (Matt. 13:42).

For when the books are opened for them (Rev. 20:12), no good deeds will be found, for without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 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. Their names will not be found written in the Lamb's book of life. Their resurrection will be a resurrection of judgment (John 5:29). As sons of the evil one, it's not annihilation that they will experience 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 names will have already been written in the Lamb's book of life, their judgment already sealed at death (Heb. 9:27). The elect, those "*appointed to eternal life*" (Acts 13:48), as living branches of the true Vine will be found to have borne much fruit; they are wheat, producing 30, 60, or 100-fold (Matt. 13:23); they themselves are the fruit of the Gospel (Col. 1:6), doing the good works that God prepared for them to do (Eph. 2:10), feeding, giving drink, welcoming, clothing, visiting especially those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10), those who have been incorporated into Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13), Jesus brothers and theirs.

Their 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, yet standing again in resurrection victory (Rev. 5:6). Christ is risen; He is living! Worthy is the Lamb whose blood ransomed for Himself a people "*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*" (Rev. 7:9) and made them "*a kingdom and priests*" who "*shall reign*" (Rev. 5:10) forever in the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13). They who were chosen "*in [Christ] before the foundation of the world*" shall inherit the kingdom prepared for them "*from the foundation of the world.*" These are the ones who were faithful unto death, whose inheritance is a crown of everlasting life (Rev. 2:10) — resurrection and life.

This is our hope. This is our joy! It's an Easter joy welling up in us even now at the end of the church year, because Jesus' resurrection is not something to be celebrated only at Easter. We celebrate it always, for His resurrection is sure and so is ours, for "*whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life*" (John 5:24). Jesus gives more such promises, but I leave you, who in faith prepare to come the Lord's Supper today, with this one: "*Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*" (John 6:54).

Lord, keep us in this faith and joy, strengthen our faith and life by Your Sacrament, raise us up on the last day, and grant us finally to hear the thrilling words, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, 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.