

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It's easy for death to invade our thoughts these days. Death has been knocking at a lot of people's doors recently. Consider the pandemic essentially over. Whatever the right number is of people who died from COVID, it's a bunch more than a usual influenza year. Deaths from other causes went up, too, in the last two years.

Death fills the streets of cities in Ukraine as that war rages on. Reporters try to shield our tender eyes from some of the horrors, but death is still obvious.

Of course, Holy Week began with the reading of the Passion according to St. Luke, and Good Friday has been filled with the Passion according to St. John, and you're not surprised: in both of these accounts, Jesus died! You might be saying, "it's understandable that with thinking about death — with all this."

Maybe, it's more than this. Maybe it's also our Zion brothers and sisters who have died in the last couple months It's Helen Russell and Erwin Brand and Walt Ostermeyer and Lucille Brandt and Jackie Schieferstein — and now Juanita Moore. "In the very midst of life Snares of death surround us," wrote Luther in a hymn (LSB755) — probably a paraphrase of the verses the funeral rite has as we process with the body to the funeral coach: "In the midst of life we are in death; from whom can we seek help? From You alone, O Lord."

To be sure, death is the occasion for a funeral, but the funeral rite is not primarily about death; it's about resurrection. The rubrics express the theme of a Christian's funeral: it "should reflect Christian confidence, trust, and hope in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." So it is on this day. Easter is not about primarily about death, though death was a necessary precursor to today's events. Without Jesus dying, we would not be talking about rising from the dead.

Yes, resurrection — rising from the dead — is what funerals are about. "[S]ince we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:14). "[I]n fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). "'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57) — you'll hear the choir sing that in a bit. And Jesus Himself teaches, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-25).

But all of these promises are predicated on one simple fact: the resurrection of Jesus Himself. In fact, St. Paul tells us, “*if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied*” (1 Cor. 15:17-19).

Paul says that because even then, people were questioning the possibility of resurrection and with that the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. He says, “*if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain [— even my preaching at these funerals —] and your faith is in vain*” (1 Cor. 15:12-14). Truly, if the resurrection of Jesus is a lie, then the comfort is false and our hope nothing but a fairy tale.

But I don’t believe that any more than Paul did, as he proclaimed: “*But now Christ has been raised from the dead.*” And so, he said, “*at [Jesus’] coming those who belong*” to Him “*shall be made alive,*” too.

So what does the Evangelist Luke tell us historically about Jesus, after all, that was his purpose in writing his gospel — “*to write an orderly account*” of the events, having talked to eyewitnesses and researched it carefully? First, he says that Jesus truly died, and no one seriously doubts that, swoon theories notwithstanding. The Romans were just too brutal and efficient; they knew how to kill.

Second, Luke records that the women watched Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepare the body, and they “*saw the tomb and how his body was laid*” (Luke 23:55). They didn’t doubt Jesus’ death; they themselves returned home to prepare “*spices and ointments*” to bury Jesus properly.

Third, Luke says that when they arrived at the tomb, the stone that had sealed up the tomb was rolled away. Unlike the other Evangelists, Luke has none of the worried conversation about rolling away the stone. Luke just reports the facts: the stone was rolled away.

Thus, the women went into the tomb and found it empty; the body was gone. Luke doesn’t focus on idle speculate for the reason — did this person take it away or another? Or for what purpose? No, with Luke, it’s just the facts. The tomb was empty, the body gone, and for all those skeptics around today, no body has ever been produced, though you might remember the thoroughly discredited show on the Discovery Channel claiming to have found “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” (2007).

Fourth, Luke reports that the women were met by two men — angels, really, for their “*dazzling apparel*” gives them away. These two announced to the women that Jesus’ word was sure, that He did what He had said He would do, that He had risen from the dead. “Don’t look for Him here at this tomb,” they said. “A tomb is for the dead. Jesus is living.” The women then remembered what Jesus had told them about His resurrection on the third day.

Finally, the women told the apostles, and Luke reports that they didn’t believe the story; they thought it “*an idle tale.*” The apostles’ skepticism adds an air of authenticity.

Well, Luke has more evidence that he evinces, but not in our Easter text, for Luke goes on to relate several resurrection appearances to the disciples — to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34), to the Emmaus road disciples (Luke 24:13ff), and to the Twelve (Luke 24:36ff). And with all of these, we can be sure; it is established as historical fact: Jesus Christ, the crucified, is risen from the dead, just as the Scriptures say. More than that, we can also be sure that Scripture’s promises are just as sure. As we look to the Son and believe in Him, we have eternal life, and God will on the last day raise us up from death to life.

Luther was right ... in the midst of life, death surrounds us. It’s so easy to let thoughts of death fill us up and bring us down. But Christians aren’t ordinary people; we’re Easter people. We grieve when our loved ones die, but we do not grieve as others do who have no hope. We have hope. The risen Christ gives us hope — for those saints gone before us, and for ourselves yet to die, for yes, Christ is risen! Alleluia! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!