

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Christians all over the world today are rejoicing, singing and saying again their Alleluias as they celebrate Easter. Others call the day Pascha, connecting it up with Passover, but especially with Christ, our πάσχα. And Paul urges us on to the feast, celebrating our Exodus as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Surely that's good and salutary.

But why this celebration? It's what we're all about as Christians. St. Paul tells us of its importance: *"I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ ... was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to"* many (1 Cor. 15:3-5), including Mary Magdalene, John records in our Gospel lesson.

Those are the facts of the resurrection — Jesus rose; He appeared to many; they're eyewitnesses; and we might add one other, evident from the Gospel: Jesus' body was not in the tomb. We dare not ignore them; we cannot dismiss them as if they are mere myth. These are essential to the Christian faith, to establishing the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

Anyone who claims to be a Christian, yet dismisses the fact of the resurrection, is either lying or deceiving himself. He is not. We confess in the Athanasian Creed that if anyone "desires to be saved [he] must, above all, hold the catholic faith. ... And the catholic faith is," in part, that we confess and worship the Holy Trinity. But it is also that one believes rightly and confesses rightly about Jesus, about His incarnation, that He "is at the same time both God and man"; and also that He "suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead." "This is the catholic faith," this universal Christian creed concludes; "whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved" (LSB, p. 319). That is, whoever does not confess it is not a Christian.

On the other hand, believing faithfully and firmly in the resurrection brings everything into focus: Jesus' incarnation; His crucifixion and death; our rescue from sin and death; our hope for everlasting life. Everything becomes clear.

John reports these facts in our Gospel today: Mary Magdalene was the first one to the tomb on that momentous third day after Jesus' death. He had been laid in the tomb on Friday evening; He lay there all day Saturday; and on the third day (a Sunday) He awakened from death's sleep. That is, the living Jesus marched into the strong man's house. The stronger man, having defeated the devil and bound him, had come into his abode and proclaimed His victory over mankind's arch enemy (Mark 3:27). After this, He returned to begin His resurrection appearances.

When Mary got to the tomb, however, she did not peer into it. Seeing the stone rolled away, she ran to tell the disciples. Seeing Peter and John first, she told them, and they ran to the tomb. Finding it just as Mary had reported, they *did* stoop down to investigate. There they found the linen cloths that had been used to take Jesus down from the cross and wrap His body; they were there carefully folded up ... but there was no body. And this is what John reports, that “*he saw and believed*”; but apparently not in the resurrection. “[*A*]s yet they did not understand the Scripture,” neither Peter nor John, “*that [Jesus] must rise from the dead.*” What did he believe, then? We can only speculate, but I suggest that he merely believed Mary’s report.

The disciples returned home, but Mary lingered on at the tomb. Not that she was any better in understanding the significance of the empty tomb. But she would have an encounter that would change everything — again, that would bring it all into focus. She first looked into the tomb herself. Unlike Peter and John, however, Mary saw two angels in white. They asked her why she was weeping, and Mary showed herself to be just as dull-witted as Peter and John. “*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him,*” she told them.

But that’s when she encountered the resurrected Jesus Himself. He, too, asked her, “*Why are you weeping?*” Not recognizing Him, but supposing Him to be the gardener, she asked if He had carted off the body. Finally, Jesus revealed Himself to Mary, calling her by name. She recognized Him and called Him “*Rabboni,*” that is, teacher.

And surely everything changed in that moment ... as soon as Mary realized that this was Jesus risen from the dead. Her tears were dried; her countenance brightened; her grief turned to joy. She wants to cling to Jesus, but He says no. Go tell my brothers, the disciples: “*I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*” That is, tell them “I am risen, just as I had told you.”

Mary did, and the disciples believed. The Scriptures came into focus for them, too, such that Peter would later preach the resurrection using words penned by David: “*you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption*” (Ps. 16:10). And John admitted that the resurrection was what they needed for understanding — when Jesus talked about someone destroying the temple and him raising it back up, they didn’t understand at first that Jesus “*was speaking about the temple of his body*” — about the cross. But “[*w*]hen ... he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:19-22). Or again, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it was especially “*when Jesus was glorified,*” by death and resurrection, that “*they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him*” (John 12:16).

Brothers and sisters, Jesus' resurrection brings everything into focus for us, too. St. Paul would later write: *"if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."* Again, *"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."*

*"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ"* (1 Cor. 15:14, 17-23). That is, us!

For, finally, the focus of Easter is also on us. It's about our hope of resurrection and life. And that's what Jesus' resurrection gives us — assurance and hope. Which is why we say with confidence: *"Come, Lord Jesus"* (Rev. 22:20), especially as we walk the shadowy path toward death. *"Come, Lord Jesus,"* we pray, for we know that *"Death [has been] swallowed up in victory"* (1 Cor. 15:54), Jesus' resurrection victory, and we give thanks to God that He has given *"us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 15:57), for Christ is risen. Alleluia!

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