

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

J. R. R. Tolkien called his Lord of the Rings novels not a Christian allegory but a myth about Christian truths, and it's true Tolkien does make a lot of Christian allusions in his Rings books. And Peter Jackson's movie depictions are quite good — faithful to that text. If you haven't read the books, see the movies.

I know they are purely fictional, but I love the battle scenes from Jackson's movies, and I'll try to use them to help me illustrate the importance of the resurrection witnesses, today.

Although I served in the military, I never fought in a war, nor did I study military strategy or tactics. I'm not really a war history buff, either. Almost everything I know about war, therefore, (if indeed it's called knowing) comes from the movies. As depicted in the movies, in a battle or war, the presence of the leader cannot be overemphasized. He plans the strategy and tactics, he deploys the troops, he gives the order to fight, he rallies the troops. The troops see the leader, and they are encouraged in the fight.

In Jackson's movies, for example, King Theoden rallies his troops for an unwinnable battle against the hordes of Mordor, riding along, banging his sword against their spears. It's the leader that steels the nerve in the face of an imposing force. On the other hand, when the leader falls, doubts arise in the hearts of the troops. Some lose heart completely and begin to flee, and the army is routed.

Friends, we are in a war, one unseen by most people and unheeded. But it's real, and it's big. It's a cosmic war, a war against "*the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*" And we're all in it, on one side or the other. No one sits on the sideline.

But lest you become overly anxious about this war and think it's unwinnable, you should know that a turning point has occurred in this war: the fall of a leader. A battle, with cosmic weapons, was waged, and it was so powerful that the ground shook, the sun was masked, and the battlefield was cloaked in darkness. In this battle, one leader was injured. He cried out in agony, blood poured from His wounds, He could barely catch His breath, and finally, He breathed His last. Fear gripped His troops; their leader was down; most fled in fear. The sight was too much to endure. It was apparent defeat, yet not in reality. His was actually victory. It was the other leader, who was destroyed.

You know the combatants: Jesus and His disciples on the one side, arrayed against Satan, and Death, and Sin on the other. Jesus did fall; our Captain did die.

But in Biblical language, that was but a bruising of His heel. It was the serpent's head that was crushed. For in Jesus' death was victory. By His death, Satan is himself bound up. By His death, death is defeated. By His death, there is freedom from the condemnation of sin. Amidst the sun darkening, the earth quaking, the rocks splitting in two, we still hear, "*Truly this was the Son of God.*" Amidst this destruction—the curtain in the temple torn from top to bottom, the temple itself destroyed, the bleeding body of God's son lying dead, the disciples cowering in fear—victory. Christ, who waged war on our behalf with Satan and all our foes, emerged the victor.

It seemed otherwise. Satan was the apparent victor. Christ was dead, last seen being taken down from the tree of His cursing. How could it be otherwise? What did those words mean, "*It is finished?*" That Satan had won? That our leader had given up on us? We watched on Friday as Jesus' lifeless body was being carried away to a tomb to be buried. We trusted in God that He would deliver us. Was our trust misplaced?

You know that it was not. We began Holy Week confessing with the woman, that Jesus would die, and that He would not be in the tomb on the third day. You are here today because you know that to be true. You know that your trust is not misplaced. You know that the shame and cross and death of Jesus was not His defeat, but the final, head-crushing blow to Satan, our foe. You are here on this third day because you know that death could not maintain its steely grasp on the Author of Life.

You are here on Easter Sunday because you know that on the first day of the week, some time during the night, a heart that had stopped beating started to pump again, that blood that had stopped flowing began to surge anew through undecayed veins and arteries, that a chest that for three days had remained motionless began to rise and fall again, that the lungs that breathed out His spirit in death began again to inhale and exhale a warm, living breath, as His spirit was reunited in resurrection victory over death.

You are here on Easter Sunday so that you can see that the conclusion of what Jesus foretold is also true — not only that He would be "*mocked and flogged and crucified,*" but that "*he [would] be raised on the third day*" (Matt. 20:19). Today you see Him through the eyes of devout women who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus for burial, but instead were greeted with an empty tomb and by Jesus' own words of greeting. You are here, hopefully, the Sundays of Easter to follow, to go to Galilee and see Jesus, to see Him present Himself alive "*not to all the people but to [those] who had been chosen by God as witnesses,*" as He did today to these women, later to the eleven, and later still to select others, and to see them eat and

drink “*with [Jesus] after he rose from the dead*” (Acts 10:41), to see our leader and be steeled for the battle.

You are here on this Easter Sunday because you know that Jesus' death was not the end. Oh, to be sure, His death finished something. His death was the end of God's punishment upon you; His death was the end of God's just condemnation for your sins; His death was the end of God's anger because of your sin — truly, all that “*is finished*” for you, for Jesus took it all upon Himself.

But He is not finished. He died most surely, but He is the living One, and He lives forevermore. God the Father raised Him from the dead—that is, His body. The tomb is empty. “*He is not here; see the place where He lay*”? “*Don't look for Jesus among the dead*” (Luke 24:5). “*He is risen.*” Satan, death, and sin have been defeated. “*Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God*” (Rom. 6:9-10).

And the Christian message is that His victory is your victory. That when “*the trumpet*” sounds, “*the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*” The perishable will “*put on the imperishable.*” The mortal “*will put on immortality.*” For “*Death is swallowed up in victory.*” And, God “*gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor. 15:52-57). Our leader and Savior lives, and we now rally around Jesus' resurrection banner; our enemies have been routed.

If you did read *The Lord of the Rings* or see the movies, you know that Gandalf the Grey, the leader of the Fellowship, fell to a powerful enemy. So devastating was his death, it was feared that that ended their quest. But he actually sacrificed himself and died. Life came back to him, and he returned, not as Gandalf the Grey, but as Gandalf the White to lead Middle Earth to victory.

Not all of Tolkien's mythology matches Christian doctrine, but one cannot help but see Gandalf as a Christ figure here, leading his followers to victory, mimicking our captain, Jesus, who fell in seeming defeat, but who rose from the dead, and who leads His church to ultimate victory, too. Which is cause to celebrate, today on Easter Sunday, and indeed, every Lord's Day. Celebrate our victory. That's what the angel told the women to do, and Jesus did, too. Go to Galilee—let the celebrations begin. Feast with Him; parade with Him; rejoice with Him; worship Him.

That's why we're here on this Easter Sunday and why we come every Sunday—not just because we know that Christ is victorious, but because we know that, in Him, we are victorious, and we want to join in the celebration. We're here

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on this Easter Sunday to rally to Him as we rout the enemy. We're here on this Easter Sunday to rejoice with all the baptized who have passed with Jesus through death to life, having been raised with Him by baptism. We're here on this Easter Sunday to join in the feast of victory of Him who died but now lives, and who by His life-giving body and blood forgives our sins and gives eternal life to all who confess His Holy name. We're here to sing the praises of His resurrection victory.

It's Easter! Yes, let's celebrate, for Christ is risen. Alleluia.