

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The news of the empty tomb by itself is not good news. The assertion of the unbelieving priests and scribes of the Jews was that the body was stolen in the night. That is not good news for those who do not believe, for it gives credence to those who want to believe Jesus is not dead. It is not good news for the disciples either, however. It means the attention and ire of the Sanhedrin is on them. It means they will be charged and pursued for something they did not do.

But even the simple fact that the Lord is risen from the dead at the first, is not good news. They had continually misunderstood Him. Time and again we are told how at Jesus' teaching, the disciples did not get it, did not understand. Even down to His last hours with them they are confused and lack understanding.

I am reminded of my Junior year in high school, the first big test in chemistry class, the teacher walks in and simply said, "I am extremely disappointed in this entire class, you all failed it." That could just as well have been what the eleven were in for by the risen Lord. They, His closest followers, His most diligent students, had bombed the test, failed their internship.

But that is the least of their problems. They, His closest friends, who had pledged to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away, turned tail and ran the moment He was seized by His enemies in Gethsemane. And Peter who has been the first to confess Jesus, the first to pledge his unwavering faithfulness even unto dying with Jesus, did not die with but denied Him.

And now they receive word not only that the tomb is empty, but that Jesus has risen. What chiding awaited them? How severe would the rebuke be? Would the punishment be rejection or something even worse? It is evening and darkness not only falls upon the world, but still covers their hearts.

It is to this fearful wondering, the agonized awaiting of what the resurrected Lord will do and say, that He appears in their midst, and it is with what He says that He shows how He feels, how He is disposed to them. He says "**Peace be with you,**" shows them His wounds, and says it again, "**Peace be with you.**"

It is not simply a greeting, but an absolution. It is a declaration that by these wounds there is true and eternal peace between God and men, that all sins are forgiven, their ignorance, their weakness, their fearfulness and denial. It is all gone, not held against them, there is peace.

And if that is what our Lord says to those who sinned against Him most directly, most grievously, who proved to be the greatest disappointments, whose actions would call any sense of friendship into question, then do not think that His words and wounds are not for you. Do not believe for a single moment that His proclamation of what it means that He has died and risen, that the risen Lord comes not to scold, chide, reject, or punish, but to give the peace of the forgiveness of sins does not apply to you.

Indeed, He counts you, who hear of this and believe it, who find balm and healing in those wounds, as more blessed than those who beheld and touched them.

It is that preaching of the risen Lord, that showing and explanation of what those glorious scars mean, that gives joy and gladness to their hearts. All the outward threats remain. Pilate remains governor. Caiaphas still presides over the Sanhedrin that sentenced their Lord to death, who will continue to persecute the Church. But now they are certain that they have a gracious Lord, a kindly Savior who has won the forgiveness of sins for their and every weakness and failure, who preaches and proves this by showing His hands and side.

Not only for them, but still for you. You hear that He was crucified for you, shed His blood and died, and thus paid for your sins and appeased God's wrath. He continues to give His pierced and glorified body, His very blood which was shed on the cross. You see them lifted up, hidden under bread and wine, and hear His words from that Easter evening as a true sign and comfort for your conscience and heart, to assure you of divine grace and the forgiveness of your sins. He preaches and gives this that you might not doubt but be certain that He is not angry but your dear Savior and Lord.

Like for the eleven, not much changes outwardly in this world, in your life, with this truth. There are still the enemies of the devil, the world, and your flesh, which remain. Those who hate you for being Christ's still hate you, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. The sorrows and stresses of this life are not wiped out, undone simply because we live in the bright season of Easter. Life is not smooth sailing because you are Christ's, indeed, as for the apostles and for so many fellow believers, it is often harder because you are His, not easier.

But the joy that is the disciples' on that evening, the peace that is given and guaranteed by those blessed wounds and proclamation of the Lord remained, could not be undone or lessened no matter the opposition from mortal men or a now defeated foe who cannot hold those who are Christ's. Perhaps you know something of how the apostles were martyred: crucified like our Lord, run through with a spear, stoned, flayed alive. Their joy in Jesus, the confidence of the forgiveness of sins, the absolute confidence in His Word to them, that this alone matters above all declarations of men, over all experiences of this body and life, was the foundation of the rest of their lives.

We suffer real pain, bear real injustice, and our foes are real. But I do not think a single one of us can claim more worldly suffering than the apostles of our Lord. They exhibit for us the steadfast confidence of Christian faith; that the Jesus risen from the dead who absolves His saints is enough, that this is the verdict we live and die by, and with this declaration, all other judgments of men, all other experiences, pale in comparison.

May Christ our risen and reigning Lord give us this joy in the forgiveness of sins for His sake now and always, and preserve us in this faith unto life everlasting. Amen.