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The Church Proclaims the Death and Resurrection of Christ

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Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (B – The Resurrection of Our Lord)

Ancient chronicles tell that in the days of knights Easter sermons used to begin with a joke. The idea was that the congregation should laugh heartily and so gain the Easter joy. For death was dead and could not harm anyone anymore.

This was also the time when artists depicted Jesus on the cross as king. They gave him a regal crown in place of the crown of thorns; they had him stand on the cross rather than hang there in helpless resignation.

It was also the time in which some Easter hymns originated. The words and melodies are still sung in some congregations. When I was a boy in Germany we loved these old melodies. They told us of long forgotten times, of long forgotten ways of looking at things, and they tied us together with the church of a thousand years ago. We knew that we all celebrated the same Easter, whether one numbered the year 955 or 1955. Most of all, these hymns and melodies have a seriousness, a majesty, a peace, and a power which younger melodies do not equal. If nothing else, they have stood the test of time.

Since I am telling you of old times, I may as well continue it for another few moments. Some of you may recall the Introits. The pastor read them at the altar following the Order for Confession and Forgiveness. They were the Entrance Psalms for the service. In my youth, and

also in the German services at Epiphany, we sang a shortened version of the Introit. Not a different one for each Sunday, but different for each season of the church year and in different Psalm Tones. The Psalm Tones are based on Gregorian chant, going back to Gregory the Great, a pope who instituted them around the year A.D. 600. The beauty of this practice is that each season is given its own sound. Some Psalm Tones are sombre, some joyous, some reflective. By keeping ancient traditions alive we tie together the old church with the modern, and confess that we have only one message to bring, whether it is a time of confusion in the world, a time of strife, or a time of peace and prosperity. We always tell the same story: The death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

As I said, Easter once began with a joke, usually about death being bested. For this is the meaning of Easter: Death is dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of our resurrection. This was so important for the Apostle Paul that he wrote a long chapter about it in his First Letter to the Corinthians. He also explained why he wrote it: Only a short time after Paul had left Corinth to preach elsewhere, people in Corinth got the idea that there wasn't a resurrection of the dead, or that it had already happened. One had come alive spiritually when one started to believe in Christ.

It takes very little time for false teachings to creep into the church, and very little persuasion to have people follow wrong ideas. Paul had hardly departed from Corinth when preachers appeared, sowed their own thoughts as the word of God, and people began to accept it.

When Paul heard of it he wrote them a letter. In it he went back with them to the very beginning. "I want you to recall in what terms I preached the gospel to you." Think back to the beginnings. Think back to what it was that persuaded you to believe in Christ. You will never outgrow it. You will never be so spiritual as to be above the simple message which Paul brought, namely, that Jesus died for our sins, that he was buried, and raised on the third day.

If you think this sounds like a creed, a statement of belief, then you are right. This is precisely what it is. Paul visited Corinth for the first time in the year A.D. 54, that is, roughly twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. When he arrived he brought with him a creed that said, "Jesus was crucified for our sin, he was buried, and raised on the third day."

Since everything in this chapter of First Corinthians is about the Resurrection, Paul begins to establish the Resurrection as firmly as he can: Jesus was seen alive first by Cephas, then by the twelve disciples, then by 500 brethren at once, then by James, then by all the Apostles, and last of all by Paul himself.

Paul names people who had seen the Lord alive. They are witnesses to the risen Lord. He indicates here: If you don't believe me, ask the people I just named. We know this to be the case because he adds, after the "500 brethren," "most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep." He means: If you find the story of the resurrection too fanciful and too unbelievable, then travel to Jerusalem and talk to any of these people and see whether they seem to be reliable witnesses; whether what I have been preaching is my invention or is based on their testimony.

He says, "Some have fallen asleep." This is not a euphemism, a well sounding phrase which means "they died." Paul speaks of it as a reality. Since Christ was raised from the dead people who believe in him do not die. They sleep in Jesus. Jesus had said: God is a God not of the dead, but of the living. If he says, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then the three patriarchs are not dead, they are alive. Anyone who is remembered by God is not dead, but lives.

Christians do not die, they fall asleep.¹ Death to them is not the end, the final door closing. But it is a rest which refreshes before one awakes in the morning. Death – and this is the meaning of the day of the Resurrection commonly known as Easter – is dead. That is, Death still holds sway over all people who allow him to rule and reign.

Last week, I, as so many other people, had to prepare and file my Income Tax form. Unfortunately, I had to pay. But for many years I never paid; I always received money back. This to me is a parable of how death is. As with your income taxes, you have to pay: You die. But if your income isn't high enough, you get a certain portion back. Death still takes life; but he cannot keep it. All who believe that Christ died for their sin will receive their life back from Christ. Death will take my life and yours, but death has no longer the power to hold us.

In Luther's hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands," one stanza, literally translated, says, "It was a most wondersome war, when death and life did wrestle; life obtained the victory and defeated death."

Luther delights in pictures such as death and life wrestling with each other. Christ burst into the realm of death by allowing himself to be killed, and took death by the scruff of the neck and shook him until death had to release him. Jesus, so says Luther in another hymn, set out to trap death and devil. Both death and devil were too insensitive to realize that a stronger one had entered their realm. They thought, "If the Romans kill Jesus it will be the end of the story." But it was only the beginning. They did not see that God was hiding in the man Jesus of Nazareth. God entered the realm of death and forced death to release him. Therefore death is dead.

In another verse of the hymn Luther wrote, "Da bleibet nichts, denn Tods Gestalt," "nothing remains but the form of death, he has lost his stinger." This is as if in a Western movie someone had taken the evil gunslinger's gun, filed away the firing pin, and replaced the real bullets with blanks. The gunfighter may still be the fastest gun in the West, he may still pull the trigger long before the other guy, but nothing erupts from his gun but a thud. He no longer has the power to kill.

In Bach's Contata, based on one of those ancient melodies and on Luther's hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands," there is a rest of three or four full beats when the choir has sung, "nothing remains." There is perfect silence from choir and orchestra. It indicates that indeed nothing remains. But then the music continues in the sweetest sounds, "but death's form," indicating that life no longer ends with death. Death is a shade, a powerless force, quick on the draw but without power to keep and kill. Death is a shadow on the wall. Scary, to be sure, terrible for those without hope and faith in Christ's resurrection, but for all who are in Christ Jesus death is a door through which we must go in order to enter into another mode of being.

This is the message of Paul to the Corinthians. Here are the people who saw the Lord Jesus alive. Talk to them if you don't believe me! Death is dead. Death has to be dead if Jesus "was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father," as Paul wrote later to the Romans. To show that Jesus was raised and seen alive after his death is Paul's purpose.

When we speak of the Resurrection we must be careful. Not in the sense that we must pay too much heed to people who will not or cannot believe that it happened, but in the sense that we do not make claims which are too great. Some people speak of witnesses to the Resurrection. Well, there are none. No human eye saw Jesus come from the

tomb. Human eyes saw only the empty tomb, the grave clothes lying there together with the cloth which had been wrapped around the head of the Lord. But the New Testament is very clear on one point: The same Jesus who was killed on Friday was seen alive by women at the tomb, by the disciples who walked to Emmaus, and by ten disciples who had gathered without Thomas on the Sunday following. Jesus was seen alive. He talked to his disciples. He proved to them during the span of forty days, writes Luke in Acts, in many convincing ways that he was alive.

People who declare that the Resurrection of Jesus didn't really happen, but that it was a flight of fancy of his disciples, point out that only believers saw Jesus. Only those who hoped that he would rise from the dead actually saw him, they say. Jesus – so it is sometimes claimed – rose in the consciousness of his disciples. By this they mean: In the weeks following the crucifixion, the disciples began to realize that their Lord wasn't dead so long as they could remember him and his teaching. But while they claim that such points are scientific and reasonable, and that the New Testament story of the Resurrection is a myth, they overlook the fact that they invent another myth in place of the event they labelled "myth." There is no evidence for their point of view; their imagination invented it. Nowhere do we read in the New Testament that the disciples expected Jesus to be raised from the dead. The Emmaus disciples didn't recognize Jesus until he broke bread and said grace with them and for them, even though they had conversed with him for over an hour. The woman, who by some people has been turned into the wife of Jesus, or at least his favourite female person, Mary Magdalene, didn't recognize Jesus at first; she took him to be the gardener. Only when he spoke to her did she realize who he was.

The New Testament testimony is that the disciples had to be convinced that Jesus was alive and was meeting them. And even after meeting him a number of times, they weren't really sure that he was alive.

The denial of the Resurrection of Jesus began in earnest when Rudolf Bultmann, a German theologian, claimed in the late 1920s that the Resurrection wasn't a historical event. To some people this meant that the Resurrection wasn't real, but was an invention. I have my quarrels with Bultmann, who died in 1967, but on this I cannot fault him. All he meant was that historical method cannot establish the Resurrection of Christ. The Resurrection is beyond the realm of human experience, and therefore beyond the realm of historical methodology. Nothing human-earthly

is proclaimed in it, but much that is heavenly and divine. Bultmann did not say that the Resurrection wasn't real, that it didn't happen. As long as he lived he would, when pressed, admit that he believed that the Resurrection of Jesus occurred. But as a scientifically working theologian he could not establish it by historical methods.

In other words: That Christ was raised must be believed. It happened in a way and in a realm beyond the way and realm which are accessible to human beings and their way of knowing things.

We are told only that Jesus died on Good Friday and was seen alive on the Sunday following. This is of first importance for Christianity. For without this event there would be no church, no believers, nothing that would remind us of Jesus. Everything would be a loud silence; no choir or orchestra would continue after a rest. The grave would be the final resting place, the last door slamming shut.

But we have the testimony of the Apostles: We have seen Christ alive! He lives! The practical result is this: We no longer have to struggle with death. We no longer have to fight a war. If we are on the side of Christ, we are at peace. The ancient Easter melodies express a deep peace and calm. They don't just say in words, "The strife is o'er, the battle done," they say it with the melody as well. No fight, no struggle left; only peace and rest.

The crucifixes which I mentioned, having Christ wearing a real crown as King and Ruler rather than as defeated victim, express the same thing. In a certain church built during that same period of time, an ancient inscription reads, "Christus vivat – Christus regnat – Christus triumphat." Christ lives; Christ rules, Christ triumphs. This is the message of Easter.

May your faith in the Risen Christ be strengthened. May you go home without fear of death or disaster, knowing that you cannot fall deeper or lower than into the outstretched arms of Christ, our Lord.

NOTE

¹ The contemporary interpreter, Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia, Commentary, Fortress Press, 1975, understands Paul's "some have fallen asleep" as a euphemism meaning "some have died." I cannot agree with Conzelmann on this point for various reasons.

We may do better to remember Martin Luther's understanding of the death

of Christians which he expressed in a Sermon for the Wednesday after Pentecost on John 6:44-51, a point of view which is also more in keeping with the New Testament sentiments about death: "Der Christen Tod ist nur ein Schlaf; wie ihn auch allenthalben die Schrift nennet. Denn ein Christ schmecket noch siehet keinen Tod, das ist, er wird keines Todes gewahr; denn dieser Heiland, Christus Jesus, an den er glaubet, hat den Tod erwürget, dass wir ihn nicht mehr schmecken und kosten dürfen; sondern einem Christen ist der Tod nur ein Übergang zum Leben, ja eine Thür zum Leben, wie Christus selber saget im Johanne 5, 24: 'Wahrlich, wahrlich sage euch, wer mein Wort höret, und glaubet an den der mich gesandt hat, der hat das ewige Leben, und kommt nicht ins Gerichte, sondern er ist vom Tod zum Leben hindurch gedrungen.'" (*Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke, Zwölfter Band, Kirchenpostille. Erlangen, Verlag von Carl Heyder, 1827, p. 474f.*) Translation: "The death of a Christian is only a sleep; as Scripture calls it everywhere. For a Christian neither tastes or sees death, that is, he is not aware of death, for his Saviour Jesus Christ, in whom he believes, has strangled death, so that we must no longer taste and swallow it; for a Christian's death is rather a transition to life, yes, a door to life, as Christ himself says in John 5:24; 'Truly, truly I say to you, anyone who hears my words and believes in him who sent me, has eternal life and does not come into judgment but has passed through death to life.'"