

Mark 16:1-8 (Easter Sunday)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
April 17, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.”

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Maybe you're already familiar with this Easter greeting. If not, you'll get used to it over the next 40 days as we celebrate our Lord's resurrection. The greeting “Christ is risen!” is called the “Paschal Greeting” or the “Easter acclamation.” You hear this greeting, or at least something similar, several times in the Gospel accounts. The angel in our Gospel text this morning says to the women: “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen.” The women were told to go report to the apostles: “He has risen.” Then the two Emmaus disciples found the eleven apostles gathered together and saying “The Lord has risen indeed” (Luke 24:34). Tradition has it that Mary Magdalene herself made the Paschal greeting popular after she appeared before Emperor Tiberius in Rome and exclaimed: “Christ is risen!”

The Easter acclamation as a greeting has only recently become commonplace in the west. But in Eastern Orthodoxy it has long been part of the people's piety. There the greeting is codified in the Byzantine liturgies. In Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Eastern Church, Christians say Воїстинъ воскресѣ! (*Xristósŭ voskrése! – Voístinu voskrése!*). “Christ is risen! - Truly He is risen!” In Slavic countries like Ukraine and Russia, “Christ is risen” is just what you say to people at Easter. How wonderful that we make this greeting part of our tradition as well! It's a regular reminder of what we celebrate today and always: Christ is risen!

The paschal greeting can also be a great comfort to us in times of tribulation on this side of heaven. The Easter acclamation is a reminder of the outcome of our faith: eternal life in a resurrected body. In October, 1951 a young Christian named Eberhard Schulze was arrested by the Stasi, the secret police of the communist regime in East Germany. Eberhard was falsely accused of espionage against the Soviet Union and sentenced to ten years hard labor at a prison camp in Siberia. Eberhard gave up all hope of ever seeing Germany again. His grief had physical consequences: stomach pain and uncontrollable shaking at night, anxious dreams, and crying spells. Besides that, the difficult work turned men into beasts and Eberhard was as scared of his fellow prisoners as he was of the guards.

When Easter, 1952 came around, Eberhard remembered what his pastor once mentioned about how the Russians greet each other on Easter morning with the Paschal Greeting: “Christ is arisen!” - “He is risen indeed!” Eberhard took his chances and with an anxious voice said to a Russian officer: “Christos woskres,” “Christ is arisen!” Hesitating at first, the officer replied with a beaming face: “Woistunu woskres,” - “He is risen indeed!” In the mess hall, Russian prisoners greeted each other with the same ancient Easter greeting. Eberhard later said that “such a greeting between hopeless men became for them a piece of heaven on earth.” Never again did He sense the presence of the resurrected Christ as clearly as he did on that Easter morning as a political prisoner in Siberia. That’s the power of the Easter message, the joyous news of resurrection! It is a piece of heaven on earth as we remind each other that Christ not only died for us; He also rose from the dead that we, too, might rise from the dead! That’s the kind of hope that can get you through anything you’re going through in this life.

Dear Christians, like Eberhard Schulze, we, too, experience prison, maybe not physically, but spiritually. The Resurrection greeting brings hope to the hopeless, including when we are

hopeless. It is a piece of heaven on earth when we feel constrained by sin, death, and the devil, which formerly imprisoned us. If Christ rose from the dead, then that means what Jesus said is true. It means that we who are connected to Christ in Holy Baptism will join our LORD in the Resurrection. The Paschal greeting means that no matter what comes our way, in life or in death, we will rise to new life in our LORD on the last day. When our past sins continue to haunt us, when we fear death, or when the devil accuses us, we remember that “Christ is arisen!” And then we answer in faith: “He is risen indeed, Alleluia!”

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there when the body of Jesus was placed into the new tomb, into the prison of death. With their own eyes they saw Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepare Jesus for burial, covering His dead body with spices and wrapping Him in a shroud. They saw the large stone rolled in front of the grave and the guards set to make absolutely sure nobody would steal the body of Jesus. Like a prisoner, Jesus needed to be guarded, even in death. The rulers of the Jews knew what Jesus said about rising on the third day. Jesus had caused enough trouble in His life. The last thing the Jewish rulers needed was anything that might look like a resurrection. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary saw all the signs that Jesus was, in fact, dead and buried.

When Jesus died, He was guarded as a prisoner, and in a sense He was a prisoner: a prisoner of death. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), the wages of the sin of the world is the death of God’s Son. The wages of sin means that the penalty for sin is death, a prison sentence. That’s exactly what God warned Adam and Eve about in the Garden of Eden: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:16-17). The wages of sin is death. When you die, you lose all sensory connection to this world. You are led as a prisoner,

against your will, to a prison from which you cannot escape. In life you are free, in a way, free to live. But in death you become a prisoner. When He died, our LORD entered that prison of death, just like we will.

After a Sabbath's rest the two Marys made their way back to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus with more spices. As they discussed who could roll away the large stone covering the prison of our LORD, they looked up and it was already moved! They entered the tomb and there sat an angel. Of course, anytime an angel appears to men there is an element of fear. When the angel appeared to the shepherds at Christmas, he had to say: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people!" (Luke 2:10). So now the angel says "Do not be alarmed . . . Go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee." The angel tells the women to proclaim this good news of great joy that will be for all people: "*Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.*" The message of the angel is the message Mary would take to the Apostles, the message of the Church from the beginning: Christ has risen! He broke the bonds of death that imprisoned Him. He is not here in the grave. He broke out of the prison of death that He might be with us always, to the end of the age, in His Word and Sacraments. He broke out of the prison of death that we, too, might join Him in the Resurrection.

You heard this same message of the angel in the sequence hymn before the Gospel reading: "Christ is arisen from the grave's dark prison . . . Were Christ not arisen then death were still our prison." Jesus rose from the dead and that means we also, will rise from the dead. As St. Paul says in Romans 5:25, Jesus "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." Christ Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and then entered the prison of death so that death will no longer be a prison for us. Christ Jesus rose again from the dead to make us

righteous before the Father. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead then our faith would be futile and we would still be in our sins. . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." We will be led to death against our will, maybe like a child going to bed. But the resurrection of Christ transforms death from a prison into the portal to eternal life. The death and resurrection of Jesus brings us hope even in this life, so let our joy rise full and free; Christ our comfort true will be. Alleluia!

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.