

Easter Sunday

“Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands (*Lutheran Service Book*, #458)

“He is risen!” “He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” What need is there to write the rest of this devotion for Easter? This is the message of Martin Luther’s hymn published in 1524. Stanza 7 says: “Then let us feast this Easter Day on Christ, the Bread of heaven; the Word of grace has purged away the old and evil leaven. Christ alone our souls will feed; he is our meat and drink indeed; faith lives upon no other! Alleluia!”

This is the message that many of us will do our best to portray on this high holy day. Martin Luther gave it his best portrayal in this hymn in matching his words with an existing tune written by Johann Walther. J.S. Bach gave it another try in his *Orgelbüchlein*. We consistently fall short in any of our efforts to celebrate completely the Resurrection of our Lord. We have to simply bow in awe, saying the words of stanza 5, “He died on the accursed tree—so strong his love—to save us”.

If any of the readers of this devotion are organists, we struggle to even interpret what J.S. Bach composed in this chorale setting for the *Orgelbüchlein* (also a part of Cantata No.4). Some of you have interpreted the setting by starting softly (as Christ rests in the tomb) and building to climax as we play the final, “Alleluia!” Others of us play it majestically with full registration throughout. But no interpretation can properly help us “... keep the festival to which the Lord invites us” (stanza 6).

So in our effort to celebrate this holy day we struggle with ‘earthly comparisons’. Yesterday in Colorado it was a snowy February day with heavy clouds and gloomy atmosphere. Today the sun bounces off of the snow covered pines and reflects its light through our windows. This reminds me of the Stanza 1 words, “And brings to life from heaven. Therefore let us joyful be and sing to God right thankfully”.

Even though that grave might momentarily cause us to play softly, it doesn’t last long because we realize that “...His blood now marks our door; faith points to it; death passes o’er and Satan cannot harm us”. (Stanza 5).

I’ll end this devotion by quoting Richard Massie’s translation of Stanza 3: “Christ Jesus, God’s own Son, came down, his people to deliver; destroying sin, he took the crown from death’s pale brow forever: stripped of pow’r, no more it reigns; an empty form alone remains”.

Happy Easter! This hymn won’t let us be anything but happy! “Alleluia” or if you prefer “Hallelujah” or “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

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Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands for our offenses given;
but now at God's right hand he stands and brings us life from heaven.
Therefore let us joyful be and sing to God right thankfully loud songs of alleluia! Alleluia!

No son of man could conquer death, such ruin sin had wrought us.
No innocence was found on earth, and therefore death had brought us
into bondage from of old and ever grew more strong and bold
and held us as its captive. Alleluia!

Christ Jesus, God's own Son, came down, his people to deliver;
destroying sin, he took the crown from death's pale brow forever:
stripped of pow'r, no more it reigns; an empty form alone remains;
its sting is lost forever. Alleluia!

It was a strange and dreadful strife when life and death contended;
the victory remained with life, the reign of death was ended.
Holy Scripture plainly saith that death is swallowed up by death.
Its sting is lost forever. Alleluia!

Here our true Paschal Lamb we see, whom God so freely gave us;
he died on the accursèd tree—so strong his love—to save us.
See, his blood now marks our door; faith points to it; death passes o'er,
And Satan cannot harm us. Alleluia!

So let us keep the festival to which the Lord invites us;
Christ is himself the joy of all, the sun that warms and lights us.
Now his grace to us imparts eternal sunshine to our hearts;
the night of sin is ended. Alleluia!

Then let us feast this Easter Day on Christ, the bread of heaven;
the Word of grace has purged away the old and evil leaven.
Christ alone our souls will feed; he is our meat and drink indeed;
Faith lives upon no other! Alleluia!

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Text: Martin Luther. English translation prepared by Richard Massie, 1800-87, alt.
Tune: CHRIST LAG IN TODESBANDEN, Johann Walter, 1524.
Both text and tune are in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]