

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

The word “unprecedented” is thrown about a lot these days. This or that action was “unprecedented” ... no preceding act like it ... never happened before.

In the world around us, this word is thrown about, often with a bit of outrage or maybe despair. Some might try to use “unprecedented” to describe the disfavored view that many in the world have for the church, but that would be wrong. The early church experienced animosity and persecution aplenty; more than we here in America anyway. But we can use the word today for what we celebrate as we gather together ... for the Resurrection of our Lord, and we use it without outrage; rather joy. We use it without despair; rather hope. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Yes, just as Jesus had foretold, He was going to suffer and be killed, and it happened. Death by crucifixion was not unprecedented. The Romans did it, and they were good at it. We recalled Jesus' fateful day on Good Friday, and we know that it was Jesus Himself who submitted to that torturous death. He drank this cup of suffering to the dregs for us, for our salvation, to bear the sins of the world, an innocent lamb sacrificed for our transgressions, our guilt placed on His innocent body. He drank it so that *“through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil”* (Heb. 2:14); it was to deliver us from the fear of death and the bondage of sin.

But something unprecedented did happen, as Jesus also foretold. *“[O]n the third day [He would] be raised”* (Matt. 16:21), He told the disciples. And we are here today on Easter Sunday to proclaim to the world ... this happened, too. Though unprecedented, this happened. The Jews aided by their Roman occupiers *“put him to death by hanging him on a tree,”* as Peter preached, *“but God raised him on the third day.”* Jesus did die, but Jesus lives! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Thus, the church confesses Jesus Christ and Him crucified, but we also confess the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the early service, we heard St. Paul recite a creedal statement: *“I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures”* (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Momentarily, we will confess similarly with the familiar words of the Nicene Creed: our “Lord Jesus Christ ... was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures.”

Through the years, these creedal claims of Christianity, much like those of Jesus' Divine personhood, have been criticized and even dismissed as incredible —

meaning not believable — incredible perhaps because they were unprecedented. But just because something hasn't happened before, doesn't mean that it can't happen. Indeed, Jesus' death and His unprecedented resurrection are believable — we believe them. More than that, they are foundational to our Christian faith. As you heard earlier, these are the things of “*first importance.*”

But we don't believe them as Mormons believe in the ahistorical Book of Mormon. We don't believe these things because we have a “burning in the bosom” (Doctrine and Covenants, 9:8). We have historical evidence, evidence for the resurrection that has been the catalyst that has turned atheists into, at least, theists, and skeptics into believers. For example, former atheist Anthony Flew wrote: “the evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It's outstandingly different in quality and quantity” (Gary R. Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did the Resurrection Happen? A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*, 85). Let's consider this evidence.

First, for a resurrection to take place, there must be a death. When it comes to Jesus, that's clearly established not only by the New Testament witnesses, but also by Roman historian Tacitus and Jewish historian Josephus, antagonists toward Christianity. Even modern scholar Bart Ehrman (perhaps now an agnostic) admits: “Since no one would have made up the idea of a crucified messiah, Jesus must really have existed, must really have raised messianic expectations, and must really have been crucified” (Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, 164). Christ crucified may be scandalous to some, and considered folly to others (1 Cor. 1:23), but it is nonetheless true. In fact, not only did Jesus die, but He was also buried, the Scriptures say and we confess, offering more proof that Jesus indeed died.

Second, for a resurrection to have happened, there can't remain a dead and decaying corpse. When the Scriptures talk about Jesus' resurrection, they're not talking about the eternity of the spirit, or a so-called spiritual resurrection. The Scriptures state that Jesus rose physically from the dead. Therefore, the Evangelists report that when the women went to the tomb, Jesus' body was not there where it had been laid. An angel confirmed it: “*you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay [but lies no longer]. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead.*”

Moreover, that the Evangelists report this based on the report of the women is astounding for first-century Jews, for the testimony of women was considered suspect back then. Even the Jews had to admit that the tomb was empty. That's why they posted a guard at the tomb ... to prevent the disciples from stealing away the body. But neither the “watchers nor the seal” (LSB487:4) could prevent Jesus from exiting the tomb alive. And the Jews could not point to a dead and decaying

body as the apostles began to preach Jesus' resurrection in the weeks following Pentecost. Surely, the Jews would have done that, if the body were still lying in the tomb.

Third, knowledge of Jesus' resurrection changed the disciples — many find this fact to be some of the strongest proof for it. Cowering disciples became bold preachers. Courage replaced cowardice; hope replaced despair because of the truth of Jesus' resurrection. After all, would the disciples risk all for something they knew to be a lie? They didn't become rich and powerful because of their preaching. Rather, they would die martyrs' deaths in subsequent years. Would they subject themselves to such persecution and death for the sake of a story that they themselves made up and knew to be false?

Of course, someone who is deceived or deluded might, but they weren't deceived. The resurrected Jesus was not a lie, and He was not a ghost. The Scriptures bear witness — we heard Peter preach it: God *“made [Jesus] to appear; not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”* We'll hear more about it in the weeks ahead: the disciples saw Jesus alive. They touched Him; they talked to Him; they ate with Him. No, the disciples weren't killed for a lie. They were martyrs to the truth. Jesus rose from the dead; He is living.

Perhaps, the apostle most changed by Jesus' resurrection was Paul. At first, a persecutor of this nascent church, Paul became an apostle of Christ and a missionary of the church, not only powerfully preaching Christ and His cross, but also vociferously defending the fact of His resurrection. *“[I]f Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”* (1 Cor. 15:17-20).

How did this enemy of Christ change so quickly and become Christ's greatest preacher? He met the risen Jesus. *“Last of all, as to one untimely born, [Christ] appeared also to me”* (1 Cor. 15:8). Paul also knew the truth of the resurrection, and so Paul also endured the ridicule, the sufferings, the persecution that went along with an unwavering proclamation of Jesus as Him whom God *“raised from the dead”* ... Jesus as Him *“who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”* (Rom. 4:24-25) ... Jesus as Him who will appear again and take us to Himself in glory.

For the good news is not only the unprecedented truth that Jesus died and rose from the dead, but that His victory over death and the grave is also our victory over them. And we trust that we who look to Jesus and believe in Him have eternal life,

and He will raise us up on the last day (John 6:40). This is our Easter hope ... a sure and certain hope in our own resurrection, for

1. Jesus lives! The vict'ry's won! Death no longer can appall me;
 Jesus lives! Death's reign is done! From the grave Christ will recall me.
 Brighter scenes will then commence; This shall be my confidence.
5. Jesus lives! And now is death But the gate of life immortal;
 This shall calm my trembling breath When I pass its gloomy portal.
 Faith shall cry, as fails each sense; Jesus is my confidence! (LSB490)

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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