

Christ is risen! Alleluia! In the name of ✠ Jesus.

On Good Friday, I emphasized Jesus' own prophecies about His death, but in many of those quotations, I stopped short. I wasn't trying to be deceitful; I just didn't want to get ahead of myself in Holy Week and preempt this festive day. But I think you already know it. Jesus not only told the disciples that He would be betrayed, and would suffer, and be killed, but also that He would "*on the third day be raised*" from the dead (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23). It's why you're here today.

Now, in Matthew, each time Jesus foretells His death and resurrection, it's with the disciples by themselves. And although Matthew reports that the disciples "*were greatly distressed*" by Jesus' words (Matt. 17:23), they must have told others, for as we heard last Sunday, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate and said to him, "*Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'*" They wanted Pilate to post a guard because they feared that the "*disciples [would come] and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead'*"—a giant scam (Matt. 27:63-64).

For what else would the people conclude except that He was the Christ? For that's what Moses and the prophets foretold. Listen to St. Paul's testimony: "*I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles*" (Acts 26:22-23).

Pilate refused the Jews' request and instead told them to secure the tomb themselves. "You have soldiers. You do it," he told them. And they did. They put a seal on the tomb and set a guard.

And so, Jesus was lying in the tomb as Friday came to an end. Jesus lay there in death all of Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath day. And as evening came, so also came the first day of the week. You recall that's how the Jews marked the days. A day ended with the setting of the sun, and a new day began. It was the third day, and Jesus rose from the dead.

Thus, as the sun set shortly after 8 PM last night, according to Jewish reckoning, we also began the third day since we remembered Jesus' death. Rightly, therefore, we kept vigil, and rightly we celebrated Jesus' resurrection for the first time last night. But it's not the last time we will celebrate it, and it's not the last time we will shout out the Easter acclamation. We say it today again with gusto — Christ is risen! Alleluia! — and we will say it throughout the season, along with our Alleluias!

Now, we don't know precisely when life returned to Jesus' dead body. We don't

know precisely when Jesus exited the tomb. What we do know is that it happened some time after the sun went down on the Sabbath day and before the dawn of the first day of the week, for that's when Mary Magdalene and another Mary—called Mary the mother of James in Mark and Luke, and who had both witnessed where Jesus had been buried (Matt. 27:61)—came to the tomb. When they arrived Jesus was already gone from the tomb.

Other Gospel accounts tell of the women's purpose for going to the tomb—to prepare Jesus' body properly for burial. It had been done hastily on Friday afternoon before the Sabbath. Mark tells us of the women's concern about how to get into the tomb. Who would roll away the stone for them? They didn't have to worry, for Matthew reports about the angel who came down and with the power of an earthquake, opened the tomb, rolling the stone back. And Matthew reports the guard's reaction: they were scared stiff at the appearance of the angel.

We shouldn't fret, by the way, about these differences in the stories. Experts in evidence claim that the differences provide credibility to the eye-witness accounts.

Now all this happened so that the women and later the disciples could peer into the tomb and bear witness to God's power over death. The angel knew both their trepidation and their purpose. *"Do not be afraid,"* he told them, *"for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified."* And then he announced to them the incredible news: *"He is not here, for he has risen, as he said."*

What Jesus had foretold had come to pass, but not right there before them. He didn't stretch and sit up from His three-day sleep in death in their sight. Before they arrived, breath had already returned into His uncorrupted body, as His father David had foretold about His Son — *"you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption"* (Ps. 16:10). Blood had already begun again coursing through His veins. He had already sat up and exited from the closed tomb, not even disturbing the seal. Jesus was not there. When the women peered in, they found an empty tomb. *"Come, see the place where he lay,"* the angel told them as translated in the ESV. Really, "the place where He used to lie," picking up the nuance of the imperfect tense and bearing witness that He was already gone.

The women were surely excited already by this good news, but the angel wasn't done with his divine message to them. After their eyes and ears had confirmed what the angel was telling them, he told them to go and tell Jesus' disciples the same message of His resurrection. "Jesus is risen from the dead; go to Galilee, and there you'll see Him." "You mean we'll get to see Him?" And their excitement turned to *"fear and great joy."* Off they went to tell the disciples as they had been instructed.

But there was one more surprise in store for the women on this Easter morn.

They got to see the risen Jesus. He greeted them, and that's all it took. They recognized Jesus. Was that because of His voice? We learn from other Gospels that the resurrected Jesus still bore the wounds of the crucifixion. Were the bruises from the beating and the stripes from the whips of His scourging still visible? Was He still "*marred, beyond human semblance*" (Isaiah 52:14), as the prophet Isaiah prophetically described Him. Was His appearance beyond recognition, but His sheep still recognized the voice of their Good Shepherd? It's not how I picture the resurrected Christ on that glorious Easter morn, though my view has been probably been affected by artists' renderings. On the other hand, we remember, faith does come by hearing rather than by sight ... hearing the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

The women fell down at Jesus' feet and worshiped Him. The nail punctures in His feet would have confirmed it. "We are not hallucinating; we are not distraught, out of our minds. This is our Lord and Savior, in the flesh, and He is alive." Jesus sent them on their way to report to the disciples, that "Christ is risen! Alleluia!"

Yes, Christ is risen. Jesus lives, yet today! We worship the Son of Man, sacrificed for the sins of the world, and the Son of God, who won the victory over death and the grave, who lives and reigns at the right hand of the Father, and who will come again in glory to raise up to resurrection glory all the dead who believed in Him, and to glorify the bodies of those living at His return. His resurrection victory will be ours, and we will live forever with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all the saints in Paradise.

As we await that day, however, it will not always be pleasant. We will have crosses to bear. People will mock us, berate us, persecute us, even as we have heard again recently in Finland with Minister Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola. The news of their so-called hate crimes has shocked Christian and non-Christian alike around the world. Yet, these two have endured and continue to endure with such steadfastness and such grace. Our sister Päivi, especially, with the confidence and grace of someone who knows and trusts the risen Christ.

Over the last few days, I looked again at her hate-filled pamphlet, as it was labeled. It was nothing of the sort. I was especially struck by this "Final Word." Päivi wrote: "A few months ago I received an email from a person wondering if I still considered the Biblical teaching on the family relevant. This person asked: 'If the Bible so most unequivocally relates the facts, can you look me straight in the eye and claim that you believe the story of how the sea parted at the stroke of a magic wand, [remember, in our Old Testament reading today, we hear Moses sing of the Lord's great deliverance in this very event; we answer "yes, we believe it"; the antagonist continued, do you believe the story of] how Jesus fed an immense crowd of people with a few fish and a couple pieces of bread, etc.? If you in all seriousness believe these stories, how can you imagine that anyone would take you

seriously? ...” You can hear the scorn in this person's voice. Such contempt!

How did Päivi respond? By pointing this person to the resurrection. “[I]n my opinion,” she said, “the central claim of Christianity, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, is the Bible's most unfathomable miracle. From a medical doctor's point of view, this is the utmost impossibility. The dead cannot come back to life. If God performs such a miracle, why can He not perform other miracles? Jesus' death and resurrection is the core of the entire Christian faith. On this the Bible stands or falls. If one does not believe in it, there is nothing left of Christianity. And yet again, if I believe this, it follows logically that I must believe everything else Christ teaches in the Bible through the Apostles and Prophets. ¶ This trust in the Word of God and the joy and assurance of the Gospel go hand in hand.”¹ Thus writes Päivi. Wow! What a confession!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: this confidence Päivi displays here, this grace, this peace are the fruits of a firm trust in Christ, in His death for our sins, in His resurrection from the dead, in His promise to deliver us ultimately from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.

God grant these to us on this day of Resurrection and every day to us resurrection people until Jesus calls us to Himself in heaven. And may He give us mouths to share this good news boldly, that Christ is risen! Alleluia!

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

¹ Päivi Räsänen, “Male and Female He Created Them: Homosexual relationships challenge the Christian concept of humanity,” p. 23