

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

Are you livin' it? Are you living in the joy?

I'm not talking about feelings or moods here – but that joy that breaks through even the greatest sorrow and hurt to bring new life.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

We get to rejoice with this acclamation because

- we have died with Christ,
- been buried with Christ,
- and been raised with him to new life.

We get to rejoice because in Holy Baptism we have been joined to Christ,

united with Jesus

in all that he went through to save us and all creation.

But it wasn't always this way.

We were not born with this joyous shout on our lips.

We were born not knowing Jesus

– ignorant of his love for us and of our broken need for his saving grace.

We needed to be evangelized

– told and shown the good news of Jesus

– which most of us were by our parents, grandparents, and church families.

The Gospel is a relationship into which we were invited as we learned the truth about ourselves and the world.

This is exactly the situation of the Jewish people of Jerusalem on that Pentecost morning when Peter preached his great sermon.

As Jesus had said from the cross: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

They didn't know they had handed over the Messiah.

They didn't know this Jesus from Nazareth was the promised Savior.

They knew he was a man who did great things

- healing the sick,
- giving sight to the blind,
- forgiving sins
- and raising the dead;

They should have known that Jesus was the promised Messiah,

but they were looking for something flashier

-- a superhero type –

and a poor rabbi hanging from a cross just didn't fit.

So Peter was proclaiming the truth to this ignorant people – of whom he was a part.

He wants them to come to saving faith in Jesus, too.

Fellow Israelites –

Here's where things stand.

Jesus of Nazareth, as you all know, traveled among all of us doing the deeds of God and demonstrating the power of God.

You have even said so yourselves, calling him a holy man.

And according to the plan of God, you handed him over to non-Jews – the Romans – to be executed.

Now Peter did not say any of this with rancor or accusation – simply as an objective statement of the truth.

It is a sad part of our Christian history that we have harbored hostility toward the Jewish people,

blaming them for Jesus' death and subjecting them to unspeakable cruelty because of our misguided thinking.

We need to pay close attention to Peter – *for he says clearly that the betrayal, suffering, death and burial of Jesus happened according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge.*

Both God's chosen people of the Old Covenant (the Jews)

and God's chosen people of the New Covenant – the Gentiles – participated in the suffering and death of Jesus.

Nobody gets off the hook – we are all complicit.

That's the bad news – that's the judgment of God's Law.

Now comes the Good News that is truly news

– a message that no one in the congregation would have heard or known:

BUT – in spite of the fact that you and the Romans put Jesus to death –

God raised him up, having freed him from death.

Because it was impossible for Jesus to be held in death's power.

Notice that Peter does not say “death was too weak to contain Jesus.”

Though that is certainly true, it seems to imply that if only death would go to the gym more often, it could get strong enough.

No – the truth is that Jesus is stronger than death

– stronger than any power on heaven and earth.

He cannot be held down – not by pain, not by rejection, not by any means whatsoever.

Because the Father's love for the Son is greater than anything else.

Nothing – absolutely nothing

– is stronger than God's love demonstrated by Jesus being raised from the dead.

Those who hear this message and trust its truth know a power like no other for newness in their own lives.

When people hear that Jesus is risen from the dead as he promised,

they are drawn into the story in which everything he did

– the healings, miracles, and teaching

– is the sovereignty of God over all things.

When hearers of the Gospel trust this story,

they experience themselves as recipients with Jesus of life through suffering and death.

They experience themselves as receiving a whole new life to live— right now -- here on earth.

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In January, I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which marks the site of Jesus' burial and resurrection.

In my travels, I have seen many a bone of this or that holy person; **but there were no bones of Jesus in that Jerusalem tomb.**

- No bones of Jesus for sale in the gift shop.
- No bones of Jesus at the place of his burial.
- No bones of Jesus being hawked by beggars in the street -- \$1 each!

Peter makes the point that King David's tomb has David's bones in it –

But the tomb of the one descendant of David whose kingdom will last forever has no bones.

This Jesus God raised up!

There are no bones because he is alive!

And we, Peter says of himself and the other disciples – are witnesses to this reality.

We saw him dead on the cross, and we saw him alive. We are eyewitnesses. You can trust our story.

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It is easy to speak of something when you have personal experience, isn't it.

I can tell you there are no bones in Jesus' tomb because I was there.

You can tell me about the birth of your child

- or about your school or job,
- or the house you live in
- because you have first-hand experience.

When we don't have first-hand experience, it is easy to doubt what people say.

Do you ever have doubts?

Most people do

- some doubt the truth of climate change.
- some doubt whether we really landed on the moon;
- some doubt whether humans descended from apes.
- some doubt the Virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection.

For some, it even goes beyond doubt

– they have completely closed their minds and ears to anything other than their own opinion.

They are intolerant of any view but their own.

I have doubts

- about the faith of believers in the western hemisphere.

I have doubts about my own ability to draw people into the Good News.

Some days, I have doubts about my own faith

—whether it is strong and right.

When it comes to faith, doubt is not a bad thing

– it is an open door for questions, new insights, and discovery.

In other words, our doubt is **the mission field of the Holy Spirit**

– the good soil in which the Word of God and the Spirit of God
nurture and nourish our hearts to bring us to the conviction of faith.

When Thomas doubted the report of Jesus' resurrection,

it was not closed-minded,

but he sought physical, tangible evidence.

He wanted first-hand experience with the risen Lord as his fellow disciples had had.

He was willing to be convinced, but only by Jesus himself.

Thomas often gets a bad rap --= but he is actually a good model for doubters.

When we are in doubt about a matter of faith, seek to be persuaded by God's Word – by Jesus.

Don't turn to human philosophies and theories to become convinced about *God's* works.

Don't allow popular opinion to define your faith.

- --turn to Jesus;
- turn to the Bible
- –ask for God to show you.

When you doubt your faith,

Ask Jesus to let you touch the wounds of his hands and put your hand in his wounded side.

And know that his answer is “yes” as you receive his body in your hand and dip your hand in the cup of his blood.

Even though we see Jesus in the bread and cup with the eyes of faith, it is nonetheless truly the risen Lord Jesus who is present.

Those who were eyewitnesses to his death and who saw him risen from the dead have passed down to us their trustworthy narratives of Jesus' saving deeds.

And believing, we pass them down to our children and grandchildren, beginning with this:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen