

## Grace to you...and Peace

### **Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tomb.**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The above “hymn” is traditionally sung or said in the Eastern Orthodox Church on Resurrection Sunday (i.e. Easter) and for the 39 days that follow Easter, until the Ascension of the Lord. This brief poetic line is also included in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* for use in funeral services, so, after the funeral itself, I often say these lines in the cemetery at the beginning of the committal. How beautiful is this hymn? How beautiful is this image?

**Christ is risen from the dead:** this is the proclamation on that first Easter Sunday. The angelic message to the first visitors’ to Jesus’ tomb is: He is not here. He is risen. Go, tell his disciples that he has been raised from the dead (see Matt. 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7; Luke 24:5). Jesus Christ *has been* raised. He *is* risen. This means, this event happened once *and is still in effect*. What is the significance of Jesus being raised? Well, it reveals that his death and resurrection was his way of...

**Trampling down death by death:** this is such a powerful image. Imagine a duel taking place. The enemy has a powerful weapon in his hands, but the hero disarms the enemy and then destroys the enemy with the enemy’s own weapon! The devil’s ultimate weapon in the world is the power of death. Death is a weapon. It is a weapon that causes fear, and is often used to oppress and enslave people. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus shared in our humanity (i.e. flesh and blood), “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil” (Hebrews 2:14, NRSV). In Colossians we read that Jesus forgave all our sins, canceled what was written against us “nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:13-15, NIV). It is *by dying* that Jesus destroyed the power of death.

In Revelation, John *hears* an elder comfort him by saying, “See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed” (5:5, NIV). Again, just like Jesus *has been* raised, there’s that past perfect tense of the verb, here: Jesus *has* triumphed. He conquered, and the effects of that triumph are still in effect. So John *hears* that the victorious conquering Christ is a Lion (regal, fearful, powerful, right?!), but in the very next verse, John looks and *sees* “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain...” (5:6, NIV). Jesus conquers and “has overcome the world” (John 16:33) *by* laying down his life...and we are called to “conquer” through the same faithfulness of Jesus (e.g. Luke 9:12-27; Rev. 12:11). The Moravian Church’s emblem is a picture of a Lamb carrying a banner, with a Latin phrase, *Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur*, which means, “Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.” And we can do this because, even now, Jesus is in the business of...

**Giving life to those in the tomb:** Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:19, NIV). Jesus, of course, raised a few people from the dead even before he rose from the dead (see Mark 5:35-43; John 11:1-44), but at the moment of his death, we’re told that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, the earth shook, rocks split, and “the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life” (Matt. 27:52, NIV)! And that, when Jesus returns all the dead shall be raised (see John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:20-26; Rev. 20:11-13). In a sense, even now, the followers of Christ have already been raised, and live in newness of life (see Rom. 6:4; also Eph. 2:1-10; Rev. 20:4-6). And we can live in newness of

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life because of what Christ has done for us through his death and resurrection, to “free those who all their lives here held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb. 2:15, NRSV).

Friends, we need no longer fear death. The good news of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is that death has no power over us anymore. We no longer need to be “on the defensive” against death. In fact, the Church is to be “on the offensive” against the powers of death. This is what Jesus means when he says, “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18, NRSV). The Church, in Christ, is now to be the frontlines against all the powers of death. We are to overcome the gates of Hades, attacking the powers of death. Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him...by laying down our lives. Because Jesus died and rose again, he already has hold of the keys of Death and Hades (see Rev. 1:18), and so commands us, “Do not be afraid!” “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18, NIV). The message of Easter is that death is a failed power. Jesus calls his followers to neither fear death as a weapon against them, nor use it as a weapon against others.

This Easter season, as we celebrate Christ rising from the dead, overpowering the powers of death, and leading us into new life, may we consider any ways in which we still “remain captive to doubt and fear, bound by the ways that lead to death” (*Book of Common Worship*, WJK Press, 2018, p. 320). Then may we look to Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, renouncing any ways we still participate in the ways of death, that we might find grace to lay down our defenses against God and against others, that we might more closely follow our slaughtered and victorious Lamb. The only way the followers of Jesus overcome/conquer evil is “by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink back from death” (Rev. 12:11, NIV). May this be said of us, as well. It’s the only way, friends.

Grace & Peace  
in Christ,

*Jeff*

**Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:**

**“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”**

**“Where, O death, is your victory?**

**Where, O death, is your sting?”**

**The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. – 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 (NRSV)**