

A Hymn of Triumph Let us Sing

In the name of our crucified, buried, and *risen* Lord Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The “Songs of the Passion” was the theme of our evening Lenten services this year. At each devotion, we took a closer look at one of the great hymns of the season. I’m glad we did. I’ve had a number of people tell me that they appreciated the exercise. They mentioned how it’s easy to sing the words of a hymn without really thinking about what they mean or about which passages of Scripture they are based upon. It helped them to realize that a good hymn is really a sermon set to music.

Anyway, as a capstone to the series, I thought it would be good for us leave the songs of the passion, and finish the project with a hymn of triumph celebrating our Savior’s victory over death and the grave. And what better Easter hymn to choose than one written by the man most responsible for introducing congregational hymn singing to the Church? Thus we have before us Luther’s great Easter hymn: *Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands*.

We’re probably not as familiar with it as we should be. I suspect that part of the reason is that it’s got a distinctly medieval feel about it. It doesn’t sound as uplifting to the modern ear as some of our other more upbeat and joyful Easter hymns. But then, we manage to muddle through other medieval sounding hymns like *A Mighty Fortress* and *Built on the Rock* without too much trouble. I think we can handle this one too.

And there’s a good reason this one sounds medieval. It is. It’s based on a much older hymn called *Victimae Paschali* that dates to around AD 1000. We’re going to listen to it in a bit. I want you to hear it. It’s quite beautiful. But I want you to know that it was used in the worship service as what’s called a *sequence*. It was kind of like the Alleluia verse that we sing before the Gospel is read. This one, *Victimae Paschali*, which means “to the Paschal Victim”, was sung before the Gospel was read on Easter Sunday. It’s a Gregorian chant. And if you turn the page in your hymnal, you’ll find it there. You might want to read along as you hear it. The chant is on the right (hymn 460), and the refrains are on the left (hymn 459). The version we’re going to hear is a bit different than what’s on the page, but I think you’ll be able to follow. Let’s listen.

Nice, huh? Now, that would have been chanted by a choir of monks in Latin, and virtually no one sitting in the pew would have a clue what it meant. Luther adapted the ideas and themes of *Victimae Paschali* into a hymn the congregation could sing in the vernacular, that is, in German, so that everyone could understand – and more importantly *remember*. That’s why Luther wanted people to sing hymns: he meant them to be a vehicle to help people learn and retain the faith. A friend of Luther named Walter adjusted the Gregorian chant tune to fit the hymn, but it’s mostly the same. Listen: Christians, to the Paschal Victim; Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands.

Okay, with that background, let’s get into the words of the hymn. It starts in the dark grave where Christ is entombed, bound by death – the strongest of all chains and, rightfully, the bonds that we fear the most. And right away we hear *why* he’s bound in death: “for our offenses given”. It was our sins that put him there as the Father’s sacrifice of atonement. He placed the penalty of our sins on Jesus so that he might suffer and die in our place. That’s why he was bound in death. And the operative word there is “was”. He’s not bound there anymore.

No, Christ Jesus is stronger than the strong bands of death. He cast them off as easily as Samson threw off so many attempts to bind him. Jesus burst the bonds of death. He rose from the dead. And now, ascended, he sits exalted at his Father's right hand. And that is for us the cause of endless joy so that full of thanks we sing, "Alleluia!" – which is Hebrew for "Praise the Lord!" And here, you thought Lutherans didn't do that.

The second verse describes the hopelessness of the human condition in the state of sin. We were powerless to escape the bondage of death because its curse held us fast. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. None are innocent. As the Lord looks over us, he makes this judgment: the inclination of each person's heart is only evil all the time. And the wages of sin is death. Like the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, we were held captive by our sin the end of which is death.

Hope comes down to us in verse three. As Moses was sent down from his first encounter with the Lord on Mt. Sinai to deliver the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage, so our Lord Jesus was sent down from a much higher place to deliver us from a captivity far worse. Moses, for his part, went reluctantly, dragging his feet. Not so Christ our Lord. He willingly descended from glory to take on our flesh in humility. And in the flesh, he faced our fiercest foe. You'll note that here Luther personifies death, and has Christ snatching the crown from his "pale brow". It's likely a reference to Satan who is called "the prince of this age" and whose goal it is to kill and destroy those Christ came to save. It's likely that the devil thought he won when Christ died, that he'd beaten him. But no, by his death Christ overcame the power of death. He paid sin's awful price. The debt we owe is cancelled. Thus death has no more power over us. "It's sting is lost forever".

The fourth verse describes the fierce battle. It happened on the cross when "life and death contended". But the Lord of life could not be defeated by death. Even in suffering death, he wins. The biblical reference here is from 1st Corinthians where Paul writes, "When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where 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."

Paul is referencing today's Old Testament lesson where Isaiah says that the Lord "will swallow up death forever". It's fascinating how it works out in the divine economy. Mankind fell by eating the forbidden fruit, and thus death came on all. Christ, on the cross, is said to be consuming death itself, swallowing it up, as if drinking down the deadly poison of its curse. And then, because of his gruesome feast on death, in a stunning turn of events, the cross becomes the tree of life: its fruit, the body and blood of Christ, are what we eat to live forever. That's spelled out in the last verse – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The fifth verse enjoins us to fix our attention on Jesus, our true Paschal Lamb. This harks back to the Exodus again and to the tenth and most terrible plague by which Israel was freed from bondage. Before I unpack it, though, it might be helpful to explain the word "Paschal" because I'm guessing it's not part of most people's daily vocabulary. It may surprise you to know that in most western languages, Easter isn't called Easter or anything that sounds even remotely like it. The word Easter is derived from the same root as east. It's a reference to the rising sun. The idea is that in Christ's resurrection, the new day of God's grace has dawned. In most other western languages, the Feast of Christ's Resurrection is called "Pascha" or some other transliteration of the Hebrew word Pesach which means "Passover". And this helps us to see the connections.

Recall in the first Passover, the Children of Israel slaughtered lambs. They brushed the blood of the lambs on their doorposts and stayed inside, feasting on the roasted flesh of their sacrificial victims. At midnight, when the angel of death came and saw the blood of the lamb, he would pass over that house. But at any house not so marked, like those of the Egyptians, the angel of death struck down the firstborn of man and beast. At sunrise the wails of the mourning Egyptians compelled the Pharaoh to let God's people go free.

Now we are invited to see that Christ Jesus is the true Paschal lamb, the Lamb of God that all those other sacrificed lambs merely pointed to and foreshadowed. As St. Paul says, "Christ our Passover is slain". The Father painted his Son's blood not on a doorpost, but on the wood of the cross – "the accursed tree – so strong his love to save us". That blood is what God sees on us and our children. By faith we too see it. And the curse of death passes over us. Satan is powerless to accuse those who are covered by the blood of Christ who died for sin.

And (verse six) ever since Christ's death and resurrection, which is the true Passover, we are to keep the feast just as God's ancient people kept the Passover. They did it once a year. We do it every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. This is the Feast of the new covenant to which our Lord invites us.

The second half of the sixth verse brings in the "Light" themes that I mentioned earlier. Christ is elsewhere in Scripture called the "Dayspring from on high" and "the Light of the world". In him it's the dawn of the day of God's grace and favor. The long night of sin and fear is past. We are children of the Light. Let us walk in the Light and rejoice.

And how do we do that? The seventh and last verse answers the question. "Let us feast this Easter Day on Christ the bread of heaven". Let's receive the gifts of his grace and assurance. As the Israelites ate the lambs whose blood protected them from death, let us eat the bread of heaven, which is Christ's body given for us in the Sacrament. The infection of sin, here called the old and evil leaven, has been purged away. "Christ alone our souls shall feed; he is our meat and drink indeed; faith lives upon no other". The reference is to John chapter six where Jesus says "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him ... whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

His words and promises are sure. So, let's keep and treasure them. And let's recognize that every time we meet and participate in the Lord's Supper it is for us another Easter Day, a celebration of our Lord's victory over death and an occasion to receive again the gifts of his grace by which he assures us of his forgiveness and strengthens our faith in him unto life everlasting.

So, yes, it's a medieval sounding hymn, but there's a powerful message here; a message that God's people have been singing since long before the middle ages. The point to be made is that they are still singing it. Those who have died in Christ, live even though they died. Indeed, those who are in Christ never die. For those who believe and trust in Jesus, death is a toothless tiger, a wasp without a sting, a viper without fangs because Christ has won for us the victory. And that is a truth worth rejoicing in always. Therefore all the faithful say, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!