

TITLE: “Risen Lord in Hearts Rejoicing”

Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! This is the day that the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it! Indeed, as Holy Scripture exhorts us, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!” And yet, it is not in our nature to rejoice in the Lord. We love to rejoice in material things: pleasures, successes, awards, money, power, prestige. But, how can we learn to rejoice in the Lord? Even after the long season of Lent, the 40-day fast, after we've struggled to keep our Lenten disciplines, we're ready to celebrate and to feast, but what will be the reason for our feasting? Will we simply return to the same old bad habits? We must feast. God's honor requires that we keep this day holy. Christ's love and his victory over death demand it. But, our feast must be not only a feast to fill the belly but to fuel our faith and our souls.

We humans are curious creatures. We often work hard to achieve a goal and then feel sad and disappointed when we finally get it. I wonder how the disciples of Jesus felt when they learned that he had risen from the dead? Perhaps the shock of being confronted by angels from heaven at the tomb left them unable to process what was happening. For hours after learning of the resurrection, they were troubled, because, it says, “they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.” They didn't know the scripture, even though Christ told it to them over and over again. They weren't rejoicing. Instead they locked themselves into an upper room

because they were afraid that the Jewish leaders would do the same to them that they did to him. Perhaps they felt a bit of what psychologists call “survivor’s guilt.” When a person survives a car crash or a house fire while others perish, they often feel guilty, as though they should have died and that they don’t deserve to live. Especially Peter, having denied his Lord, he must have been filled with sorrow, even after he had seen the empty tomb.

Sometimes we feel our souls burdened right at the moment when they should be happy and free. You may have heard the story of Juliane Koecke. She was a 17 year old girl whose parents had moved to Peru from Germany to help preserve the rainforest there. She and her mother caught a flight from Lima, Peru on their way back to their biological research in the rainforest. The plane they were traveling on, flew into a thunderstorm, and Juliane saw a bolt of lightning strike the wing. Within seconds the wing broke away and the whole plane began to rip apart. Suddenly Juliane found herself hurtling downward in the open air, still buckled into her seat. After blacking out, she recalls waking up sometime later on the ground, somewhere in the rainforest. She had fallen some two miles to the earth and lived, the sole survivor of the crash. Her mother and 80 or so other passengers had perished. She was rescued by fishermen eleven days later. Afterwards she became a successful biologist, but she would always be haunted by the question, “why me? why did I survive?”

During Holy Week, we followed Christ to the table on Maundy Thursday, to the cross on Good Friday, and the tomb on Holy Saturday. We shared in his pain and sorrow, the Lamb of God slain for us and for our salvation. And now, in a sharp and jolting turn of events, the Church calls us to rejoice! “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast. Not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him ... Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Christ has died and we survived. The Son of God has perished because of us, and yet we go free. It was our sin that held him to the tree, our mocking voice that derided him as he hung on the cross. And yet, for those who put their trust in him will listen, the guilt, the guilt of our sin will melt away, because he lives! He lives! He has broken the iron gates of death and sin and guilt, and being raised from the dead, he brings healing and forgiveness. So, rejoice in the Lord always, not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. And again I will say, rejoice!

But, the skeptic will ask, how can we rejoice, when our sins were the immediate cause of the death of God’s own Son? He came to offer us everything we ever wanted. Think about it. Christ offered us: eternal life, a life without restraint, a

happiness that brightens even the darkest day, a joy in our hearts by the revelation of God's own face, so that we might walk with our Creator in the light of his glorious and beautiful garden, in an earth fully restored and incapable of falling into ruin, in relationships with those that we love, those that we have lost, with renewed friendships without lies or deceit, in a place where we walk barefoot through the grass, without any fear that we might strike our foot against a stone, leaping from hill to hill like young deer, with no concern about money or food or politics, bowing lowly to honor each other more than ourselves, and yet finding Christ our God and King below and above us, honoring us, spreading a table for us, calling down the whole host of God's angels to sing his love for us, and we perfectly loving him, without any care or concern about what is right or wrong or what has been or what will be, for all is made perfect and complete, and our hearts are fixed on Christ, having fully acquired the divine-like simplicity of heavenly rest, never ever to lose it again. That is what Christ came to give us.

And yet, beloved, the moment you turned your heart from God. Immediately, in the same instant that you turned to yourself and sought only what was good for you, in that same moment, without realizing it, you rejected yourself, you wounded yourself, and for the sake of a few moments of pleasure or respect, you poisoned your soul, your body, your whole being with the incurable disease and blackness of self-love. You made yourself an idol to the almighty Self, and you rose up to eat and

to play. Whether you knew it or not, when you turned to yourself, you turned from God, and like a child, you covered the sun of righteousness in a blanket of darkness, and then you asked God why are things so dark? How can we rejoice, when our sins were the immediate cause of the death of God's own Son, and our own death?

I don't want to ruin your Easter joy, but rather to deepen it. Your Easter joy will be of no use to you in eternity, if you do not rejoice in the Lord. There is nothing in yourself, apart from Christ, but death and sin. Rejoice, not in yourself or the pleasure of this life, or in the twisted pleasure of self-judgment and condemnation, but in the power of Christ given inexplicably to a sinner like you. Take that holy gift, and ascend by faith all the way into heaven, and rejoice in the life that is to come in the Kingdom of Heaven. Yes, you can ascend into heaven by the power of Christ's resurrection. He is there, seated at the right hand of the father, and as the Scriptures say, we are there with him too. Do you really think that Christ would leave you here without raising you up, even while you await the final resurrection of the body? Listen to the words of Holy Scripture: "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, <sup>3</sup> among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, because

of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

As St. Luke records, “when [Jesus] was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; 21 nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” The Kingdom of God is within you, and you are seated in the heavenly places. As St. Bernard once said, the heart of the lover is more truly present, not in itself, but with its Beloved. If we love Jesus, if we gaze upon his cross, where he died for us, so that we would not longer bear any guilt or shame or regret. If we see our Saviour’s love for us, and we find our hearts inflamed by that love, even if the flame is small and often dim, then the only explanation for that flame of love, when the Object of our love is so far from us, is that our hearts have been transported up to heaven, touched by the Beloved, who is Christ our Lord, seated at the right hand of the majesty on high.

He is the source of our joy, even heavenly joy on earth. He is the source of our spiritual rest, which is heavenly rest even now in this life. Even though you have

failed to love. Rejoice! If you repent and believe, your name has been written in the Book of Life. Your sins have been washed away in the cleansing flood of Christ's own blood, which he poured out for you in your baptism. Let go of the guilt you feel because it will do you no good to punish yourself for your mistakes. And in fact, if you do punish yourself for the guilt you feel, then you reject the gift that Christ is offering you. As Isaiah said, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand."

Christ has risen from the dead! Now he lives to pray and intercede for you in heaven. So, beloved, rejoice in the Lord. And if your heart refuses to rejoice, say to yourself as David says, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him. For the help of His countenance." The Anglican poet George Herbert wrote his Easter poem as an exhortation to himself, saying:

"Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise

Without delays,

Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise

With him mayst rise:

That, as his death calcined thee to dust,

His life may make thee gold, and much more just.”

Rise heart! Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice inwardly by faith in the inner man, where the Kingdom of God has already come and all of heaven’s joys have begun to dawn upon you. Because by baptism, by the Holy Sacraments of the Church, Christ has poured his own heavenly life into you. And this morning he invites you again, to take and eat in the Kingdom of Heaven. Come and partake of the food of angels, the medicine of immortality, and the heavenly manna of his blessed body and blood.

Let us come to the altar with a prayer on our lips that we might know the blessings of heaven, that a new eye would be given to us, whereby we might see through the lies and the darkness of this present wicked generation, and pierce through the veil of tears to see the light of Christ, our Sun of Righteousness, rising up within us with healing in his wings. Though we approach such a great and holy Sacrament as this with fear and trepidation; though we enter God’s garden, seeing the angels guarding the way, and though we ask, when that crown of eternal life is put upon our head, “Lord, why? Why me? Why did I survive? Why did you choose me?”



Listen, and He will say, Because I came to seek and to save that which was lost. Take my yoke upon you, and be glad, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Now, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affections on things above,” and come to the Supper of the Lamb, for all is now made ready.

Let us pray.

O Almighty God, hear Thy people, who have met together this day to glorify the Ressurrection of Thy Son our Lord; and guide them on from this festival to eternal gladness, from the exulting joy of this solemnity to joys that have no end. For this is the day of man’s Resurrection, the birthday of eternal life; in which we have been satisfied with Thy mercy in the morning, in which the Blessed One Who cometh in the Name of the Lord, Who is our god, hath shone upon us, and Who liveth and reigneth, in the unity of the Father and the Holy Ghost, our King eternal in the Heavens, for ever and ever. Amen.