Sermon — 04/14/25

*(3rd Sunday of Easter)*

Text — 1 Peter 3:18-19

For Christ suffered once for sins — the Righteous for the unrighteous — to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, He went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits…

Theme — “He’s Risen, He’s Risen”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

C. F. W. Walther was a man of many talents. He was a tireless pastor of **four** — count ‘em — four churches in St. Louis. He was the first president of our Missouri Synod and one of its founders. He was president and professor at our St. Louis seminary; probably the greatest theologian in our church body’s history. He was editor and author of the synod’s numerous periodicals. He was a sought-after speaker at church conferences and conventions — not just of our synod, but of a number of Lutheran church bodies in the United States. And he did most of these things, all at the same time!

Somewhere along the line, he found time to write the classic Lutheran books *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* and *Church and Ministry*, as well as a number of others. And, as a sort of cherry on the top, he was the author and composer of today’s sermon hymn — *“He’s Risen, He’s Risen”* — the next Easter hymn for our sermon series examination.

Walther loved music (he also loved constantly smoking his pipe, which his wife and students complained about — something which also endears him to me). In fact, as a youth, Walther thought he would like to be a professional musician and composer. But the Lord had other plans for him. He was to be a pastor, like his father and many in his family before him. And what a pastor he turned out to be! But today, we are going to focus on Walther, the hymn writer. Or rather we will focus on the hymn he wrote (the only one in our hymnals) — which I am sure would make him much more happy. So, let’s take a look at that hymn, verse by verse. (pause)

*He’s risen, He’s risen, Christ Jesus, the Lord;  
He opened death’s prison, the incarnate, true Word.  
Break forth, hosts of heaven, in jubilant song  
And earth, sea, and mountain their praises prolong.*

The hymn starts off with the extreme joy that only Easter can bring. It is so upbeat, so strong, so triumphant. Yet, the interesting thing is that Walther wrote this hymn while on board a steamer ship headed to Europe in 1860. He was going there because he was broken by the overwork to which he had subjected himself. Physically, he was a wreck. He was exhausted and rundown. But even worse was his mental state — Walther was in the throes of a deep depression. It was thought that a trip to Europe would give him a chance to recuperate and rest. Thankfully, it did. He was able to return to the United States and continue to serve his congregations and synod for another 17 years.

I think there’s a good lesson there for us. We go through our own times of depression and physical ills. But Walther — and our hymn — teach us that the best medicine is to focus on the joy of being a Christian. Whatever WE suffer, it is nothing compared with what our Lord endured. All sin. Excruciating death. Hell itself. He took it all for us. And yet He also rose! And THAT makes all else endurable. We CAN have joy, even in the midst of the deepest dark periods of our lives. Because He’s risen, He’s risen, Christ Jesus the Lord. (pause)

*The foe was triumphant when on Calvary  
The Lord of creation was nailed to the tree.  
In Satan’s domain did the hosts shout and jeer,  
For Jesus was slain, whom the evil ones fear.*

Here Dr. Walther picks up a thought expressed in a number of hymns from the Middle Ages — the idea that Satan thought he had won on Good Friday. It’s an interesting theory, to say the least. But you can see where it might arise. After all, if one were to look at how things stood that afternoon at the cross, it would certainly seem like Jesus had lost. He was betrayed by one of His own hand-picked disciples. Denied by another and deserted by all the rest. The mob turned on Him and demanded His death. He was flogged and beaten, crowned with thorns and nailed to a cross, where He had died in shame and misery. Nobody — except for a dying thief and a Roman soldier — believed in Him anymore. Yes, it sure DID look like the devil had won.

In Eden it also seemed like Satan had won. After all, he had gotten Adam to sin. To doubt God. To turn away from his heavenly Father. To break the one commandment God had given him. And ever since, Satan had been enjoying dominion over the lost, fallen creation. How he delighted in torturing poor humanity. In making us suffer. In bringing all manner of shame and vice and pain into the world. God had promised He would come Himself to fix it. And so Jesus was born — God in our flesh — to do just that. Yet here He was, dead and nailed to a cross. Hated by all. The sky had darkened and the earth shook, to add to His suffering and to man’s fear. Even the Father had turned His face from Jesus that day. You can see why Satan and his demons might have celebrated their apparent victory. However, listen to what the hymn reminds happened next:

*But short was their triumph; the Savior arose,  
And death, hell, and Satan He vanquished, His foes.  
The conquering Lord lifts His banner on high;  
He lives, yes, He lives, and will nevermore die.*

How does the phrase go? “He who laughs last, laughs loudest.” And that would be our

Lord. From Eden’s fall to Christ’s birth in Bethlehem was a long time — literally hundreds, even thousands, of years. But when He was born, Satan was afraid. Very afraid. That’s why he incited King Herod to murder all the babies in Bethlehem, just so he could get Jesus. But he failed. And throughout Jesus’ life, Satan’s fear only grew. He saw Jesus perfectly keeping all the commandments, to give us the credit. He saw the miracles, which foreshadow the healing and restoration Jesus came to bring to our fallen world. He heard the teaching with the authority of God, telling the crowds of God’s love and forgiveness. And it made Satan shudder.

Well, the devil’s seeming triumph on Good Friday lasted far less than those years, those millennia, between Eden and Christmas. This time it was only three short days! Even less, really. For as our text says, between Good Friday and Easter Jesus went and *“made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits”.* That is, Jesus descended into hell (as we confess in the Creed). But He did not go there to suffer more. No, at the cross Jesus had taken ALL of God’s wrath at sin. This descent into hell, then, was a proclamation of victory. To tell the devil — in his own house, so to speak — that he (Satan) had lost and that Jesus had won. That He had taken back all that the devil had stolen away from Him in Eden. As I tell the students in confirmation class, it is sort like spiking the ball after scoring the winning touchdown. You lose, Satan. Game over. The descent into hell, then, made clear to the devil what had happened. But Easter proves that victory to those who are here on earth. (pause)

So, what does that victory mean for us? The next stanza makes it clear:

*O, where is your sting, death? We fear you no more;  
Christ rose, and now open is fair Eden’s door.  
For all our transgressions His blood does atone;  
Redeemed and forgiven, we now are His own.*

Death only comes because of sin, the Bible teaches. It is one of the most horrific consequences of Adam’s sin. And because WE die, we know we are sinners too. But because Jesus has dealt with all sin, Death is conquered. Jesus’ resurrection and life mean OUR resurrection and life. His empty tomb means OUR graves will be empty as well.

In the past week and a half, we have had two funerals here at our church. Beloved members who died and were buried. But we gathered for those funerals, full of hope because of Easter. Yes, Bud and Jean died. But we also are convinced that they still live. That their souls are even now with the Lord, enjoying the bliss and joy which only can be in His presence. And that soon — on the Last Day — Jesus will descend from the skies with the trumpet sound of God, with His holy angels. And He will then raise our bodies — Bud and Jean’s bodies — from the grave. He will join their souls to those risen and perfect bodies —- like our Lord’s own risen body! — to rule over the new heaven and earth He will give us then. The return of Eden. But an Eden even better than the first, for never will Satan be allowed into this one. An Eden where we will live as God’s children forever and ever. And nothing — and no one — can ever take that away from us.

Yes, death still “stings” but as the hymn says, we fear it no more. Because Jesus’ resurrection means death too has been overcome. We have life — eternal life — in Him. Which leads us to the last stanza. (pause)

*Then sing your hosannas and raise your glad voice;  
Proclaim the blest tidings that all may rejoice.  
Laud, honor, and praise to the Lamb that was slain:  
With Father and Spirit He ever shall reign.*

Our hymn ends where it started: with joyful praise to the God who has won and given all this to us. Our Easter joy overflows and pours out in our song of thanks. A song we want everyone to hear because Jesus has lived, died, and risen for them too. And there is always room for more in God’s heaven.

I mentioned earlier that Walther wrote this hymn while in a period of deep depression. The doctors thought a change of scenery and a little less work would do him good. But the truth is, what really did him good — what healed him — was the subject of this hymn. Jesus. And His victory at Easter. The victory which He gave to Dr. Walther. The best advice — in good times or in bad — is always, ALWAYS, to look to Him. Because in Him you have been given everything. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Offertoty/Offering

FE — Nicene Creed