

“Here the True Paschal Lamb We See” Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands

✠ Alleluia! Christ is risen! ✠

In this Eastertide, we burst forth in our most exuberant song in praise of the Resurrection of Our Blessed Lord. We rejoice that the bonds of death have been burst and that our Lord is victorious over sin, death, and the devil.

Alleluias, silent since the Transfiguration of Our Lord, once again sound triumphant.

In her hymnody, the Church teaches not only of the facts of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but most importantly what those acts of Christ have won for and ensure us. This catechetical view of hymnody was especially held by Blessed Martin Luther, and was his driving force for re-introducing congregational song, and especially his reason for teaching hymns to youth. His Easter hymn, *Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands* teaches all who sing it why Jesus had to suffer and die, what His death has won for us, and drives us to the Sacrament where we receive the fruit and benefit of His sacrificial death.

In our hymnal, only five of Luther’s seven stanzas are given. Fortunately, *The Handbook to The Lutheran Hymnal* makes these additional stanzas available to us. They are included in the box above and are printed as the italicized stanzas. This hymn was first published in Erfurt in the year A^oD 1524 in *Eyn Enchiridion*, a hymnal containing 25 hymns, of which 20 were written by Dr. Luther. This hymn is acclaimed by *Julian’s Dictionary of Hymnology* to be “second only to [Luther’s] unequalled ‘Ein’ feste Burg’ (A Mighty

Fortress is Our God).” It, like many other Easter hymns, carries over phrases from (or illusions to) the Easter Sequence, *Victimæ Paschali Laudes* (“Christians, to the Paschal Victim”). Luther himself saw this hymn as an improvement to the 12th Century Latin hymn *Christ ist erstanden* (*Christ is Arisen*, TLH 187), since his original title of this hymn was *Christ is erstanden: Gebessert* (*Gebessert* means amended or improved in German.).

The first stanza states quite simply why we should “thankful be and sing to God right thankfully loud songs of hallelujah”: Christ, who was dead, is alive again and has ascended to the Father. He died to pay the penalty our sin demanded, and imputes that righteousness to us by Holy Baptism.

The second stanza teaches our sinful state. Most of Luther’s hymns include stanzas highlighting our sinful state and our inability to remove ourselves from the same. He teaches that there is no innocence on earth, for all have sinned (Romans 3:23). Not only have all men sinned, but sin is perpetually in our flesh

and always desires to spring up and overtake us (Romans 7:13-23). Since sin guarantees death, Luther writes that sin keeps us in thralldom (servitude) to Death (*Death* in this hymn is directly referring to Satan) and its power “ever [grows] more strong and bold and [keeps] us in his bondage.” But with St. Paul we cry: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ Our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25)

**Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands,
For our offenses given;
But now at God’s right hand He stands
And brings us life from heaven;
Therefore let us thankful be
And sing to God right thankfully
Loud songs of hallelujah. Hallelujah!**

***No son of man could conquer Death,
Such mischief sin had wrought us,
For innocence dwelt not on earth,
And therefore Death had brought us
Into thralldom from of old
And ever grew more strong and bold
And kept us in his bondage. Hallelujah!***

***But Jesus Christ, God’s only Son,
To our low state descended,
The cause of Death He has undone,
His power forever ended,
Ruined all his might and claim
And left him nothing but the name—
His sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!***

And that is exactly where Luther next takes us. He does not leave us to wallow in pity or turn to our works but immediately takes us to Christ. He succinctly teaches Christ's Incarnation, birth and sinless life in the third stanza. Jesus, by His death, fought and destroyed Death. For those who belong to Jesus, death has no power and is "nothing but the name."

The events of Good Friday Luther rightly calls "a strange and dreadful strife when Life and Death contended." Here he adapts the Easter Sequence which proclaims: "Death and life have contended in that combat stupendous." Luther calls to mind Paul's great teaching on the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. There we are taught that Christ's death and resurrection have forever defeated death and taken away its sting and victory (1 Corinthians 15:55). This stanza also calls to mind the reversal heard in the Proper Preface for Passiontide where we heard of the defeat of Satan by the Cross: "That he who by a tree once overcame" (*deceiving Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden*) "likewise by a Tree" (*Christ's Cross*) "might be overcome."

Also, as is seen in much of our Eastertide hymnody, there are allusions to the Passover and the Exodus. The fifth stanza teaches us that Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), whom God the Father made a curse and sacrificed for us, to make atonement for all our sins so we may not be cursed and damned eternally. To make Christ's death and resurrection ours, His

Blood covers us, poured on us at Baptism where the Holy Spirit exorcises the unclean spirits and dwells in us to keep us as God's dear children. When faith, by the Holy Spirit, points to that Blood that covers us—shed because of His strong love—sin and death flee confounded "and Satan cannot harm us. Hallelujah!"

But faith does more than point to Christ's Blood—it also points us to the place where we receive Christ's Blood. Faith desires to be with the Faithful, gathered around the gifts Christ freely gives. Luther captures this in his sixth and seventh stanzas, telling us to "keep the festival whereto the Lord invites us" and bids us "feast this Easter Day on Christ, the Bread of Heaven." We need not search for nourishment in any other place because in the Church only are we given Christ, who alone "is our meat and drink indeed" and our "faith lives upon no other."

Although we will move quickly through Eastertide, I encourage you to continue to gather with the Faithful to receive our Paschal Lamb, who was sacrificed for us. I also encourage you to further explore the Easter and Ascension hymns available in our hymnal (hymns 187-223). Here you will find many treasures with which you can join with all the Faithful in our praise of our

Risen and Ascended Lord, our only Confidence.

The peace and joy of Christ's defeat of sin, death, and the devil be with you this Easter!

✠Pastor Beffrey

**It was a strange and dreadful strife
When Life and Death contended;
The victory remained with Life,
The reign of Death was ended;
Holy Scripture plainly saith
That Death is swallowed up by Death,
His sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!**

**Here the true Paschal Lamb we see,
Whom God so freely gave us;
He died on the accursed tree—
So strong His love!—to save us.
See, His Blood now marks our door;
Faith points to it, Death passes over,
And Satan cannot harm us. Hallelujah!**

**So let us keep the festival
Whereto the Lord invites us;
Christ is Himself the Joy of all,
The Sun that warms and lights us.
By His grace He doth impart
Eternal sunshine to the heart;
The night of sin is ended. Hallelujah!**

**Then let us feast this Easter Day
On Christ, the Bread of Heaven;
The Word of Grace hath purged away
The old and evil leaven.
Christ alone our souls will feed,
He is our meat and drink indeed;
Faith lives upon no other. Hallelujah!**

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