

Easter Sunday 2020

Acts 10.34-43

Psalm 118:14–17, 22–24

Colossians 3.1-4

Matthew 28.1-10

Opening

It's been the longest Lent season of our lives, but today Eastertide begins as we say 'Alleluia' again. So let's begin together with three consecutive Alleluias—Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

When we began our Lenten pilgrimage, we gathered here on Transfiguration Sunday and said a final Alleluia before Ash Wednesday. We had no idea this Nave would be empty when we shouted the Alleluia acclamation on Easter Sunday. It is not the Easter Sunday we imagined or desire, yet even though we are dispersed throughout this city, still we make our song—Alleluia!

The nations of the earth have been shaken to their core by a virus the naked eye cannot see. Yet today we remember a far greater shaking of the earth. We remember the Day when not only Jerusalem, not only this earth, not only Hell itself was shaken and defeated, but *the entire cosmos* was shaken at its core.

God created his cosmos in seven days. And when his good creation and his image bearers became corrupted by Death, God sent his only Son to dethrone the triple tyranny of Death, Hell, and the Grave. The ancient liturgy proclaims: 'Today hell groans and cries aloud: 'It had been better for me, had I not accepted Mary's Son, for He has come to me and

destroyed my power. ¹ That earthquake in Jerusalem—that opening of the earth—meant the old world was dying, and a new world has been born.

Easter Sunday is not just a new day. This is the Eighth Day, the day God's new creation begins. "This is the Day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." The Eighth Day—Resurrection Day—means we see everything—the past, the present, the future—with resurrection eyes.

To See the Empty Tomb

Matthew tells us that women devoted to our Lord Jesus went to see the tomb of the Lord Jesus before dawn. What did they expect to see? They expected to see a stone they could not possibly move. That stone represents that we cannot overcome death, even with all of our might and strength.

But what did they *actually* see? They expected to see a sealed tomb and then they saw the earth moving. They saw Roman guards trembling like dead men. Rome's power is nothing before the fearsome angel of God. That awesome angel rolled away the stone. The women saw an *empty tomb* and the angel sitting atop the stone. Sitting *above* the stone can only mean one thing—the Kingdom of Heaven dethroned the Kingdom of Evil.

Who needed the stone rolled away? Certainly not the crucified One who was laid in the tomb. He who moved freely behind locked doors in his resurrection body surely could not be contained by a large stone. No, the stone was rolled away for us; so this miracle would forever change the way we see the past, the present, and the future.

"Come, see the place where he lay," the angel said. What you see there, what you see this morning, will change the way you see everything else. After seeing the empty tomb, the two Marys are charged to go to the disciples tell them what they have seen.

¹ Orthodox Church, *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Kallistos Ware with Mother Mary, *The Service Books of the Orthodox Church* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), 655–656.

But making their way to the Upper Room, they see the risen Lord Jesus and they worshipped him. In their lives, they had probably prayed the Psalms hundreds of times, psalms like the one we prayed earlier Psalm 118, uttering the Hebrew words “Hallelujah,” meaning “Praise the Lord.” But now those familiar psalms have changed. Everything is new, even this word Hallelujah. The empty tomb is the place where they learn a new song—Alleluia. Praise to the *risen* Lord.

To See History and the Future Anew

What do we see when you look on our world today? We see tremendous suffering and we know that our Lord Jesus comes near all who suffer. He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows on Good Friday. And he is with us as our world experiences a Good Friday in our time. We cannot understand why God permits a pandemic. He is the same God who permitted his Son to die on a cross. Yet in a great and awesome mystery, God takes the worst evils and redeems them for good. Who could have imagined a crucified rabbi would rise again after three days? The power of resurrection was hidden in the cross.

This pandemic is an hour of terrible suffering in the world, but Easter people have been given eyes to see that, hidden in our world’s present suffering, the power of Christ’s resurrection is present.

In times of crisis, we still cling to our Easter song: Alleluia. This is our heritage. Think of our heritage of faith in this land. Think of Easter 1930. The economy shaken to its core, the Great Depression descended on America. These desperate years molded the lives of our fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers. Still our ancestors gathered on resurrection morning and sang Alleluia!

Or think of Easter 1942. America entered World War II only five months prior to Easter. They did not know the outcome of that war in 1942. In the middle of the world’s largest war, still our ancestors greeted the Easter dawn with songs of Alleluia!

And you can remember past Easter seasons of your own personal suffering. Perhaps you said 'Alleluia' with tears in your eyes; perhaps you could only whisper 'Alleluia.' Yet even in grief, we make our song: Alleluia.

We sing Alleluia in all seasons and in all times because our risen Lord Jesus Christ declared these four words: **Do not be afraid**. He faced the worst darkness of all; he descended to the dead. *This is the One* who says to you, "Do not be afraid." /

Fear is so familiar to us. Fear grips the soul. *And fear forms cataracts over our spiritual eyes*. You know how fear loses its grip; how your vision is healed? You fix your eyes on the risen One. You gaze on his glory and power.

St Symeon the New Theologian learned the power of the resurrection in his suffering when he wrote these words:

*Your light shining round vivifies me, my Christ,
for seeing You gives life and resurrection.
...I know, my God,
that even in sickness, Master, even in affliction and grief,
even in fetters, and even in hunger, and even when I am held in jail,
and even when I am oppressed by worse pains, my Christ,
your shining light expels them all like darkness,
and your divine Spirit suddenly puts me in relaxation, and light, and enjoyment of the light.*

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Even at the Grave We Make Our Song

Since April 2019 I have anticipated sharing Easter joy with you here at Apostles. I cannot recall anticipating an Easter Sunday for an entire year. The ache of distance from my church

² St Symeon the New Theologian, *Divine Eros: Hymns of St Symeon the New Theologian*, ed. John Behr, trans. Daniel K. Griggs, vol. 40, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), 360.

family on Easter has become too familiar. This will be the second consecutive year I have not been in person to worship with you on Easter Sunday.

Last Easter Sunday I was in Nashville. I entered Vanderbilt Medical Center's Intensive Care Unit where my dad was lying in great weakness. I gathered with my mother and two sisters at my father's bedside. Dad would fall asleep in the Lord two days later. But that Easter Sunday I brought bread and wine and a Bible. We read the resurrection story from John 20. When a priest offers communion to the sick, he usually makes a few comments about the Gospel. But on this day I needed the communion of the saints to help me. So I turned to the holy words from St John Chrysostom's Paschal Homily, preached 1600 Easters ago. Before he entered Paradise I read Chrysostom's bold Easter words to my dad:

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.
Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.
Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.
O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?
Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!
Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.
To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen! ³

Even at the grave, we make our song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia! Though separated and dispersed for a season, we still make our song—Alleluia!

³ St John Chrysostom, *Paschal Homily*, c. 400

Glory to God for All Things, Even in Exile

I close with a final story—a story about the man who wrote those Easter words, St John Chrysostom. Chrysostom was a powerful preacher and archbishop of Constantinople. He lived and served in a time when the emperor vehemently opposed his Gospel ministry. Chrysostom was condemned to exile in Armenia, a place he described in his letters as “the most deserted place in the world.” We have suffered separation from one another for four weeks; Chrysostom lived and died after three years of exile from his people.

To the end, Chrysostom bore his exile and suffering with patient endurance. He wrote seventeen letters during these years to comfort his spiritual daughter, St Olympia,⁴ a deaconess who served with Chrysostom in Constantinople.

St Olympia wrestled with long bouts of despair over Chrysostom’s absence, probably a combination of spiritual sorrow and clinical depression. She poured out her grief to Chrysostom over the ruined state of the church after his departure. Chrysostom replied to Olympia comparing the Church to a battered and damaged ship in a terrible storm. Still he confessed his hope in the Pilot at the helm:

⁴ <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2020/07/25/102087-holy-woman-olympias-olympiada-the-deaconess-of-constantinople>

when I see such things, I do not give up an even firmer hope, as I consider the Pilot governing everything, who prevails over storms, who calms the raging gale, not through skill and artfulness, but with a single nod. It is not at their beginning—not immediately, when they first arise—that he customarily obliterates evils, but when they increase, when they come to their furthest point, when most men fall into despair, then he does wondrous things beyond all expectation, demonstrating his own power, and training the patience of those who have fallen. ⁵

And even if a myriad of fears, a myriad of tumults, assail you, and conflagrations, and whatever else are laid before your eyes, let none of them trouble you. For the Master is not outmatched by the difficulty of these things, even if everything is brought to the verge of destruction. For he is able to raise up those who have fallen...and to give life to those who are dead, and to render more brilliant those things which have been razed to the ground, and to make new those things which have grown old. ⁶

Chrysostom died in exile, yet he famously wrote to Olympia: “Glory to God for all things—and I have not ceased repeating these words in the midst of everything that is happening to me.” ⁷ Yes, Glory to God for all things in the midst of everything happening now. Do not be afraid. Look upon the past, the present, and the future with the eyes of resurrection. For today, tomorrow, and even at the gate and grave of Death, we will make our song: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.

⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, ed. John Behr, trans. David C. Ford, vol. 56, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 46.

⁶ Saint John Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, ed. John Behr, trans. David C. Ford, vol. 56, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 49.

⁷ Saint John Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, ed. John Behr, trans. David C. Ford, vol. 56, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 38.