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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
The Resurrection of Our Lord
April 17, 2022

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Since we can't say that enough today, let me say it again. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Now, I don't know about you, but to me it seems strange to proclaim these words with the same sense of "joy" as we have in previous years on Easter Sunday.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia. (Shake head.) No, it sounds a bit awkward.

Yes, this year I feel there is something amiss in our Easter celebration.

Today, we are singing joyous hymns.

Today, we have beautiful, colorful flowers on display to brighten and cheer us on this day.

Today, candy eggs, jelly beans, and the like are being shared with one another.

But, I am having a tough time this year with Easter.

I am finding it difficult to express the usual Easter "joy."

I am even having some difficulty saying "Happy Easter," when on the other side of the world there is a devastating war going on.

I am finding it difficult to express joy when a humanitarian crisis beyond our comprehension is taking place right now.

To be sure, there is something amiss regarding our "joyous" Easter celebration.

There is something amiss when we consider the atrocities that are being reported in Ukraine.

Indeed, as I was writing this sermon some days back, the world was just learning of the horrific actions of the Russian army in the wake of their retreat from areas around the capitol of Kyiv.

The killing of citizens, who in some instance had their hands bound behind them.

Bodies left littering the streets.

In other instances, there were mass graves.

There were reports of rape. There was mass destruction. It has been utterly gruesome, of which words truly fail to describe.

All this is on top of the ongoing shelling of cities, especially of Mariaupol, which has been completely destroyed, according to reports.

In Mariaupol upwards of 100,000 people are reported to be trapped, unable to safely flee the conflict.

We have heard as well of bombings of schools, of hospitals, of a theater where people were seeking refuge, and which was clearly marked “children.”

We have heard of humanitarian corridors being established and then being fired upon.

We have heard of a train station attacked, while people were trying to flee.

And we have heard of a quarter of the population of Ukraine, over 10 million people being displaced by this war.

Yes, personally, I have found it hard to muster much joy this Easter with all that is happening.

Joy has taken a backseat to other emotions.

Like, profound GRIEF in light of the abundant loss of life and livelihood in Ukraine.

Like, profound DISBELIEF that what was thought of as a “civilized” people could perpetrate such heinous acts.

Like, profound ANGER towards rampant evil and despicable lies.

Yes, there are other emotions coursing through us, other emotions aside from joy.

It is hard to feel much joy this Easter when we think of that part of our human family is suffering as they are in Ukraine.

PAUSE

But even so, sisters and brothers, the Easter message still rings true in our world.

Even so, the Easter message still speaks a great and necessary truth.

The Easter message still reigns victorious in the face of sin, death, and THE DEVIL.

For this is what I see (anyways) in Ukraine.

I see the devil working his darnedest to upend society.

I see the devil working to sow pain and grief and terror.

I see the devil having a field day destroying lives.

I see the devil wielding his weapons of sin and death, his weapons of lies and fear.

Yes, we see you, devil, and we call you out for all the harm you are doing.

But, the Easter message is still proclaimed and is all the more significant this Easter.

PAUSE

Now as I speak of the devil at work, let me just say that I hesitate to define people as demons, or as monsters, or as beast, or devils.

I hesitate to do that because to dehumanize others is to impact our own sense of humanity.

But boy, it is hard NOT to describe the perpetrators of evil in Ukraine as something other than human.

Nonetheless, I do believe that what we see in Ukraine reminds us that the devil can influence human beings in terrible ways such that humans will do awful things.

And, I personally find myself wanting to lash out toward this evil.

I want spit in its face.

I want to tell it literally "to go back to hell."

I want to make some rude gesture toward it.

This is how disgusted I have been with all the evil we have witnessed.

This is how disgusted I have been with the devil who has (I feel) been laughing at us for many weeks now.

This is how disgusted I have been.

But again, Easter has come again nonetheless.

Easter has come with its message, and it has come at maybe just the right time.

PAUSE

Now, we know that when the Russian military invaded Ukraine, the letter “Z” was emblazoned on their vehicles.

And other people have been displaying the letter “Z” in support of this war against Ukraine, wrongly I might add.

The letter “Z” is a symbol that has now become infamous.

It is a symbol that smacks in our face of military arrogance, of illegal invasion, and so on.

The letter “Z”, like the devil himself, is a symbol that mocks us.

It is symbol that has become synonymous with evil.

But Easter has another symbol to stand in stark contrast to this letter “Z.”

PAUSE

And so, I have been thinking all these things for many days...

I have been thinking about all these things leading up to this our Easter Sunday worship.

I have been thinking about the letter “Z.” I have been thinking about the devil mocking the whole human family.

I have been thinking about my own gut-wrenching, visceral response to the images of horror in Ukraine, and my want to lash out at the devil.

I have been thinking about these horrible, heinous acts perpetrated upon innocent people.

And I have been thinking about Easter, and what the phrase “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” really means for us.

And in my various thoughts about all these things, I came back to the simple message of Easter.

And that simple message of Easter is that. (Point to the cross.)

The simple message of Easter is an EMPTY cross. I emphasize the word "empty."

Easter is not a crucifix, where we see an image of Jesus still hanging on the cross.

Easter is not God's Son in the death throes upon some ancient Roman device of execution.

No, the message of Easter is an empty cross.

The message of Easter is an empty cross.

The message of Easter is that the devil did his darnedest to try to destroy humanity and even God's self.

The devil did his darnedest even resorting to kill God's Son.

But the devil failed. The devil lost. Jesus suffered death and was buried. But on the third day he rose from the dead.

Jesus was nailed to a cross, struck down for human sins.

But on the third day he rose from the dead.

Jesus was crucified because of humanity's evil, heinous ways.

But on the third day he rose from the dead.

Jesus rose from the dead. And the devil lost.

That is what Easter is all about. It is about an empty cross.

PAUSE

And so, this year, I don't know if I am so much "joyous" about our Easter celebration, as I am defiant in the face of evil.

This year, I don't know if I can casually say, "Happy Easter," knowing all the suffering happening in Ukraine.

It sounds awkward in my ears, "Happy Easter."

But I do know that we can say “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” as a way to throw God’s good news in the face of the devil and all that he is doing in our world.

“For now, you may be having your day, devil, in Ukraine...”

“You may be arrogantly destroying lives and upending lives.”

“You may be laughing at us, mocking us.”

“But, here is the truth, devil, ‘Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!’”

“Take that and chew on it for a while, devil.”

“Your days are numbered, devil.”

“Your war in Ukraine is only one battle, but the victory already belongs to God through his Son Jesus Christ.”

PAUSE

Yes, Friends, our Easter proclamation, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” is a proclamation of defiance in the face of the devil.

And so, I am telling you, Friends, as much as we might want to spit in the face of the devil, or tell him to “go back to hell,” or make some rude gesture at the devil...

As much as we might want to do any of those things, what most infuriates the devil...

Indeed, the best way to irritate and to enrage the devil...

The best way to respond towards him is to proclaim boldly, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

In other words, we are saying loudly and boldly, “Devil, you have already lost.”

And there is the proof. (Point to the cross.)

There is the empty cross.

The Lord Jesus does not hang in death on the cross.

He has been raised. “And you have already lost, devil.”

That is the Easter message. It is one of defiance. Thanks be to God.

And, as sinister and as evil a symbol the letter “Z” has become then, it is the sign of the cross that stands in stark contrast.

The cross is the sign of the power of God, the victory of God, over sin and death and the devil.

PAUSE

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, today, we do celebrate God’s victory.

And we do sing, and we do rejoice, and display flowers, and we do enjoy our sweets, but let us think of our Easter celebration as one of defiance against the devil.

For we acknowledge today that the cross is empty. The devil has lost.

And we throw God’s victory in the face of the devil, proclaiming our defiance of sin and evil.

Today we announce that the devil has lost.

Today we say, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. Amen.”