

Note: This pdf of the text is accompanied by another pdf with pictures of slides.

Today is the 5th Sunday of Easter. It's now been 4 weeks and 1 day since Easter Sunday. And yet, we are still in the Easter season.

{{Slide 3}} Yes, in our culture most, if not all of the Easter candy has been eaten. The bunnies and the eggs and the Easter baskets have been put away until next year.

{{Slide 4}} And even in the church, the full glory of Easter is beginning to wear off. Yes, we still have the Resurrection banner. Yes, we still say "Alleluia."

{{Slide 5}} But the Easter lilies are gone. The big crowds from Easter day aren't here. And even our readings aren't focused as strongly on the Resurrection. During the first 3 Sundays of Easter we focused on stories of events from Easter day itself. Last week we celebrated Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

{{Slide 6}} But today, our Gospel was all about Jesus as the vine. It's a wonderful image, but it's not an explicitly strong Easter image.

So I want to do something a bit different today. {{Slide 7}} I want to actually focus on some Easter images. I want to look at some art that depicts the Resurrection. And I especially want to look at the way we represent Easter in the West, in contrast with the way our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters picture it. Their picture of Easter highlights aspects of the Resurrection that are largely off our radar screen.

{{Slide 8}} In Western Christian art, whether Protestant or Catholic, our focus is often on Jesus coming out of the tomb. {{Slide 9}} Some of the images are pretty dramatic, Jesus rising from the tomb, {{Slide 10}} or even blasting out of the tomb. {{Slide 11}} Jesus comes out of the tomb like some triumphant super hero.

{{Slide 12}} (Hum "Superman" theme) Super-Jesus!

{{Slide 13}} This image is so familiar to us we might not even think anything of it. It even is part of our worship space here at St. Paul's.

{{Slide 14}} Jesus comes forth, often with flags flying, literally. {{Slide 15}} He often is portrayed with a banner with a cross. The cross was the sign of death and defeat. But now it has been converted to a sign of triumph and victory.

There are two important things I want to note here.

{{Slide 16}} First, none of these images is actually Biblical. {{Slide 17}} None of the Gospels spend any time describing the actual moment of Resurrection. In all 4 Gospels, {{Slide 18}} Jesus is buried. {{Slide 19}} Then it's Saturday. {{Slide 20}} Then early on Easter Sunday the women come to the tomb and find that it's empty. That's it. Scripture has no

descriptions of Jesus rising from the tomb, blasting out of the tomb, flying out of the tomb like Superman.

Instead, the tomb is discovered as being empty. And the women are told, "he is not here—he is risen."

Then there are accounts of Jesus appearing to his disciples. {{Slide 21}} In John, Jesus appears outside the tomb to Mary Magdalene. {{Slide 22}} And then in Matthew, Luke, and John, Jesus appears various times in the midst of his disciples.

{{Slide 23}} But the actual moment of the Resurrection is never described or narrated anywhere in scripture. That's the first thing I want to note.

The second thing is something rather odd. {{Slide 24}} In Western art, Jesus is portrayed rather singularly. He is climbing out or blasting out of the tomb alone. {{Slide 25}} Occasionally there are angels hanging around. {{Slide 26}} Occasionally there are overwhelmed guards depicted, usually fainting with fear in the foreground. {{Slide 27}} But the focus is on Jesus as the solitary heroic figure rising from death.

Nothing wrong with that. But it does influence the way Western Christians often think of the Resurrection. {{Slide 28}} It's something that happened to Jesus. Easter is his big day. HE is risen.

Again, nothing wrong with this. But we need to be aware of it. {{Slide 29}} We often view Jesus as the solitary hero. {{Slide 30}} He goes to his death alone. He is forsaken by his followers. He carries his cross to Calvary to take on the powers of sin and death alone.

{{Slide 31}} One Holy Week hymn says,
"Alone thou goest forth, O Lord, in sacrifice to die."¹

Nothing wrong with this. {{Slide 32}} But we do need to be aware that we transfer our picture of the lone Jesus of Holy Week to the lone Jesus of the Resurrection. And we also need to be aware that these images, that this concept plays into our mindset of {{Slide 33}} other images of the lone hero standing toe to toe with the powers of evil. {{Slide 34}} Thus, if we're not careful, {{Slide 35}} we're just equating Jesus with other lone heroes in our culture.

{{Slide 36}} So yes, the Resurrection is Jesus' moment of triumph. Yea! Good for him. It is something to celebrate.

"Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and choirs of angels, and let your trumpets shout Salvation for the victory of our mighty King."²

¹ Hymn #164, *The Hymnal 1982*

² BCP p. 286

{{Slide 37}} But if we only view the Resurrection in individualistic terms, if we only view it as Jesus' personal moment of triumph, if we only see it as the victory of a lone warrior, then we miss something important.

{{Slide 38}} The Resurrection is good news for all of us as well. God doesn't just bring new life to Jesus. God promises to raise us like Jesus. The triumph Jesus had at Easter, we too will one day experience in our own Resurrections. As we'll hear St. Paul talk about next year on Easter Sunday:

{{Slide 39}} "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died... For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."³

Christ is the first to be raised. But eventually, all who belong to Christ will also be raised.

This is a hugely important idea that we often miss in Western Christianity, especially in Western Art, though it does appear occasionally.

{{Slide 40}} But it's the centerpiece of most Eastern Orthodox depictions of the Resurrection. In Eastern Christianity, it's not only about Jesus being raised. It's also about others being raised with him and through him.

So when an Eastern Orthodox Christian thinks of Easter, {{Slide 41}} he or she will not picture this. {{Slide 42}} They will picture THIS. {{Slide 43}} Or this. {{Slide 44}} Or this.

{{Slide 45}} Yes, there are secondary Orthodox icons of Easter {{Slide 46}} that show the women coming to the empty tomb and {{Slide 47}} meeting the angels. {{Slide 48}} But the primary Orthodox image of the Resurrection is this triumphant icon, {{Slide 49}} an icon often labeled with the word, "Anastasis," or in English, {{Slide 50}} "Resurrection" or "The Resurrection." Think about that. They don't usually say, "Jesus' Resurrection." This is THE Resurrection, the Resurrection for Jesus and for all of those who follow him.

{{Slide 51}} And this depiction of Easter is just as triumphant as Western pictures. Jesus enters Hell. Jesus enters the realm of the dead. {{Slide 52}} We still proclaim this every time we recite the Apostles' Creed. {{Slide 53}} In the old version, we used to say, "He descended into Hell." {{Slide 54}} The newer translation is, "He descended to the dead."

This idea is based on a couple of verses from the {{Slide 55}} First Epistle of Peter. It says,

"(Christ)suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison."⁴

³ 1Corinthians 15:20, 22-23

⁴ 1Peter 3:18-19

After his death, {{Slide 56}} Jesus in the spirit, {{Slide 57}} went to the spirits in prison. The nickname for this incident is the Harrowing of Hell.

{{Slide 58}} And there are some older Western images of it as well. The idea is that through the power of his Death and Resurrection, Christ defeats the forces of Death and Hell. {{Slide 59}} And he brings life to those who sit in the darkness of death.

In the old days, the idea of Jesus Harrowing Hell used to be regarded in literal chronological ways. {{Slide 60}} Medieval Christians saw this as the way Jesus spent his time between his Death and his Resurrection. In his death he defeats death. And so he goes and he brings the power of Resurrected life to God's people who have preceded him in death.

{{Slide 61}} In the Middle Ages, and still in Orthodox liturgy, these events are the focus of Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

{{Slide 62}} But I would say, to my mind, these icons are not so much about a chronological event. But they are primarily about a theological event. They convey great symbolic meaning about the power and the ramifications of Jesus' Resurrection.

{{Slide 63}} Jesus' Resurrection is not just a good thing for him. It's a good thing for all of God's people. It's not just about Jesus' new life. It's about the new life Jesus brings.

This new life is pictured very dramatically in these Eastern Orthodox icons. {{Slide 64}} Jesus is standing triumphantly upon the broken gates of Hell itself. {{Slide 65}} Sometimes the gates even fall in the shape of a cross as a reminder of his triumph. Chains and shackles and locks are opened symbolizing the new freedom Jesus brings. {{Slide 66}} And a personified death is often depicted as vanquished and in chains himself.

So this is a triumphant image. {{Slide 67}} And to be fair, it sometimes used to appear in Western Art. {{Slide 68}} And this idea was very popular in the Middle Ages. The oldest English plays extant were centered on these events. But these images have largely fallen off of our Western Christian radar screens.

{{Slide 69}} Not so in the East. This is still the central Orthodox image of the Resurrection, {{Slide 70}} even in more modern versions like these.

{{Slide 71}} We use the great Orthodox prayer in our funeral services.

{{Slide 72}} "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tomb."⁵

Let's not miss this. Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death... AND giving life to those in the tomb.

⁵ BCP pp. 483 & 500

{{Slide 73}} If you notice, in these icons, the Resurrection of Christ is not portrayed as some solitary event. In these images, the Resurrection is shown as something that happens to Jesus AND to other people.

{{Slide 74}} In these icons, Jesus goes to those who have died before him. And he literally drags them up out of their own tombs. {{Slide 75}} He is usually shown pulling Adam and Eve up from their tombs. {{Slide 76}} And others who have preceded him in death are there. King David. King Solomon. John the Baptist. {{Slide 77}} Other prophets.

{{Slide 78}} The message here is tremendous. {{Slide 79}} The Resurrection is not just good news for Jesus. {{Slide 80}} Through the Resurrection God brings new life to ALL of his faithful people.

{{Slide 81}} And it's not just good news for those who are fortunate enough to have been born after the Resurrection. No, it works both forwards and backwards in time. {{Slide 82}} Jesus brings new life to those who preceded him in death.

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, AND giving life to those in the tomb.

{{Slide 83}} The Resurrection is not just for a solo super hero.

{{Slide 84}} The Resurrection is for the great conquering Lord of Life who reaches out and reaches down and brings new life to all of God's people.

{{Slide 85}} "Death has been swallowed up in victory... {{Slide 86}} Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶

⁶ 1Corinthians 15:54, 57