

BUT NOW HAS CHRIST ARISEN

Robert W. Bertram

[Sermon preached at Lutheran School of Theology Chapel, April 26, 1989.]

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed.

"My love, the crucified." That is what our Easter hymn (LBW, 149) has been calling him for five weeks now. But what kind of morbid name is that to hang on Jesus now that he is risen? Why should that be the title that sticks, "the Crucified," even after Easter? It is such an exuberant hymn, "This Joyful Eastertide," so why make it rhyme with "the Crucified?" Can't Christians let bygones be bygones in view of the happy ending?

It is like a mother I knew who, twenty years after her baby had been healed, would still introduce the now tall, strapping fellow teasingly, "This was the boy with the fatal cancer." Was she proud of that? Apparently she was. In an impoverished barrio in Peru I met an old man who had once done a stretch in prison for protesting against contaminated drinking water. Guess what his neighbors called him, and ever so fondly. *El Convicto*. The convict. Couldn't they forget? I know for sure that next Sunday in my home church, even during Eastertide, Moira Cavanagh, a pretty teenager, will be making the sign of the cross - that executioner's symbol. (So shall I.) "My love, the Crucified." One gets the distinct impression that Christians love him because he was crucified. As a matter of fact we do.

There is more. Not only is he our love because he was crucified. He was crucified because he is our love. That is why he was put to death, because of the company he kept. He went the fatal stretch, a convict all the way to execution, for love of the likes of us. Surely then, that being so, you will not think it morbid when this crusty sinner calls Jesus "my love," or when this heterosexual male addresses Jesus quite unabashedly as "my love," or when this husband feels not the slightest jealousy as his wife calls that other Man "my love," or when this sexagenarian goes down on his knees before that One who was scarcely half his age and worships him as "my love," or when this Goy professor from an antisemitic culture hails this hill-country rabbi as "my love" -- The Crucified.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed.

Indeed. "But now has Christ arisen." The real punch in that hymn line is in the little words, "but now." So our love was crucified? But now has he arisen. So the baby was born with a brain tumor? But now look at him. So Garcia was a convict? But now he is the barrio's hero. You remember the line from the psalm, "Praise the Lord anyway." "Anyway" was the psalmist's equivalent of Easter's "but now."

Two musician colleagues. Mark Bangert and Bob Bergt, used to have fun with this line. (Mark preached about that a few weeks ago.) Suppose one of them would complain, "You should've seen the poor turnout at last night's concert." Whereupon the other would respond, on pitch, "But now has Christ arisen." Or one of them might gripe that the harpsichord is out of tune again, and the other would sing back, "But now has Christ arisen." Try it. It is good for laughs, "anyway."

Speaking of laughs, did you know that a synonym for laughable is the word "risible?" It probably has nothing to do with the word "risen." Still, that "Christ has now arisen" is enormously risible - not in the sense of ridiculous, though of course any God who operates by resurrections has to have a high tolerance for ridicule. No, what truly is risible about the risen Crucified is that he is God's last laugh. And those not on whom the last laugh is but with whom it is, those who are laughing all the way to resurrection - who are they? They are the church risible.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed.

"This joyful Eastertide," so goes the hymn, "away with sin and sorrow." More exactly, what the hymn says is, "away with sin and sah, ah-ah, ah-ah-ah, row." Still more exactly, the hymn does not say that, it sings it. Of course the singing I could not duplicate on this page with mere visuals, black on white. For that we would need sound. It is not enough to make sin and sorrow visible, they must be risible, out loud, capable of being laughed down. And down is definitely how the hymn's melodic line goes at this point. Sah, ah-ah, ah-ah-ah, row starts on b-flat and then, step by giggling step, chuckles all the way down to e-flat. Take that. sin and sorrow. All you are good for anymore is laughs.

"My love, the crucified, has sprung to life this morrow." "This morrow" is Easter's "but now." Then aren't we still sinners and sorrowers? Oh sure, but not so that it hurts us anymore, not now, not on this Easter mah, ah-ah, ah-ah-ah, row. Isn't that hilarious? In a moment we get to sing it, the sin and sorrow, "away." When we do, let us remember who it is who is laughing with us, who bore the sin and sorrow away: that dear Good Loser who so generously offered, This laugh is on me.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed.

We cannot say that without going for broke. And go for broke is what our Easter hymn does. It gambles everything, all we live and hope for, on one very vulnerable historical claim, that "now has Christ arisen." If he has not, and reasonably that is altogether possible, then neither does our faith have a leg to stand on. That is what we venture to risk, who venture to sing "This Joyful Eastertide."

Had Christ who once was slain,
Not burst his three-day prison,
Our faith had been in vain.

Back in seminary days some of us students once asked a favorite professor who could be trusted with our questions, What if Jesus was not resurrected after all? Would it follow, as Paul claimed, that then our faith would be futile and we would still be in our sin?

The professor, whom we had always thought of as an adventurous spirit, surprised us with his answer. It turned out that he was far more cautious than Paul. He affirmed that Jesus rose, but the divine forgiveness, he felt, dared not depend on that. Still, that was before this dear prof was tried in the fire, as later he was. There is good reason to believe that out of that hard experience he gathered new hope and did indeed go for broke. By now, bless his memory, he may know for sure. And bless him for something else: he was for us a poignantly human reminder of how high the stakes really are - as high as the e-flat an octave and a half above middle-c -- when we dare to sing, "But now has Christ arisen, arisen, arisen. But now has Christ arisen!" The laughter becomes almost giddy.

Robert W. Bertram
LSTC Chapel
4/26/89