

RESURRECTION PASTORAL LETTER 2004

To our beloved clergy, monastics and pious faithful of our God-protected Episcopate, Grace, mercy and peace from God; and from us, our fatherly love and hierarchal blessing.

Dearly beloved:

Christ is Risen!

Having reached this great day of rejoicing and celebration, let us give thanks to God our Father for leading us through the period of the Great Paschal Fast. As he delivered the People of Israel from the Angel of Death and through the Sea of Reeds to reach the land he promised to them, so God has strengthened us to fix our eyes on this day as we have transversed the period of the Forty Days. He has destroyed not merely the power of Death, but Death itself, and he has brought us to the new paradise, for he himself crossed over the threshold of the prison of death and emptied it of fallen mankind. He has entirely negated its power which kept mankind sinning and in the grips of fear.

Today, we are celebrating the victory of Life over death, of God's elevation of man into the paradise once lost. Listen to what Saint Policarp, that great martyr and patron of our own first bishop, says: *"If we please him in this present world, we will also inherit the future world. For he promised to us that he will raise us again from the dead"* (Policarp c.135, E) 1:42. St. Policarp was converted to Christ by the Apostle John in the year 80 A.D.; and thus, he carries on the tradition and teaching of the Apostles to us.

Perhaps we are accustomed to think that today is a special day only for Christians, that it is "our" celebration only. *"As respects their body and soul, there will be no difference of condition between the people who believe and those who do not believe"* (Tertullian 3.591). Thus, we must remind ourselves that, in fact, it is a universal celebration for all people, for the power of death held sway over all mankind; and Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son of the Father, has delivered all generations from its power. And just as it is a celebration for all the children of Adam and Eve, so too, will there be a universal judgment of all humanity. *"Let none of you say that this very flesh will not be judged, nor rise again...For just as you were called in the flesh, you will also come to be judged in the flesh"* (Second Clement 7.519).

Therefore, for those of us who do know of the wonderful work of salvation in our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ foretold by the prophets and taught to us through his apostles, who have "been baptized in Christ and put on Christ," let us bring our own praise and thanksgiving to God, and let us also bring to him that of those who do not yet know and confess his name. Today, we are to bring to God thanksgiving and praise in behalf of all his children for *"He will raise all men from the dead"* (Justin Martyr 1.240), and surely we must acknowledge this great mercy for ourselves and in behalf of all mankind.

Three nights ago, together with those brave women disciples, we went about the holy work of going to the tomb to anoint the lifeless body of our Lord, Jesus. Just as a very few of the inhabitants of the earthly Jerusalem took part in that unique procession to the new tomb which would, for a short three-day period, hold the life-giving body of our Lord, so too, few of our fellow citizens accompanied us with the sacred epitaphios as we encircled the holy church. We were present and participating, and we acknowledge and we believe that *"If Christ has not risen then useless is our preaching and empty is our faith"* (I Corinthians, 15:14).

"O Christ, Savior, the angels in heaven praise your resurrection, and on earth, we unworthy ones, with pure hearts, glorify you," we sang earlier this blessed night as we processed around the church. It is a gift from God that tonight, indeed, our hearts are pure, full of glorification of God and love for one another. If our hearts were not pure, we could not sing out that "Christ is risen!" and respond, "Truly, he is risen!" These words do glorify God, for they confess our belief in all the mighty works which God has promised, fulfilled and will complete at the end of the ages.

Note that we do not say that “Christ arose,” nor do we respond, “Truly he arose” as though this event was once and for all, and we speak of it as some kind of anniversary event! Today, we are in Jerusalem; today, we are at the tomb in the garden; today, we are with the women disciples and later with Peter, John and the others as they gathered together, first out of fear and then in spiritual ecstasy, heartened by the words of the risen Messiah, “Peace be to you!” Christ is risen forever, and therefore, every generation in turn shouts out that he is risen now — for me, for you, for us, for all humanity!

How wonderful is this day when we join together in singing praises to our Lord and crying out that “He is risen from the dead!” With us join the bodiless powers of heaven and those who once sang hymns of glory at the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem. Now they dance and exalt in ecstatic joy as they sing hymns at the tomb, witnessing to the Lord’s arising from among the dead entombed around him. “*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory*” (Matthew 25:31). Truly, the hosts of heaven join us today in our joy and thanksgiving, welcoming us back into the promise of unending life bestowed on us by our all-loving God. “*I am the resurrection and life; he who believes in me even though he die, will live, and whosoever lives and believes in me will not ever die*” (John 11:25-26).

Do you see, dearly beloved, that what we are celebrating is the fulfillment of the ancient promise of love of God the Father for us through His only Begotten Son? It is the completion of all the prophecies and of the words of our Lord himself which are to be fulfilled at the end of this age: “*For he will come again to judge the living and the dead*” and “*of his kingdom there will be no end.*”

Because of our joy, that gladness which fills our hearts with hope for our loved ones who have fallen-asleep in the Lord and for the trust we have that we shall come into the presence of God, we are like radiant candles: “*Let us become true bearers of spiritual light*” (Tone 5, Pentecostarion) for “*The light of Christ illumines all!*” And being saved by Christ and being united to him in his death through our baptism and rising with him from his tomb, let us remember what the Great Paul says: “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love he has for us, who were dead through our transgressions, made us alive in Christ. And arising with him, we sit together with him in the heavens*” (Ephesians 2:4-6).

The Lord is risen and is at the right of the Father, having prepared a way and a place for those who acknowledge him as “Lord” and “God.” St. Basil the Great says: “*Let us die so that we can live. Let us kill the thoughts of the body, so that the thought of the Spirit can be born in us, from which will be born life and peace*” (Homily, Vol. 17, p. 488, Bucharest).

Dearly beloved, just as the risen Lord greeted his apostles with “Peace be to you,” so he greets us each day and every moment of our lives. “Take my peace; live in my peace,” Jesus invites us. Thus, to be in communion with him, we must have his peace, and to have his peace, we must have him dwelling in our hearts and in our lives. Let us lose no time! Let us be sure to throw off the old ways and do good works pleasing to God. “*It is not I who lives but Christ who lives within me*”(Galatians 2:20).

The mysterious works of God are not for us to witness, but to believe. Should the apostles themselves have been stationed at the tomb and been witnesses to his resurrection, to his coming forth from the cold, stone sepulcher, that would still not have convinced others that, indeed, the Lord is risen as he foretold. “*But be ready, for you know not the hour in which our Lord comes*” (Didache 7.382). What is important is not the moment of resurrection, but the fact of Christ’s arising from the dead. In this did the apostles take part, in this did they see the Lord come through the closed doors, and in this did Thomas fall down in worship, crying out: “*My Lord and my God!*”

It was their participation in the forty days of learning and reflection with the risen Jesus that so empowered the apostles and disciples to bear witness, even to the shedding of their own life for the truth, that “The Lord is risen!”

Dearly Beloved, we are apostles of the risen Savior! As the Holy Apostles themselves could not restrain their hearts and their lives from preaching that “Christ is risen,” so, too, we cannot restrain our hearts from responding, “Truly he is Risen,” granting great mercy to the world!

+NATHANIEL, Archbishop of Detroit