

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Our God's power is seen in His word. He speaks, and it happens. At the very beginning of time, the Lord brought the universe itself into existence from nothing at all, merely by speaking. And that power has continued to be found in His word throughout all the ages, even to today.

This power and certainty of what our Lord says is one of the main themes in St. Matthew's account of the resurrection. In Jesus' resurrection, we see His power to bring about what His word declares.

Jesus' rising from the dead shouldn't have been a surprise, although it certainly was. It shouldn't have been a surprise because He had declared that that was His plan. And He'd said this long before He was even born. The resurrection was foretold centuries and centuries earlier through the prophets.

For example, David, speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says of Christ, "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption." The Holy One of God, the Messiah, the Christ, would not see corruption; His body would not rot in the grave. His would be the path of life, not death.

Later on, Isaiah would also foretell of the Messiah's death and resurrection. He says, "When His soul makes an offering for guilt, He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong His days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand." Even though this Suffering Servant would be the great sin offering for the people, He would not remain dead. He would live! He would see those who had been made righteous by His sacrifice! God had spoken by His prophets and given His sure word that His Messiah would rise from the grave.

When that Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, walked this earth, He declared the truth of His resurrection several times. Three times, He told His disciples this, quite plainly. For example, He said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise." The whole passion and resurrection, in a nutshell!

To those who weren't His disciples, Jesus also foretold His resurrection, though in parables. Asked for a sign by unbelieving Pharisees, Jesus told them, "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

After Jesus cleanses the temple, He is asked for a sign to show He has the authority to do such things, and He replies, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." In parables, or plainly stated, Jesus gave His clear word that He would be rising from the dead.

So, if His word about His resurrection was frequent and in some cases very clear, why was it doubted? For one, the idea of a dead person being brought back to life was a stretch for people's minds. Sure, they had heard in the synagogue readings about people in the Old Testament being brought back to life by the prophets. But that was a long time ago! Did God still work the same way?

And yes, Jesus had brought people back to life, such as the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain, and most recently Lazarus. But if Jesus was killed, who could bring Him back to life? No one had ever resurrected himself! It all seemed impossible to their human reason and understanding that these words of Jesus could be true.

More maliciously, though, Satan, the great enemy of mankind, opposed the resurrection because he opposes all life, both the life of Christ and the life that the resurrection of Christ would guarantee for those joined to Christ by faith.

He strove to end Jesus' life in the first place, working in the hearts and minds of unbelievers to bring this about. He came into the heart of Judas after Judas decided to reject Jesus, guiding the former apostle to betray his Master. As the father of lies, Satan guided the lies of those who bore false witness against Jesus.

He inflamed the pride in the hearts of the Sanhedrin, leading them to declare Jesus' wonderful words – that He was the Son of Man, God come to save His people – as blasphemy worthy of death. He stirred in the hearts of the crowd, leading them to desire the release of a violent murderer and cry out for the crucifixion of an innocent man.

And even after Jesus hung dead on the cross, the evil one still worked, leading the high priests to request a guard for the tomb, so that Jesus would stay in there. The father of lies, and those who had embraced his lies, would do everything they could to keep the words of Jesus from coming true.

Yet their efforts were absolutely futile. Despite active opposition, despite a lack of understanding, Christ still rose. He had given His word, and His power would cause His word to be fulfilled.

The devil and all those opposed to Christ thought that they were winning a victory when they crucified Him. But they were actually fulfilling God's will. The Lord had foretold His suffering and death, both in ages past and during His earthly ministry. By putting the Innocent One to death, they had unwittingly brought about the great atoning sacrifice that would pay for this sins of the world.

Satan had been foiled, his seeming triumph turned into utter defeat. Now the one sure weapon he had possessed – the ability to rightly accuse God's people of their sins and demand just punishment – had been taken away. Jesus bore that punishment on the cross, making satisfaction for each and every sin. The devil's accusations were now totally worthless when thrown at those washed in the blood of Christ.

The loss of power by the devil and the grave was seen on the third day, when the promised resurrection of Christ took place. As Jesus had been innocent, paying for the sins of others, death could not hold Him. His body could not and would not stay in the tomb. He rose, just as He had said He would. He had won the impossible victory over the grave.

And His victory was no little thing, no slight of hand. No, the power of God was displayed on that first Easter morning. An angel was sent from the halls of heaven to open up the tomb.

Such was the power of God in this heavenly messenger that an earthquake was set off when He landed. The glory the angel reflected from the Lord was such that the guards, presumably no cowards, fainted clear away. It's a notable twist that those who were there to make sure Jesus continued to appear dead ended up appearing like dead men themselves.

And after the guards have fallen, the angel rolls away the stone... and sits on it. The image is, again, one of victory and power. That enormous stone, seemingly immovable, barring the exit from the grave, is tossed aside and then sat upon, like a defeat enemy forced into submission.

The angel's words, like his actions, also show forth the power of the risen God. He first tells the women who have come to see the tomb, "Do not be afraid." Though we might not realize it, this was an act of God working through His word. The angel continued to shine like lightning, and surely the women would have fainted away like the guards. But the Lord speaks through His messenger: "Do not be afraid." This isn't mere encouragement, this is the Lord bestowing courage and strength through His word, His power coming through His word, enabling the women to stand where hardened soldiers had fainted from terror.

The angel then reveals God's knowledge, the Lord's power to know the heart. "I know you seek Jesus who was crucified." Their purpose, their sorrow, their mourning, was not hidden from the Lord. He knew their hearts, and by His word He would comfort them.

"He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay." The angel proclaims his Lord's victory over the grave. He had died, but He had risen from death. The angel invites them to look into the empty tomb to see with their own eyes what they had heard Jesus foretell. The stone hadn't been rolled away so Jesus could get out – no rock could hold the Son of God. No, it was rolled away so they could look in.

And, as the angel points out, this was all as Jesus had said. Jesus' word was once again proved true. The almighty power of God had not allowed one of Christ's words to fall to the ground, even those that seemed utterly impossible. The Lord Jesus had said that He would rise on the third day, and so He had. His word could not go out and return empty. Nothing could overcome His word.

The word is what they are sent out to proclaim. The angel tells them, "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him." The word is spoken to them, and now they are to go out and declare it to the disciples.

This word is actually something the disciples have heard before from Christ. The night He was betrayed, He told them that, after He was raised up, He would go before them to Galilee. So the women, like the angel, are sent bearing words which Christ has spoken.

As they go, who should appear to them but the risen Christ Himself? At the appearance of Jesus, the women fall down, not in fear like the guards, but in worship, praising the God who had fulfilled His word. Accepting their worship – for Jesus is the God worthy of worship – Jesus then

speaks again the word which He had previously spoken to them through His angel. “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

Through His word, the Lord again calm their fears and strengthens them. And He again sends them to go tell of His resurrection to His disciples, His brothers. The word of His resurrection has gone from Him, to the women, to the disciples, and then out into the world.

That word is what we the Church rejoice in and proclaim, not only on Easter morning, but every day. Our Lord’s word, containing His power to overcome death and grant everlasting life, is the Good News, the Gospel. Jesus has declared that those who are joined to Him by baptism and faith will not die eternally but will share in His resurrection and everlasting life.

Like His own promised resurrection, this promise of believers rising from the dead goes back a long way before Jesus spoke it in His earthly ministry.

In the Old Testament, Job speaks with confidence born of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration when he declares, “And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” And the Psalms are full of the Lord’s promises to save His people from Sheol, from the grave.

Jesus Himself would promise that those who believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. He would declare, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

After Christ’s ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit would declare through St. Paul that “the dead will be raised imperishable,” and that because of the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, death had lost its sting. God’s promises of His people’s resurrection are found throughout His word.

Sadly, though, as there were those who opposed the words of Jesus concerning His own resurrection, there are those who oppose His words still today. Like some at the time of Jesus, some today see the promise as an impossibility. The idea that dead bodies could be brought back to life, that those who have long since rotted into dust could come together once more, it seems like a fairy tale, a fantasy.

Those who have embraced the so-called “enlightened” positions of scientific materialism – that the physical, material world is all there is and that the spiritual realm is a myth – see the resurrection like all the miracles in the Bible: a bunch of fables told by primitive people. “We have advanced beyond such silliness and shouldn’t delude ourselves.”

This temptation to believe only what we can see is a threat, to be certain. But the greater threat, the opposition that Satan puts more of his efforts into, is to try to undermine the faith which leads to the resurrection.

He works to convince people that merely knowing about Jesus – as he himself does – is enough to get to everlasting life. Believing, which means actually trusting the word of God and living according to it, is a different thing than merely knowing. Belief brings what is heard into action, and Satan strives to keep people from believing.

The devil also spreads the lie that, because God is love, pretty much everyone will be resurrected and brought into heaven, because how could a loving God send people to hell? The devil works to make the resurrection, the promise of grace, so cheap, so universal, that people just take it for granted. And to take the promises of Jesus for granted is to begin to let them slip through your fingers.

But though Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh would attack the word of God, either through pride or through indifference, God's word does and will always remain true.

He has promised that apart from Him, no one will live forever, no matter how advanced medical science becomes. And He has promised that those who let their faith wither and die will be cast into the outer darkness for eternity. These are His everlasting decrees.

Yet He has also decreed that He doesn't desire even one sinner to perish, but that all might repent and come to saving faith. His great victory, won at the cross and shown in triumph at the empty tomb, is a victory over even the greatest of sins. There is nothing so wicked, so vile, you can do that, should you turn to Him and repent, He will not immediately forgive. The blood of Jesus makes atonement for all sin.

And the promise of the resurrection is just as certain as the fact that He now lives and reigns to all eternity. He has given His word that He will watch over His people through all the days of their lives, granting them their daily bread, delivering them from the evil one. He has given His word that even the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. And He has given His word that, for those who fall asleep in Him, death is merely the doorway from this life to a life infinitely better.

All of this is guaranteed in His resurrection. The power that raised Christ from the dead is the same power that will guard and keep His Christians, both in this life and the life to come.

Our God's power is seen in His word. He promised to rise from the dead, and though it seemed impossible, and though many opposed it, it happened all the same. He has promised to grant eternal life to all who believe in Him, and though many oppose it, it will happen.

The Lord speaks in His word, "Do not be afraid," and so there is nothing you need to fear, because in that word, received by faith, the power of God is there for you.

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