

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Throughout the events of Holy Week, and of the Resurrection itself, the Bible paints a picture of strong contrasts. Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem with cheers and blessing; He is led out of Jerusalem beaten and bloody. Jesus shares an intimate meal with His closest followers; one of those followers will betray Him. Jesus is dead, laid in a tomb with a great stone rolled in front; Jesus is alive, the stone is rolled away! The events are all contrasts between what the world expects and what God's word declares. And, as the angel at the tomb points out, it's the word that is always proven true.

What are the world's expectations for what should've happened Easter morning? We're shown in the words and actions of the women coming to the tomb. We read, "Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him." These faithful, loving women are bringing spices. Why? To anoint the dead body of Jesus.

The worldly expectation is that they'll find a corpse. That's how it usually works, right? When someone dies, he stays dead. And these women had no doubt that Jesus had died. They had seen Jesus be beaten, crucified, stabbed with a spear. They had watched as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus in burial cloths and laid Him in a tomb. Jesus was most certainly dead.

Now, perhaps we say, "But what about the times Jesus had raised someone from the dead? And what about all His promises that He would rise again? The women should've clung to these signs and words and not fallen into worldly despair!" And yet, they did. Why?

Perhaps to understand their mindset, we should look at ourselves. Where do we find that we are tempted to go along with the world's expectations rather than the clear words of God? Maybe we should start with today: Easter. What's the point of Easter? I'd guess you all know the correct answer to that question. Jesus Christ bodily rose from the dead to show that He had overcome death. We know that.

But what are we tempted toward? One example might be making Easter merely a cultural celebration, with chocolate and jelly beans and Easter egg hunts, and big dinners afterwards. There's certainly nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But ask yourself, how many children in this country, or even in Rawlins, will enjoy a basket full of candy but not hear even one word about Jesus? Maybe this worldly idea is a little closer than we think.

Or for another temptation, consider the Easter message given by King Charles of England, where he held up Jesus as an example of "the Jewish ethic of caring for the stranger," and "a deep human instinct echoed in Islam and other religious traditions, and in the hearts of all who seek the good of others." Now maybe you figure that, as an American, Charles isn't your king and so his messages aren't your problem. The thing is, though, behind that proclamation is the idea all too common in

America, that Christianity is just one valid path among many, and the main point is just to be nice and kind to others. Easter is just an occasion to highlight generic virtues common to all.

But the Jews didn't call for Jesus' crucifixion because He taught the need to care for the stranger. They had Him killed because He clearly stated that He is the Savior and that only through faith in Him can a person be saved from the fires of hell. Judaism, and Islam, and other religions, deny the Resurrection because it proves that Jesus is right.

So why are these temptations toward worldly thinking so common, even among those who claim the name of "Christian"? Here, the women in the Gospel reading may again help us understand. They had been with Jesus for a long while, and then suddenly, He's no longer there. And if He's gone, how can He keep His word? Isn't this a temptation for us as well? We don't see Jesus around, nor do we always feel His Spirit stirring in our hearts.

Sometimes, especially when things are very hard – think witnessing your beloved rabbi being crucified – it can seem like Christ isn't there. If He's not there, then you may as well go with the world's ideas, right?

Or perhaps the world seems right because it seems to get results. Jesus had spoken of the coming Kingdom of God. But the kingdom that seemed to triumph was the world. The Sanhedrin convicts Jesus of blasphemy, which is itself the greatest blasphemy, and nothing seems to happen to them. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, puts a sign above Jesus' head, mockingly proclaiming Him as the King of the Jews. Does Pilate face any consequences for mocking the Son of God? Again, seemingly not.

In our lives, how often do we see the world mocking God's word, despising His Law, rebelling against His authority, and nothing seems to happen? The devil loves to come to us in those times and tempt us to doubt, to join in his rebellion against Christ and His word, because, again, what's going to happen? "Break the Commandments, follow the world, the sun will still come up; it really doesn't matter." So the deceiver would tempt us to believe.

Yet Easter, the truth of the resurrection, disproves all this. By the resurrection, God's word is proven true; the world's expectations broken. The Bible shows this, beginning with even the more mundane things. What was the first concern we hear from the women, a practical, worldly concern? "Who will roll away the stone?" Yet when they get to the tomb, what do they find? "But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away." The tomb had been sealed, guarded, yet none of it was able to keep Jesus inside.

Going further, more worldly expectations are shattered. In place of a dead body, they find an angel – one of the undying spirits who serve God, appearing as a young man in a white robe. Where is Jesus? They saw Him die! They saw Him buried – in this tomb! The angel tells them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him."

You're expecting a dead man, but He is alive! He has overcome death! He has conquered the grave! He has vanquished sin! The common understanding, that death is the end, is undone. Jesus Christ is risen, and therefore death is not the end!

Such wonderful news cannot remain with just those few women. The resurrection is not secret; it must be proclaimed! So the angel tells the women, “But go, tell His disciples – and Peter – that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him.” Here another expectation is done away with. The angel refers to the disciples – and Peter. Why mention Peter by name? Because Peter had explicitly denied knowing Jesus. He had called down oaths and curses upon himself to reinforce his words. Surely such a person could never again be a follower of Jesus, much less be brought again into the inner circle.

Yet Peter had been struck with sorrow and contrition ever since Jesus looked at him in the high priest’s palace. Even more, Jesus had shed His blood to wipe away even the denials. The angel tells the women to tell Peter that His tears have been seen, his cries heard, that he, even he, has been forgiven.

The angel concludes his Easter message with the statement that was no surprise to him, but which confounds the world’s expectations: “as He said to you.” The angel reminds the women, and the disciples, and us today, that the word of the Lord is and always will be true. Jesus had spoken of all these things, and they had all happened according to His word. And if these words about the resurrection had been true, that resurrection which had seemed impossible to worldly expectations, then all the other words spoken by Jesus and by His Spirit through His prophets and apostles and evangelists must be true as well.

Those words include the ones about sin and death. Worldly expectations would lead us to think that sin isn’t usually that big of a deal. Everybody does it, and how could God get mad at us all, especially when many of our sins aren’t that bad, at least in our own eyes. Besides, doesn’t the Bible say, “Judge not”? Who are we to tell people what they can and can’t do?

The thing is, because God is God, He sets what is right and wrong, and declares it to us in His word. The Commandments He has given are reflections of His holiness, and so to break them isn’t just to violate some arbitrary rules, but to act against the very nature of God.

This is why sin brings such severe consequences. The apostle Paul writes, “The wages of sin is death.” The prophet Ezekiel declares, “The soul who sins shall die.” Death isn’t just a natural part of life; it’s God just punishment of sin. And death isn’t just breathing your last. Eternal death is separation from God in hell, having everything good removed from you forever.

God is merciful and loving, though, and He doesn’t desire anyone to come into such judgment. That’s why He has provided His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for sin. Here again, what the Lord declares goes against worldly expectations. Those would lead us to think that, as long as someone has been a “good” person, doing more good than bad, then he’ll go to heaven when he dies.

But our good deeds can’t cancel out our bad ones. No one aside from Jesus has lived a perfect life. Nothing but the blood of Jesus can take away our sins. We can do nothing to save ourselves, and so that’s why Jesus came. As the Bible tells us, “[Jesus] was delivered up because of our offenses and

raised because of our justification.” The cross was the altar where the Lamb of God was sacrificed, and the empty tomb was the great sign showing that the sacrifice had been accepted.

The Lord’s word tells us that this great gift of God, the very righteousness of Christ, is given to us through repentance and faith. As Jesus Himself declared in the first preaching of His earthly ministry: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” The world tends to see repentance as merely words, and belief as just knowing some information.

But the Bible teaches that repentance is turning away from sin and back to the way of God. And belief, faith, isn’t just knowing what God has said and done, but trusting in those words and deeds, letting them guide one’s life. Faith is a living thing, born out of the life that God gives to us.

That life – eternal life – is another place where the world’s expectations fall short of God’s truth. Worldly ideas of heaven sometimes involve just really good versions of what we do on this earth, like sitting at the best fishing hole ever, or hiking through the most beautiful forests, or things like that. As nice as these sound, they fall ridiculously short of what God has in store for His children.

Eternal life is being in the presence of the Lord God, who is the source of every good. It is to be happier than the happiest moment in this life. It is to have more peace and calm than even the most placid times of this earth. It is to feel more satisfaction than our best days here ever offered.

In the new creation, all division and strife are removed, with the saints given perfect unity. Because of Easter, those who die believing in Jesus are never truly separated. All Christians will rise to life, gathered around the throne and the Lamb.

These are the promises God gives to us in His word. Their sheer greatness might make them sound like too much, too good to be true. Like the women, we might be tempted to flee either in fear or amazement. But as the angel says, these words come from the Lord. He has given them to us, and they cannot fail. Jesus is risen, and all those joined to Him by faith shall also rise to life everlasting.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Amen.