

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Like Christians of old, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ every day by remembering our baptism.

by Arthur A. Just Jr.

When the women came to the tomb on that first Easter morning, they came to anoint Jesus' body because they thought He was dead. In the darkness of the first day of the week, they came to finish what they had begun on Good Friday, when they took Jesus' body down from the cross and prepared it for burial. This was no Sunday for them, no day of resurrection, no Lord's Day. This was a day of mourning, a day to anoint the dead body of their Master and Lord.

What a surprise for them to see the stone rolled away and no body of the Lord Jesus in the tomb. Prostrating themselves before two men in dazzling clothes, they heard the first Easter proclamation: "Why are you seeking the living among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen" (Luke 24:6).

Jesus, the Crucified One, was "back from the dead." "He is not here, but He has risen" has been the Easter message of the church ever since.

Easter is Jesus' "pass over" from death to life, celebrated each spring when the Jews celebrate the *Pascha*, or Passover, as nature is reborn after a winter of darkness. From the beginning, Easter was the time of Baptism, as bodies were washed and reborn through water, Word, and Spirit.

Rebirth is one of the dominant images of Baptism, echoing the words of Jesus to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5 ESV).

For early Christians, to celebrate Easter was to celebrate their baptism as their journey with Christ from death to resurrection.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He showed us in His resurrected body—still bearing the scars of His passion—what we will one day be and what we already are through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are risen creatures, brought back from the dead, celebrating Easter every day as we walk in newness of life. Christ's life is our life, and because we are joined to Him, we share in His resurrection.

This news seems too good to be true. And that is how the disciples responded on that first Easter when Jesus appeared to them. They "disbelieved for joy" (Luke 24:41).

"See My hands and My feet—that I am Myself; touch Me and see, because a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see Me having," He told them (Luke 24:39).

The scourged, beaten, crucified body of Jesus with the nail marks in His hands and feet, and the spear wound in His side, was eating roasted fish before their eyes. Jesus was back from the dead! Was this *their* destiny?

Three hundred years after the Resurrection, the church affirmed this in the Apostles' Creed:

"I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body."

A NEW CREATION

Easter was the first, and for many years, the only historical event in the life of Jesus that was celebrated by Christians. For the first three centuries, the church organized time by the week, and Sunday was the celebration of God's restored creation, because on this day of the week God's Son rose from the dead. Sunday is the Lord's Day, but it is also the "eighth day," the first day of the new creation, the eternal day that has no end. Luther affirmed this view:

The eighth day signifies the future life; for Christ rested in the sepulcher on the Sabbath, that is, during the entire seventh day, but rose again on the day which follows the Sabbath, which is the eighth day and the beginning of a new week, and after it no other day is counted. For through His death Christ brought to a close the weeks of time and on the eighth day entered into a different kind of life, in which days are no longer counted but there is one eternal day without the alternations of night. ... For the risen Christ is no longer subject to days, months, weeks, or any number of days; He is in a new and eternal life. The beginning of this life is perceived and reckoned, but there is no end.

Luther's Works 3:141



This is the reason many baptismal fonts are eight-sided. The number eight was the number that signified eternity in the ancient world, corresponding to the practice of circumcision that occurred on the eighth day after birth. In Baptism, we die with Christ and rise with Him to a life that never ends. For many, this entrance into eternity takes place in an eight-sided font that proclaims the full meaning of Baptism.

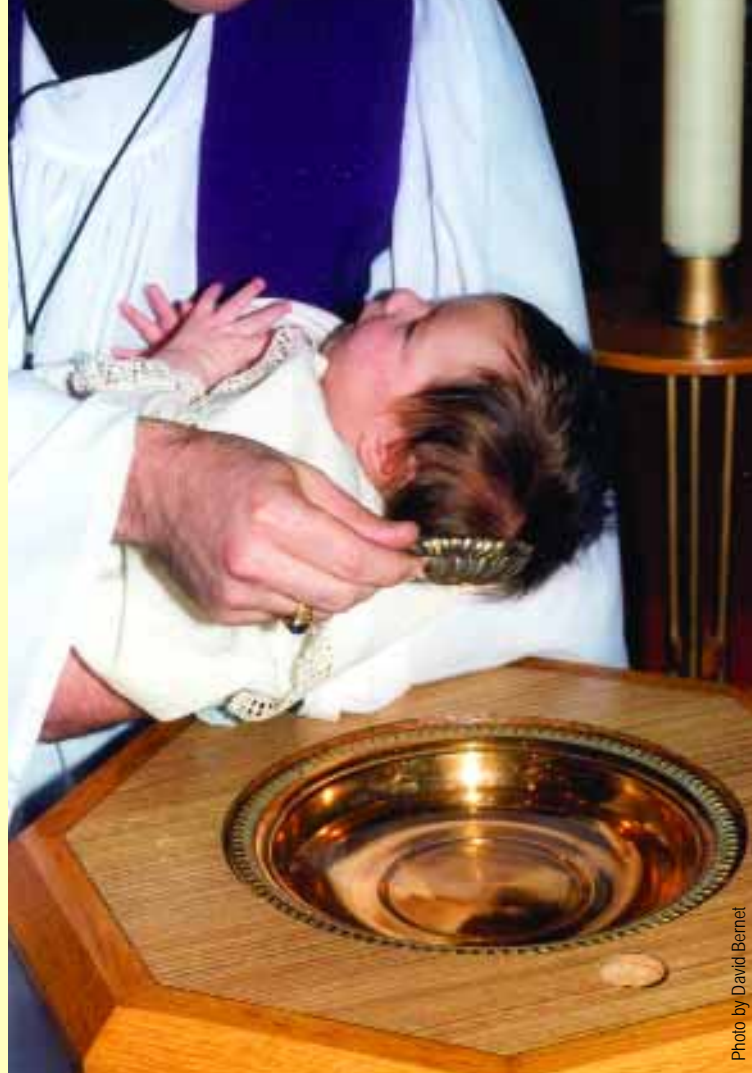


Photo by David Bernert

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

In the early church, the time of Baptism was normally the night before Easter, called the Easter Vigil. (For early Christians, Easter began at sunset on Saturday.) Lent was the time for the final preparations for Baptism, beginning on Ash Wednesday with the final enrollment of those preparing for Baptism, who were called catechumens. Lent was primarily a catechetical time, and only secondarily a time of penance.

The rite of Holy Baptism among early Christians proclaimed what they believed about Baptism, about the Resurrection, about Easter. On Saturday evening the faithful would gather in church on a dark spring night to sing psalms. Huddled together with a few candles providing some light, the people would chant psalms in a rhythmic back and forth, binding them together as a community.

After hours of chanting psalms, the catechumens would separate themselves from the community and move outside to the baptistery, men with their sons and women with their daughters.

The baptisteries were buildings outside the church, normally with an outer and inner room. The outer room was smaller, and like the church they gathered had just left, dark and cold. The catechumens turned to the West to renounce Satan and all his works and all his ways. The West was the place of darkness where Satan dwelled. After the renunciation, the catechumens would be anointed with plain olive oil on the eyes, nose, lips, ears, and chest to seal out Satan. Like warriors readied for battle, they were prepared to fight the Evil One.

Next, the catechumens would strip off their clothes. In this dark, cold room, they were naked as Adam was before the Fall and as Christ was on the cross. Early Christians saw this nakedness as representing both

Adam and Christ. Jesus was crucified naked on the cross, emphasizing the shame of the crucifixion, but also showing that in His humiliating and shameful nakedness, vulnerable to all, He had the power to defeat Satan. This is truly a profound proclamation of the theology of the cross.

Cold, naked, and standing in darkness, the catechumens saw the doors to the baptistery burst open, whereupon they entered a magnificent room, warm and filled with light, arrayed with mosaics of paradise on the walls.

"You have entered paradise," a church father would say, for this was in fact the place where they would cross the boundary from death to life and enter into communion with Christ, a communion that never ends.

Catechumens would often step down into fonts to be baptized, immersed three times—once in the name of the Father, again in the name of the Son, and finally in the name of the Holy Spirit—but also



Photo by Mel de la Motte

*A white robe would be placed upon them.
The robe represented Christ's righteousness,
which now covered them by their baptism.*

immersed three times for the three days that Jesus spent in the tomb.

Baptism in the name of the Triune God is here united with Romans 6: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4 ESV).

One church father writes that in the waters of Baptism we both died and were reborn, that the font was our tomb and our womb, our grave and our mother.

Coming up the stairs on the other side of the font, dripping with water, the newly baptized would be anointed with chrism, a sweet-smelling olive oil representing the anointing of the Holy Spirit. They now stood there as "Christs." A white robe would be placed upon them. The robe represented Christ's righteousness, which now covered them by their baptism. Washed, anointed and robed, the newly baptized returned to the assembly of believers waiting in the church.

THROUGH WATER, WORD, AND SPIRIT

How incredible it must have been for the congregation to smell the chrism covering these newly baptized Christians. The smell of Easter in the early church was not the smell of lilies but the sweet scent of the newly baptized, who had died and risen in Christ. What a way to celebrate Easter, where the reality of Christ's death and resurrection is lived out by all in the baptism of adults, children, and infants, who have now entered the paradise of God through the water, Word, and Spirit.

Jesus Christ is back from the dead! Celebrate this Easter reality every day by remembering your baptism.

Dr. Arthur A. Just Jr. is professor of exegetical theology, dean of the chapel, and director of the deaconess program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. His email address is: justaa@mail.ctsfw.edu.

Sing Alleluia!

by Greg J. Wismar

One of the sacred words used in our hymnody is the familiar alleluia, or hallelujah. This joyful praise to God occurs in hundreds of Christian hymns. In one hymn alone, "A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing," it is used more than 40 times.

Experts in the Hebrew language note that the word historically connotes being sincerely and deeply thankful. God's people, redeemed by Christ, cannot help but express their gratitude to God. The time-honored word "alleluia," which means "praise the Lord," is a fitting way to voice that appreciation.

Although alleluias appear throughout the Bible, many may be found in the book of Psalms. Often the psalmists link the use of "Hallelujah" with some form of exuberant musical expression. As we sing our alleluias, we faithfully join the countless generations that have been blessed by using that most meaningful expression of praise: Alleluia!

Dr. Gregory J. Wismar is
chairman of the LCMS Commission on Worship and
pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church, Newtown, Conn.
His email address is: ctkingchrch@snet.net.



Photo by Connie Blackwood