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Trinity Lutheran Church
Decatur, Illinois
Easter Sunday
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The Greatest Comeback Ever

Christ Is Risen! He Is Risen Indeed! Hallelujah!

Hear the Word of God from Mark 16,

“The angel said, ‘Do not be afraid! I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen!’

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

Today is not a day for those who don't care who wins. Today is for those who love challenges, who never give up, who never surrender. Everybody loves a good comeback: the Cinderella sports team, the most dramatic movies, the most inspiring news stories revolve around those who have been beaten down, overwhelmed, and pummeled; and yet, somehow, they came back to win. If we had kept score, God was behind ever since the devil got Adam and Eve to sin in Genesis 3. The death cry, the spear jab, the limp body, the bloody shroud, the funeral procession, and the tomb announced that Jesus was dead, and that the God whom Jesus preached was either a dead god, or no god at all. Since Jesus didn't come down from the cross, He was, no doubt, an impostor, like His enemies claimed. Gethsemane, the arrest, the trials, the execution of God's champion, all proclaimed that Jesus had lost. Champagne bottles were being popped in hell. But the demons were celebrating without a victory. As they say, *‘the game isn't over, until it's over’*. And the clock had not yet run out yet. The game wasn't over until Easter morn.

On this day, our champion, Jesus – with glorified scars, and an indestructible body - stepped out of His grave to beat the odds. The battle marks still etched in His resurrected body, are now the emblems of Christ's victory. In Revelation 5 John looks into heaven and writes, ***“I saw (in heaven) a lamb, looking as if He had been slain, now standing before the throne, and all those in heaven sang a new song: ‘You are worthy..... because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God.’”***

His pierced hands, speared side, nailed feet, thorn-crowned brow, battered face, and scourged back, all now warm and pink with new life, tell a story that the angels and saints are already celebrating in heaven. Revelation 5, ***“Worthy is the lamb, Who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”*** The old cliché that “*it’s not about whether you win or lose, but how you play the game*” is not true when you’re talking about life or death, heaven or hell, resurrection or grave, God or Satan. Rather than ‘popping the ‘champagne’, God now pours us a bottomless chalice of His son’s forgiving blood. And our champion, Jesus, actually lets us drink the very blood that conquers our enemies. Paul says in 1st Corinthians 11 ***“As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s (victorious) death until He comes again.”*** and 1st Corinthians 15, ***‘Where, O Death, is your sting? Where, O Grave, is your victory?’ We can now mock our enemies in worship, at the communion rail, and at the grave because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!***

But how exactly did Jesus pull it off? In Matthew 12 Jesus said, ***“How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions, unless He first ties up the strong man.”*** On Good Friday every devil in hell was lined up against Jesus, and it looked as if they had won. But, as they say, *‘looks can be deceiving’*. The truth is, sin, death, hell, and the devil lost the moment Jesus cried, ***“It is finished.”*** They just didn’t know it until Easter morning. Today, Jesus entered the strong man’s devilish house, stripped him of his weapons, burned his propaganda, and robbed him of his ammunition. The devil’s all out of ammo folks. He’s just shooting blanks. It’s time to call him out on His lies and propaganda, and start shooting back with the big guns of Christ’s forgiving blood, saving death, and victorious resurrection. Luther said, ***“When the devil holds my sin in my face I tell him, ‘Dear devil’, I direct you to Christ. You can accuse and condemn Him all you want for dying for me; but that’s what He did, and if you have a problem with my being forgiven, that’s between you and Jesus, so don’t bother me anymore.”*** **Page 2**

It's time for us to gag the devil with the Good News, *"Devil, you got me to sin again, and I'm ashamed of it. But it doesn't mean a thing! 'What do you mean 'it doesn't mean a thing'?' the devil howls. It doesn't mean a thing because you tried to get Christ to sin, and you could never get Him to sin - not even once - and God says I'm covered with Christ's righteousness in baptism. So unless and until you can bring charges against Jesus and make them stick, you cannot bring charges against me and make them stick.'*

Luther said, *"The devil came to me one night to charge me with my sins, but when I realized it was the devil, I went back to bed and fell asleep again, and let him be angry, for I well knew that he could do nothing to me in Jesus'.* On Easter day the divine hostage, Jesus Christ, blew the lid off of His own grave, and God's Word says, ***"Death no longer has dominion over Him"***. Jesus prevailed, and led His holy angels into hell to announce His victory, and then He began reclaiming a world stolen by Satan. The custodians of hell, and the guardians of the grave were blind-sided by the light of the risen Christ. The light of Christ's empty tomb has burst into the graves of God's saints, unchaining them from death. Thus, even on that first Easter, God's Word says, ***'many saints came out of their tombs, and entered into the holy city and appeared to many'***, announcing that the great resurrection of Christ's Holy people has already begun.

Things aren't always as they seem, folks. The cross, which tolled the death of Jesus, actually trumpeted God's victory. The blood that poured out of His body, actually won the war, when our victor cried: ***"It is finished."*** Jesus destroyed death by dying it. Jesus' burial shroud, stained with blood, is now the unfurled banner of our Savior's victory. Today Jesus shouts into the abyss of hell, ***"Where, O Death, is your sting? Where, O Grave is your victory?"*** And in deathly, defeated silence there comes no echo of any response, just serpent hisses and demonic growls. On the last day, the grave will give up all her dead ones. Both believers and unbelievers will rise. But not all the dead will live forever. On that day all of the risen will be divided between goats and sheep, chaff and wheat, unbelievers and believers, for Jesus will not force His kingdom on anyone. And, sadly, there will always be those who don't want Him. On that day, those who do not want their Savior, who treat Him as dead, who regard everything as more sure than Jesus, who choose to turn back to the grave and hell of Christless living - will be able to have what they want – life without God – but what they don't realize is that life without God is HELL.

But know this. And know this well. Christ has rendered hell entirely unnecessary for anyone to ever have to do to. There's no thrill in knowing the outcome of a contest or a game before it even begins. What makes a contest thrilling is seeing losers win and winners lose. The poorest guy in town inherits a fortune. The kid at the bottom of the class gets the highest score. The school klutz makes the game winning shot. Out-numbered American colonists turn back British soldiers, and the soldiers have to march past them laying down their weapons. That's what happened on Easter morn. The tables were turned on hell. The enemies of Jesus paraded in front of Him, laying down their weapons, confessing that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the same God they once cursed.

This was *NOT* a contest between God's almighty power and satan's diabolical power. That would have been no contest at all, and Satan would have forever accused God of not playing fair. No, this was a battle between Christ - in the weakness of our human flesh - against the full force of all the devils in hell, and an entire world of sinners poised against Him. And yet, Christ came from behind, and settled the score in our favor!

As a result of Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus has given us a "Comeback" from sin. Romans 8, ***"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.....and neither death nor life will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."*** The guilt and power of sin are conquered. Even when I fail, my champion's blood still forgives. 1st Corinthians 15, ***"If Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sin.....BUT.....Christ has been raised from the dead."*** Jesus mopped up all of our mess-ups at the cross; and as a result, our Satanic accuser is now gagged by Jesus' blood

On this day, Jesus has also given us a 'comeback' from death, namely, that one can live, even when one has died. In John 14 Jesus declares, ***"Because I live, you will live also."*** Your baptism is your participation in Jesus' death and resurrection, and a dress rehearsal for the day when He will call us out of our tombs. Today, you and I are not standing at the entrance to our graves, we are standing at the exit to our graves. Judgment Day is behind us. Our baptism is the first step in our resurrection out of our graves. Spiritually speaking, we have already passed through the valley of the shadow of death, and we're just waiting for our physical bodies to catch up with the spiritual resurrection that is already ours' in Jesus. In Christ we are daily passing out of death into life. Today, you and I have been dealt a trump card. Of all the religions, belief systems, and philosophies in the world only Christianity can boast that our founder is not dead, but alive. **Page 4**

And finally, Jesus has given us a ‘comeback’ from hell. Jesus went thru hell and high water to save us. And He drank its’ deadly poison. But now, risen from the dead, Jesus is hell’s anti-venom, so that you and I no longer need to pay what’s already been paid!

With the charges against us, nailed to the cross, and now marked “Paid In Full”, Satan, that ancient dragon, now chokes on Jesus’ forgiving blood. Today began the earthquake that will carry on until the last day, when the lids of our graves will be ripped from their hinges. Jesus has gone into our hellish prison to release the hostages, one prisoner at a time. *“Do you renounce the devil, and all his works and all his ways?” “I do!” “[Then] depart you unclean spirit and make room for God’s Holy Spirit.”* Jesus has reclaimed the world for God, and disposed of the devil, who had enthroned himself as our ‘lord’. On this day, the rafters of heaven are shaking and quaking with angelic roars. The foundations of hell are cracking. The troops storming out of the gates of hell have been ambushed by the Risen One. The enemy is everywhere in retreat. Christ has pillaged hell. Satan is bound. Death is conquered. The grave has lost its’ sting. The temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom, granting us access into the Father’s family, and the Father’s home. The saints are streaming out of their graves into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. The gates of Paradise are unlocked. Eden is restored. The Tree of Life is our food. Noah’s ark has survived the flood. Pharaoh and his host have been drowned in the sea. The Passover Lamb has been slain, raised from the dead, and is now feasted upon by the conquering troops in the Lord’s supper. God stands in front of His church and leads her through the Red Sea of our Baptism. The Jordan is backed up like a heap. The Promised Land is already being entered. Goliath has fallen. The fiery furnace has left no burn marks on us. The lions’ den have had their mouths shut. The heavenly Jerusalem is in view. The temple, destroyed by God’s enemies, from the day the world began, has been raised again on the third day. Today is God’s day. His fortunes have been reversed. His enemy is placed in chains. Today is a day for divine bragging, and heavenly hysteria, over the greatest comeback ever, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. This kind of comeback could only have been orchestrated by the God Who is more powerful than sin, death, hell, devil, and grave combined! And all this calls for Endless Celebration! For what is even better than watching a great comeback on TV, is that, in Christ, you are actually a participant in the world’s greatest comeback. The angels didn’t roll away the stone to let Jesus out. He was already gone. The angels rolled away the stone to let you and me in on the greatest news the world has ever received, in John 11, ***“I AM the resurrection and the life! He who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me, will never, ever, ever, die eternally!” AMEN!***