

Dearly beloved: Christ is risen!

Whenever I am in Pennsylvania to visit family I try to make a point of visiting the cemeteries where my family members are buried: my paternal grandparents, my maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Some of the cemeteries are quite old and the tombstones are inscribed not only in English but also in Cyrillic and Slovak. Some of the inscriptions began with the words, "Here lies..." The ground of a cemetery is sacred ground, set aside to lay to rest the bodies of those who have died. But cemeteries are only a temporary feature in our world. They are transient resting places for our mortal bodies.

We know this because of the angel at the tomb of the Lord whom we heard in today's gospel, that portion of the same gospel we read outside before we enter the church on Pascha night, prior to our singing "Christ is risen." The myrrhbearing women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, came to anoint Jesus' body in the tomb. But when they arrived, the stone was rolled back and Jesus was nowhere to be found. The angel they met spoke to them the words that are foundational for us Christians: "He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him."

"He is not here." There is no gravestone marker at the tomb of the Lord with the words, "Here lies Jesus." His grave is empty. It is now the centerpiece of the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem. The proclamation of the angel to the women, the women's proclamation to the apostles, and so on throughout the generations is the grave marker unique in human history: "He has risen, He is not here."

Jesus is the first born of the dead, that in all things He may have pre-eminence. His Resurrection is for us the promise of our resurrection. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is a sign for us of what will become of us on the last day, when He will come again in glory. The tombs will be emptied of the dead. As Saint Paul writes in the earliest writing of the New Testament, his first letter to the church at Thessalonika which we read at every funeral, "For the Lord Himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first." The bodies of those who have died will rise, united to their spirits, and be raised in likeness to the Lord's risen body: no longer subject to hunger, pain or sickness. Jesus promises that those who have died alive in Him will rise to the resurrection of life but those who died in evil will rise to the resurrection of judgment. We read these words of Jesus at every funeral, also.

The resurrection of glory is the promise Jesus gives to us by His own rising from the dead. Because, by His own three days in the tomb, Jesus hallowed the graves of all those who believe in Him. So that by His grave and by His resurrection, He has made the grave not a place of death, but a sign of hope which promises resurrection even as the grave claims our mortal bodies. For the day will come when the words on monuments and gravestones, on our own graves, will need no longer be "Here lies so and so" but will rather need to be replaced with the words "They have risen, they are not here!"