

# He Is Risen

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*Thomas Merton*

**H**e has risen, he is not here . . . he is going before you to Galilee" (Mark 16:6-7).

Christ is risen. Christ lives. Christ is the Lord of the living and the dead. He is the Lord of history.

Christ is the Lord of a history that moves. He not only holds the beginning and the end in his hands, but he is in history with us, walking ahead of us to where we are going. He is not always in the same place.

The cult of the Holy Sepulchre is Christian only in so far as it is the cult of the place where Christ is no longer found. But such a cult can be valid only on one condition: that we are willing to move on, to follow him to where we are not yet, to seek him where he goes before us—"to Galilee."

So we are called not only to believe that Christ once rose from the dead, thereby proving that he was God; we are called to *experience* the Resurrection in our own lives by entering into this dynamic movement, by following Christ who lives in us. This life, this dynamism, is expressed by the power of love and of encounter: Christ lives in us if we love one another. And our love for one another means involvement in one another's history.

Christ lives in us and leads us, through mutual encounter and commitment, into a new future which we build together for one another. That future is called the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is already established; the Kingdom is a present reality. But there is still work to be done. Christ calls us to work together in building his Kingdom. We cooperate with him in bringing it to perfection.

Such is the timeless message of the Church not only on Easter Sunday but on every day of the year and every year until the world's

end. The dynamism of the Easter mystery is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is the life of the Church. The Resurrection is not a doctrine we try to prove or a problem we argue about: it is the life and action of Christ himself in us by his Holy Spirit.

A Christian bases his entire life on these truths. His entire life is changed by the presence and the action of the Risen Christ.

He knows he has encountered the Risen Christ, as Paul encountered him on the road to Damascus. Such an encounter does not have to be dramatic, but it has to be personal and real. Baptism is, of course, the seal and sign of this encounter.

But Baptism must be lived out in subsequent encounters with Christ: in the Eucharist, in the other sacraments, in reading and hearing the word of God, and in realizing that the word is preached to us personally. True encounter with Christ in the word of God awakens something in the depth of our being, something we did not know was there.

True encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation.

For the Christian there is no defeat, because Christ is risen and lives in us, and Christ has overcome all that seeks to destroy us or to block our human and spiritual growth.

In the Easter sequence the Church sings of the duel of death and life in our heart. This is a bitter, desperate fight, the combat of life and death in us, the battle of human despair against Christian hope.

The risen life is not easy; it is also a dying life. The presence of the Resurrection in our lives means the presence of the Cross, for we do not rise with Christ unless we also first die with him. It is by the Cross that we enter the dynamism of creative transformation, the dynamism of resurrection and renewal, the dynamism of love.

The teaching of St. Paul is centered entirely on the Resurrection. How many Christians really understand what St. Paul is talking about when he tells us that we have "died to the Law" in order to rise with Christ? How many Christians dare to believe that he who is risen with Christ enjoys the liberty of the sons of God and is not bound by the restrictions and taboos of human prejudice?

To be risen with Christ means not only that one has a *choice* and that one *may* live by a higher law—the law of grace and love—but that one *must* do so.

The first obligation of the Christian is to maintain his freedom from all superstitions, all blind taboos and religious formalities, indeed from all empty forms of legalism.

Read the Epistle to the Galatians again some time. Read it in light of the Church's summons to complete renewal.

The Christian must have the courage to follow Christ. The Christian who is risen in Christ must dare to be like Christ: he must dare to follow conscience even in unpopular causes. He must, if necessary, be able to disagree with the majority and make decisions that he knows to be according to the Gospel and teaching of Christ, even when others do not understand why he is acting this way.

"The followers of Christ are called by God not according to their accomplishments, but according to his own purpose and grace."\* This statement effectively disposes of a Christian inferiority complex which makes people think that because they never have amounted to anything in the eyes of others, they can never amount to anything in the eyes of God. Here again we see another aspect of St. Paul's teaching on freedom.

Too many Christians are not free because they submit to the domination of other people's ideas. They submit passively to the opinions of the crowd. For self-protection they hide in the crowd, and run along with the crowd—even when it turns into a lynch mob. They are afraid of the aloneness, the moral nakedness, which they would feel apart from the crowd.

But the Christian in whom Christ is risen dares to think and act differently from the crowd. He has ideas of his own, not because he is arrogant, but because he has the humility to stand alone and pay attention to the purpose and the grace of God, which are often quite contrary to the purposes and the plans of an established human power structure.

If we have risen with Christ then we must dare to stand by him in the loneliness of his Passion, when the entire establishment, both religious and civil, turned against him as a modern state would turn against a dangerous radical. In fact, there *were* "dangerous radicals" among the Apostles.

Simon the Zealot was a member of the extreme left wing of Jewish politics, a would-be freedom fighter against Roman imperial rule.

\*Vatican Council II, "Constitution on the Church," n. 40.

If we study the trial and execution of Jesus we find that he was condemned on the charge that he was a revolutionary, a subversive radical, fighting for the overthrow of legitimate government.

This was not true in the political sense. Jesus stood entirely outside of all Jewish politics, because his Kingdom was not of this world. But his actions could be twisted to look like political revolutionism. And yet he was a "freedom fighter" in a different way. His death and resurrection were the culminating battle in his fight to liberate us from all forms of tyranny, all forms of domination by anything or anyone except the Spirit, the Law of Love, the "purpose and grace" of God.

When we understand these things, we can understand what lies behind St. Paul's words in praise of the freedom which comes only in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ: "When Christ freed us," said Paul, "he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

This is in the Epistle to the Galatians (5:1), where Paul rebukes the Christian converts for still thinking that certain legal observances were necessary for them: as if they could not be saved without being circumcised. The Galatian converts were tempted to something that we might describe today as religious overkill. They wanted to make absolutely sure that everything was completely taken care of.

So they not only adopted the Christian faith but all the ritual practices of Judaism as well. Thus, if Christianity turned out to be not good enough, they would still be covered by Jewish observance!

This spirit of overkill is characteristic of the Christian who is afraid to be simply a Christian in the world of our time. He is not content with faith in the Risen Christ, not content with the grace and love of Christ: he wants the comfort and justification of being on the side of wealth and power. In some cases, Christianity becomes literally the religion of overkill: the religion in which you prove your fidelity to Christ by your willingness to destroy his enemies ten times over. In order to do this you have to conveniently forget all those disturbing statements in the New Testament about the love of enemies!

St. Paul says, "The whole of the Law is summarized in a single command: Love your neighbor as yourself. . . . If you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence, since self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:14-16). He goes on to outline the hard line of self-denial which is inseparable from the Cross of Christ.

We have been called to share in the Resurrection of Christ not because we have fulfilled all the laws of God and man, not because we are religious heroes, but because we are suffering and struggling human beings, sinners fighting for our lives, prisoners fighting for freedom, rebels taking up spiritual weapons against the powers that degrade and insult our human dignity.

If we had been able to win the battle for freedom without his help, Christ would not have come to fight for us and with us. But he has come to gather us around him in the battle for freedom. The fact that we have been wounded in the fight, or the fact that we may have spent most of the time, so far, running away from the battle makes no difference now. He is with us. He is risen.

The Gospel account of the Resurrection in Mark is very suggestive. Not only is the Resurrection the key and center of the Christian life, but our Easter experience often follows the pattern of the experience of the Apostles and other witnesses of the Resurrection. The experience of the holy women at the tomb gives us a typical example of the dynamics of Christian faith.

We often forget that in all accounts of the Resurrection, the witnesses started out with the unshakable conviction that Christ was dead. The women going to the tomb thought of Jesus as dead and gone.

They had only one thing in mind: to embalm his body. But there was a problem. The tomb was sealed with a stone too heavy for them to move. They did not know how they would find someone who would roll away the stone for them so they could come to his dead body.

Now this is a kind of psychological pattern for the way we too often act in our Christian lives. Though we may still "say" with our lips that Christ is risen, we secretly believe him, in practice, to be dead. And we believe that there is a massive stone blocking the way and keeping us from getting to his dead body. Our Christian religion too often becomes simply the cult of the dead body of Christ compounded with anguish and desperation over the problem of moving the immovable stone that keeps us from reaching him.

This is no joke. This is what actually happens to the Christian religion when it ceases to be a really living faith and becomes a mere legalistic and ritualistic formality. Such Christianity is no longer life in the Risen Christ but a formal cult of the dead Christ considered not as the Light and Savior of the world but as a kind of divine "thing," an extremely holy object, a theological relic.

This is the result of substituting something else for the Living Presence and Light of Christ in our lives. Instead of the unspeakable, invisible, yet terribly near and powerful presence of the Living Lord, we set up a structure of pious images and abstract concepts until Christ becomes a shadow. At last he becomes a corpse-like figure of wax. Yet people go to extraordinary lengths to venerate this inert object, to embalm it with all kinds of perfumes, and to make up fantastic tales about what it can do to make you rich and happy by its powerful magic.

We must never let our religious ideas, customs, rituals, and conventions become more real to us than the Risen Christ. We must learn, with St. Paul, that all these religious accessories are worthless if they get in the way of our faith in Jesus Christ, or prevent us from loving our brother in Christ. Paul looked back on the days when he had been a faultless observer of religious law, and confessed that all this piety was *meaningless*. He rejected it as worthless. He wanted one thing only. Here are his words:

I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything as so much rubbish, if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts . . . but I want only the perfection that comes from faith in Christ. . . . All I want to know is Christ in the power of his Resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death (Philippians 3:8-11).

When the holy women arrived at the tomb, they found the stone was rolled away. But the fact that the stone was rolled away made little difference, since the body of Jesus was not there anyway. The Lord had risen. So too with us. We create obscure religious problems for ourselves, trying desperately to break through to a dead Christ behind a tombstone. Such problems are absurd. Even if we could roll away the stone, we would not find his body *because he is not dead*.

He is not an inert object, not a lifeless thing, not a piece of property, not a super-religious heirloom: HE IS NOT THERE, HE IS RISEN.

The Christian life, Christian worship, Christian community, the Eucharist, all these have been obscured by a limited ritualistic piety that insists on treating the Risen Lord as if he were a dead body, a holy object, not Spirit, and Life, and Son of the Living God.

Today let us come with faith to the banquet of the Lamb, the Risen Savior, to the Bread of Life that is not the food of the dead but the true and Risen Body of Christ. He who encounters the Risen Christ in the banquet of his Body and Blood will live forever!

Come, People of God, Christ our Passover is sacrificed, and in sharing his banquet we pass with him from death to life! He has risen . . . he is going before us into his Kingdom! Alleluia!