



## Eastertide



Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands,  
 For our offenses given;  
 But now at God's right hand He stands  
 And brings us life from heaven;  
 Therefore let us joyful be  
 And sing to God right thankfully  
 Loud songs of alleluia! Alleluia!

No son of man could conquer death,  
 Such mischief sin had wrought us,  
 For innocence dwelt not on earth,  
 And therefore death had brought us  
 Into thralldom from of old  
 And ever grew more strong and bold  
 And kept us in its bondage. Alleluia!

But Jesus Christ, God's only Son,  
 To our low state descended,  
 The cause of death He has undone,  
 Its pow'r forever ended,  
 Ruined all its right and claim  
 And left it nothing but the name,  
 Its sting is lost forever. Alleluia!

It was a strange and dreadful strife  
 When Life and Death contended.  
 The victory remained with life,  
 The reign of death was ended;  
 Holy Scripture plainly saith  
 That death is swallowed up by death,  
 In vain it rages o'er us. Alleluia!

Here the true Paschal Lamb we see,  
 Whom God so freely gave us;  
 He died on the accursed tree—  
 So strong His love—to save us.  
 See, His blood doth mark our door;  
 Faith points to it, death passes o'er,  
 And Satan cannot harm us. Alleluia!

So let us keep the festival  
 Whereto the Lord invites us;  
 Christ is Himself the Joy of all,  
 The Sun that warms and lights us.  
 By His grace He doth impart  
 Eternal sunshine to the heart;  
 The night of sin is ended. Alleluia!

Then let us feast this Easter Day  
 On Christ, the Bread of heaven;  
 The Word of Grace hath purged away  
 The old and evil leaven.  
 Christ alone our souls will feed,  
 He is our meat and drink indeed;  
 Faith lives upon no other. **Alleluia!**

Martin Luther's Easter hymn, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands" is by far the best of them all. I make this claim with the most objective criteria in mind. The poetry that is printed for you to read in the right-hand column here preaches about as eloquent a sermon as can be preached. It teaches clearly and beautifully what the gospel is. And that, after all, is what we're going for when we sing hymns. We aim to proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

That's what makes Lutheran hymns the best. Because they bring the light of the gospel most brightly forth to expound and clarify what God desires to teach us. One of the greatest ways to instill a love for the hymnic treasures that we possess as Lutherans is to teach them to our children—to imbue in them a wholesome bias toward what is good and salutary.

To be honest, when I was a child, I wasn't too crazy about this hymn. After the dreary (albeit beautiful) Lenten season, I was excited to sing such hymns as "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today," and "Awake My Heart with

Gladness,” which are of course excellent themselves. What drew me to these as a child were their joyful and uplifting melodies. And Easter is certainly the time for such joy. I sure am glad to know these hymns!

But as far as this hymn here by Luther is concerned (which I have chosen as the hymn of the month for April), I can’t say that I love it because I grew up with it. I didn’t. You’ll notice soon enough, if you can’t remember, that Luther did not choose a very cheerful-sounding melody. He wrote it in a minor note. For Easter?! Why? Ah, but read the words. And as you learn to love what you read you will want to sing what you believe. The melody is not bouncy or care-free. It’s not even particularly triumphant. But it is dogmatic. It is assertive. And the more sin creeps up on you, the more the devil accuses your guilty soul, the more death shows to you its grim reality, the more you need to tell these enemies off.

And so you need to assert what you have been taught. This is the usefulness of dogma. And for a Christian who knows his own timidity, his own weakness and sin, and his need for help and salvation from God, there is nothing more useful than Christian doctrine. The greatest enemies of our Christian conscience and life are the very foes that Christ destroyed and conquered on Easter morning when He rose from the dead. We announce this victory with joy and haughty defiance against sin, death, and the devil every time we confess and assert with dogmatic certainty what Christ accomplished for sinners—on the cross and from the grave.

In the spirit of this divine confidence in what you have been taught, in the joy of the certainty that the Spirit works in your heart, may this melody grow on you as it has on me; for it brings with it a bold and certain proclamation that God has so mercifully taught us in these words. Assert what God teaches with joy. Here is where true joy is grounded. **Amen.**

Pastor John C. Preus