

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Christ is alive!

He has risen, indeed!

He has risen from the dead, Alleluia!

“I know that my Redeemer lives.”

If I were to change the end of that last statement by just a couple of letters, a “th” for a “s” so it would be “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” you may have immediately thought of a song. Perhaps one of the most famous Easter songs of all time.

What is it?

Well it is from one of the greatest choral works of all time... Handel's Messiah. And this song, I Know that my Redeemer Liveth, is presented as a Soprano solo in Part III of this massive work (actually the 45th of 53 songs) and deals with the promise of eternal life. It is the first song that is experienced after the majestic “Hallelujah” chorus.

We may know nothing of Handel, but chances are that we have some familiarity with his Messiah.

In the Victorian era, “Messiahs” performed at Hyde Park, London's Crystal Palace at its three yearly Handel Festivals had 3000 performers and tens of thousands in the audience. As the English music historian (Charles Burney)

wrote even earlier of Handel's majestic "Messiah:" "It has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan, and enriched succeeding managers off the oratorios, more than any single production in this or any other country." Some say it is the best known choral work in Western music.

But as well as we think we know Handel's defining Easter sound, "The Messiah," do we really? When you hear the "Messiah" in your head, you hear a phrase: "I know that my Redeemer lives." But do you know where that phrase comes from? The most famous passage of Handel's Messiah, the paean of praise to hope and resurrection, "I know that my Redeemer lives" . . . comes from one of the angriest, most rebellious, and death depressing books in the Bible. The Book of Job, chapter 19, verse 25.

On this resurrection morning, we find ourselves in a situation unlike any of us have ever experienced. The world is battling a virus for which there is (as yet) no known cure and no vaccine, and any vaccine is probably about a year away. We are isolated, or at least we should be isolating ourselves from others outside of our own household in order to give our hospitals and medical professionals every opportunity to fight this invader without being overwhelmed. However, this isolation is taking its toll on our emotions, on our relationships, and on our psyche. Our world, as we know it, has changed... and more than likely will never be the same again.

Perhaps, in that light, we can begin to understand the feelings of dread and despair that the disciples and the close followers of Jesus felt on that day. Their teacher, their Rabbi, had been murdered by the state for the threat that he posed to their belief system and the status quo.

Jesus had taught them about a new way of living... a new way of loving that wasn't new at all. It was just a re-emphasis of what God had been telling his creation all along... we were just too pigheaded and stubborn to listen.

These disciples were hiding behind locked doors in fear and trembling. They had seen what the establishment had done to their friend and teacher. And they feared that they were next.

And then comes this news shared by the women who had gone to the tomb on that morning to properly prepare Jesus' body... preparations that had to be postponed because of the Sabbath. The news that Jesus had risen from the dead was incredible... beyond belief.

It is one thing to hope for a life come back to life. It is another thing to accept that there actually may be an indestructible spirit that can overcome death, that resurrection may be real.

Most of us are caught somewhere between wanting to believe in the power of resurrection and the stupefying strangeness of a life that might transcend death. As biological beings we instinctively recognize the "end signs" of physical death. Yet our spiritual selves still wait for the next act. We cannot accept the finality of biological cessation. And yet confronting that "something more" still terrifies us.

We both want and fear "forever." The first reaction of all who witnessed the empty tomb was terror. No one rejoiced. All those first responders were frightened and flummoxed. They wanted to know "What is going on?" "Where is Jesus' body?" "What has happened here?" In none of the gospel resurrection texts is there a reaction of joy and happiness and faith when the tomb is opened and revealed to be empty. In every instance the first human reaction is grief and despair. The first responders to the tomb expected to offer their sorrow and

sadness at Jesus' tomb. Not one person expected to respond with joy and faith at the sight of an empty space. Despite all of Jesus' messages to his disciples, they were totally unprepared for what they encountered on Easter morning. And in the Gospel accounts, they were unconvinced. They returned back to the place where they were staying, locked the doors, and continued to cower in fear... even after Jesus himself appeared to them later that day.

How could this be true?

For us who follow Jesus 21 centuries later the question is no less "in your face." The ultimate challenge that confronts us on Easter morning is this: "What if it's true?"

What if the God of the universe loves each and every one of us?

What if that love walked among us in the person of Jesus?

What if that love embraced the ultimate sacrifice of death for our sake?

What if that love was able to transcend the finality and power of death and live again to live forever?

What if that love continues to live and walk among us today, two thousand years after that death-melting resurrection?

What if it is ALL TRUE?

The Bible is not a book where the truth is in the science, but truth is in the story. And while the resurrection is a fact narrative, not just a faith narrative – the Son of God DID shake off those grave clothes, the stone DID roll away the facts of "He's Alive!" must be taken in faith. The truth is this: it's a leap of faith either way.

So I ask again: What if it's true?

What if Jesus did rise from the dead?

What if Jesus did make eternal life possible for each and every one of us because of what he did on the cross?

What if “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life?”

What if it is ALL TRUE?

The most astounding, transforming truth of Easter morning is this: if Jesus broke the power of death, it is a power that still continues today. He is ALIVE! And that means, everything has changed. What if it's true? Everything has changed!

Easter Sunday is when we “refresh” our spiritual memory and reconnect to our most basic spiritual connection — our faith that Jesus Christ defeated death, rose from the dead, and demonstrated that divine power and love can never be held captive by the grip of suffering and death. Easter is the time when we renew our confession of faith in something that defies logic. In “online” language, it is the time when we hit our spiritual “refresh” icon, bringing our daily lives back into sync with our spiritual commitments.

That's why the highest point in Handel's “Messiah” is a direct quote from Job 19:25, the confession of a man who suffered greatly on earth and yet knew in his soul that there was “something more.” Job knew that God's love, that God's promises, were real. His spirit knew that “it was true.” In his moment of deepest despair and darkness Job could still find the fragment of faith within himself that could confess, “I know that my Redeemer lives.”

In this time of darkness, a light shines. That is the light of Jesus that lives in us. It is the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. It is the love of God

filling us to overflowing that sets us up to be people of hope in the midst of despair.

We have something wondrous and hopeful to proclaim: “Christ has died, Christ IS risen, Christ will come again.”

In this time of stress, let’s keep our eyes open for the signs of hope and life that are all around us. I too am saddened that we cannot be together on this day, but I am encouraged that in a time when we cannot “do” church, we continue to “be” the Church.

Let us take this time out to practice the love that Jesus taught as we live out the commandments to love God and neighbor.

Let us take this time out to seek God in the silence and grow closer to God in the process.

Let us look forward to the day when we can come back together and once again proclaim:

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen, indeed!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.