

***"I shall not die, but I shall live" –  
Martin Luther's Easter Jubilation***

***Sermon on Psalm 118***

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Dear Congregation!

“The Lord has risen“ – This is our call on Easter morning. It is a victory call. Death has been conquered. Jesus has risen, the resurrected Lord is victor over the powers of death which torment our world. And so today, I want to contemplate with you a victory song from the Bible, a victory song, which has been sung from the beginning of Christianity in celebration of the victory at Easter.

***Psalm 118***

<sup>1</sup>*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!*

<sup>2</sup>*Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”*

<sup>3</sup>*Let the house of Aaron say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”*

<sup>5</sup>*Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.*

<sup>6</sup>*With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?*

<sup>13</sup>*I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me.*

<sup>14</sup>*The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.*

<sup>15</sup>*There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; <sup>16</sup>the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.”*

<sup>17</sup>*I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.*

<sup>19</sup>*Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.*

<sup>20</sup>*This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.*

<sup>22</sup>*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

<sup>23</sup>*This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

<sup>24</sup>*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

<sup>26</sup>*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.*

<sup>27</sup>*Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.*

<sup>29</sup>*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*

“I shall not die, but shall live and recount the deeds of

the Lord. This is the day that the Lord made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” This is Easter jubilation. In the congregation we celebrate Christ today, the resurrected Lord, celebrate the life that has achieved victory over death.

As Protestant Christians, we can have a special relationship to this Psalm. Martin Luther loved this Psalm very much. Luther wrote an interpretation of this Psalm and called it therein “his dear Psalm and his treasure”. Luther wrote, “Even though all the Psalms – and the Holy Scripture as a whole, which are my only comfort in life – are also dear to me, I came across this particular Psalm, that it must be called mine and must be mine.” Luther found in this Psalm God’s personal promise, “I shall not die, but shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.” So many times had Luther been in danger of death! So many people had become his deadly enemies! “But God has kept and saved me, I may continue to preach his gospel“, this was Luther’s jubilation cry and personal Easter experience.

Let us go even further back to the beginnings of our church, to the beginnings of the New Testament. For Jesus himself, Psalm 118 was very important. “Hosanna! O Lord have mercy on us! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” This is how Jesus was cheered enthusiastically on Palm Sunday, at

the time when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey, and the people waved palm branches and spread garments on the ground. There was loud shouting openly in public.

This Psalm was probably much more significant to Jesus when spoken in a small circle as a quiet prayer, because he prayed it at the last supper with his disciples. Psalm 118 is part of the praises during the Passover meal, and these words “I shall not die, but I shall live. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” will have given Jesus courage for the cruel path which lay before him. “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord“ – we sing these words from Psalm 118 at every Holy Communion and thus join the victory jubilation of Easter.

Perhaps you have felt it already during the reading of the Psalm; Psalm 118 is a text model for a triumphal march.

“Let Israel say: His steadfast love endures forever! Let the house of Aaron say: His steadfast love endures forever.” Several groups are urged here at the beginning of the victory celebration to join the thanksgiving with relief. The chanter sings the call first, those present repeat it. “Out of my distress I called on the Lord. With the Lord at my side I do not

fear. What can mortals do to me?" Here it tells about the fear during warfare, once again, it is reported how dangerous this battle was. „There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!" Victory is achieved, God has granted it. „Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.“ Now the victorious fighters enter through the main gate of Jerusalem, celebrated enthusiastically by the Israelites, by their relieved families, then all stream into the temple, to celebrate a great thanksgiving service. “We bless you from the house of the Lord – Those who return home greet the priests, and the priests ask the celebrating people to bring their donations to the altar. One can easily imagine that this Psalm 118 was often sung in Jerusalem during triumphal marches, when victory had been won over an alien neighbouring people, or when an attack on the Roman occupying forces had been successful.

Is that in harmony with Jesus? When the soldiers took Jesus prisoner in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the disciples took up arms in their desperation, Jesus did say, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Jesus has demonstrated how to live peaceably and non-violently. And yet, this Psalm is in harmony with the Easter message. In the beginning of our worship we

sung a hymn by Paul Gerhardt, the second verse says: "The foe in triumph shouted When Christ lay in the tomb; But, lo, he now is routed, His boast is turned to gloom. For Christ again is free; In glorious victory He who is strong to save Has triumphed o'er the grave." Christ was successful in the battle; and now waves his victory banner and cries “Victoria, victory, the battle is won!” Yes, that belongs to the Easter message.

“Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.” I was able to experience the Easter victory being celebrated in this way. During my studies in theology, I liked to travel to Düsseldorf, in the Western part of Germany. There was a German-Orthodox Congregation, a congregation of the Eastern Church, which conducted the church services in German. Easter night at 12 o'clock, the totally dark church was locked. Then the congregation walked around the church in a procession, the priest with a large Easter candle at the front. Psalms and hymns of the victory of the living God over death were sung; the bells rang out and became increasingly louder and more joyful. Three times the congregation walked around the church, three times the priest knocked on the entrance door, then it was pushed open, and singing joyfully, the congregation streamed into the church, carried the Easter light into the darkness, all lit their Easter candles, and the formerly dark walls shone again in

bright light and brilliance

In this Orthodox congregation in Düsseldorf, it was a triumphal march. Christ's victory was proclaimed; now, already during the Easter night, they celebrated what will happen when Christ returns at the end of time, when God will overcome all hate and fighting in our human world.

It is a victory, but for the benefit of mankind. Not a triumph which is paid through the deaths of thousands and millions of people, no conqueror who walks over dead bodies. In a report from Brazil I have read what the Easter triumph could look like in everyday life. In a miserable favela near the Brazilian town of Recife lived 1,500 people in huts made of boards, cardboard and mud, without electricity and water. To look for casual work in the city, they had to cross a river with a ferry; the boatswain demanded an unaffordable price, of pregnant women even twice as much. In this slum there was degrading, miserable prostitution. It was a special year, when the Sisters of a Catholic Order, who lived in this favela, asked after the traditional passion procession on Good Friday, how Jesus here and today would be suffering among them. The two worst wounds – they recognized – were the brothel and the missing bridge. The sisters continued to ask: What could resurrection look like in this slum near Recife? They realized what the answer was and – after

many struggles – acted: The owner of the brothel and the boatswain were driven away. The sisters themselves built a bridge, which people now could cross free of charge. They named it “Bridge of the Resurrection”. This is a victory according to Jesus. A fight was necessary. But it was fought for the benefit of people. Losers were only those who had taken advantage of other people and had enslaved them. But the winners were the poor and disadvantaged. That's the task of us being Christians, to build "Bridges of Resurrection" in our every-day-life, bridges into God's new world.

Martin Luther said in his interpretation of Psalm 118 „In the Holy Scripture there are no reading-words, but living-words, which are put there not for speculation or for high contemplation, but for life and action.” This is also the Easter message, not a reading-word, but a living-word. The word, that wants to help us live, and that wants to be lived and practiced by us.

Luther's wife helped him to rediscover the Easter message anew as a living-word. During his last years in his life, Luther was often downcast and discouraged in the face of all the battles in church-related matters. So, Katharina from Bora called a stonemason and gave him the commission to put in a new entrance to their house. Into the end stone of the arch, she had the word Vivit chiselled. In Latin, this means: He lives!

Everyone, who went in or out the door, should know: Christ lives! Foremost Luther himself received encouragement hereby. The Easter message above his entrance door helped him against all his temptations, his worries and doubts. Vivit! He lives! The resurrected is here. He will help you out, time and again; he will continue to guide you.

It would be good if we put this Vivit over the entrance door of every new day. When we, at the beginning of a new day, think not only of all the tasks which will keep us on the go all day. If we not only let us be cast down by the sorrows which burden us. But if we also place the promise of the Easter message at the beginning of a new day.

We can put the Vivit over the entrance door of the new day by saying these verses of Psalm 118 as a morning prayer:

“The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. I shall not die, but I shall live. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

This is a morning prayer that can carry us through the day. This is how we could live Easter in everyday life. This is how the Easter victory would guide our actions. Amen.