

Hymn of the Month

Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands (LSB 458)

Before speaking of our hymn of the month—a truly great hymn!—we must first turn to the two hymns directly following it: “Christ Is Arisen” (459) and “Christians, to the Paschal Victim” (460). These are actually one hymn, and they are about a millennium old!

Victimae Paschali Laudes (“Praises to the Paschal Victim”) is the Latin title for hymn 460, which was originally written by a famous medieval figure named Wipo of Burgundy. This hymn was what musicians call a *sequence*: a choral chant during the liturgy that came between the Alleluia and the Gospel reading. It decorated the Alleluia we sing as we rise for the Gospel, usually adding details proper to the Gospel story of the day; in so doing, it prepared the listener to hear this Word. This particular sequence was (and still is!) appointed for use on Easter Day and its octave (the eight days following Easter). Appropriately enough—for it summarizes the atoning sacrifice of *the* Passover Lamb that has just taken place (remember, Holy Week was the week of Passover for the Jews); and then, in stanza two, it turns to the drama of Easter morning, entreating Mary Magdalene to tell us what she has witnessed. She responds in haste: “The tomb of Christ, who is living, The glory of Jesus’ resurrection; Bright angels attesting, The shroud and napkin resting. My Lord, my hope, is arisen; To Galilee He goes before you.” The language is disjoint and breathless, not even making grammatical sense. It is as though we have met her on the road as she is rushing back from the tomb, heart racing and thoughts in hopeful disarray. She has witnessed *the* singular and time-rending Miracle, and who could possibly understand! We end the sequence with a confident declaration and petition: “Christ indeed from death is risen, Our new life obtaining. Have mercy, victor King, ever reigning! Amen. Alleluia.”

“Christ Is Arisen” (459) was originally a medieval German *Leise*, or folk hymn. A manuscript from 1190 A.D. describes its use, which is fantastic to imagine... During the Good Friday liturgy, an image of the Crucified One was lowered into a holy grave and covered with a linen cloth while the choir sang “Behold, thus dies

the righteous one.” The next day, during the Easter Vigil, the priest and a few helpers would go secretly to the grave and raise the statue or painting of the Crucified One. Finally, the other priests along with all the people would come to Matins early the next morning, at the end of which occurred the *visitatio sepulchri*: the visit to the sepulchre. This was a little drama enacted by three women (playing Mary Magdalene and the two others), as well as two men (playing Peter and John). When the actors playing the apostles pointed to the linen cloths lying in the grave, the choir would sing in Latin, “He has risen as He said,” and the congregation would respond with gusto: “Christ is arisen from the grave’s dark prison!” What an epic ending to a church service—and to the Triduum! Later on, this hymn began to be sung in alternation with the stanzas of the *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, which is how we use it even now in the LSB.

Okay, finally! Enter this month’s hymn: **“Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands,”** the Hymn of the Day appointed for Easter Day. As our beloved Martin Luther is famous for, this hymn is his adaptation and expansion of hymn 459 (and, by association, 460). Notice that it uses the same melodic contours of 459, but it takes out the guesswork of the chant’s timing by giving the melody a strict rhythm. This was one of the big innovations of Reformation-era music, because predictable timing is the congregation’s best friend—*especially* when it comes to music! One of Luther’s big liturgical projects was to return the song of the church to the people of the church (rather than an exclusive choir), and he did two major things to accomplish that: make the rhythm accessible, and translate the lyrics into the language the common people spoke (at the time, that meant translating a lot of Latin into German). Fortunately, hymn 459 was already in German, so his job in this adaptation was to expand the lyrics so that the singers could meditate on the events the lyrics describe.

Luther begins stanza one with the image of “the grave’s dark prison,” showing Death’s proud stranglehold of our Lord as He is entombed. This, Luther shows, was the Lord’s sacrifice on our behalf. But in accord with his fiery personality, Luther gives the spoiler right away: “now at God’s right hand He stands And brings us life from heaven”! This introduction frames the hymn’s unfolding drama with the hope of the resurrection.

Stanza two launches into the depth of our depravity, mincing no words about how desperately beyond salvation we were. Death is personified as our formidable and merciless captor. But then, in stanza three, Christ utterly eviscerates Death,

reducing it to an empty and powerless husk.

Stanza four is my personal favorite, as it begins with the muscular phrase, “It was a strange and dreadful strife When life and death contended.” The mortal combat of the Almighty and our ancient foe, locked in fierce battle for Mankind! One can imagine the triumph of Life Himself as He storms in glory down to the bowels of Hell (I feel a Hans Zimmer soundtrack swelling in the background...!).

Stanzas five and six portray the Scriptural teaching of the Passover lamb and its culmination in *the* Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Exodus 12, John 1:29).

Lastly, stanza seven interprets the imagery of the Paschal Lamb in light of the Marriage Feast of the Lamb: the Lord’s Supper! “Then let us feast this Easter Day On Christ, the bread of heaven... Christ alone our souls will feed; He is our meat and drink indeed; Faith lives upon no other! Alleluia!” What better way to celebrate the Feast of the Resurrection than with the eternal feast which He has set before us through His atoning sacrifice. Encapsulated in this stanza is the *telos*, or the fulfillment, of the entire Easter story. Through Christ’s victory, we now partake of His own Body and Blood, being united to Him forever. Alleluia, indeed!

A “Note” about the Music...

To appreciate this hymn, it’s important to know two musical buzzwords: ***setting*** and ***mode***.

Firstly, we call the combination of the melody and the harmony notes of a song its *setting*. Easy, right?

Mode is a little trickier: to put it simply, it refers to the combination of notes used in a particular musical scale. In the Western tradition, we are the most accustomed to hearing major and minor modes (we generally associate major with happy-sounding music, and minor with sad). How simple things have gotten... in times past, there were many modes. Many of Luther’s hymns in our hymnal, for example, sound slightly off or weird to us because they are neither major nor minor, but modal (i.e., using one of the other seven modes).

This month’s hymn is *set* in the Dorian *mode*. This means that its melody and

harmony use the Dorian scale, which is much like our minor scale, but half a bubble off. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Dorian mode was thought to convey strength and seriousness, and many believed it produced a virtuous character. Although we associate Easter with joy, and rightly so, this Easter hymn does not use the expected major mode; rather, appropriately, it employs the Dorian mode, for the drama of the conquering of Life over death is indeed a dreadful and awesome story. The setting of this hymn takes no prisoners; it is here to tell the tale of Easter in no uncertain terms: Christ has won, for he has destroyed death! Alleluia!