"Christ Our Brother":
Sermon on John 20:11-18

The Resurrection of Our Lord
(March 28, 1535)

MARTIN LUTHER

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:11-18)

You have no doubt been instructed about the article of the Christian faith that says, "He rose again from the dead." Enough has been said about how you should regard this article; in truth, I have been a preacher over twenty years

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1The original German/Latin text for this sermon is in WEA 4151-55. The translation is by Frederick J. Gaiser. A contemporary German version is available in Martin Luther, Ausgewählte Werke, vol. 3, Ausgewählte Predigten (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1935) 169-175.

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and have never missed an Easter—though this may be my last time to preach [an Easter sermon].

I propose to speak [today] about Mary Magdalene, how she had a conversation with the angel and afterwards with the Lord. These are stressed so strongly to let you know what the resurrection is and for whom it is valid. Christ did not have to make himself known for his own sake, nor for the angels who already knew him. But this happened and has been written down in order that we might learn to believe it and hold it fast. So, look at the story, how kindly the dear holy angels speak with Mary Magdalene and the other women,\(^3\) as though they are jesting with Magdalene. It seems almost like they, in their own certainty and joy, make fun of her and her weeping, and say, "What a dear fool you are, crying in the midst of such great and overwhelming joy." They speak with her as one would with a playmate with whom one had been raised since childhood. The angels treat her as though she were their beloved sister, as though she were with them in the kingdom of heaven. In doing this, they want to inculcate in us the truths that they already know, as though we too already sat with them in heaven and had them for brothers and sisters; as though we too could play with them like comrades with whom we had been raised since childhood. All this occurs to comfort and support us so that we come to know [the truth of] this article [on the resurrection].

The resurrection has happened now! It is true in reality and fact, not only in promise. For Christ the Head has been raised up. He is no longer, as before, merely the resurrected one according to the letter and word [of scriptural promise]. Now he has been raised up in person. He has become Lord over death and, in his own person, he has defeated death. With this, the article is more than half [fulfilled]. That’s why the angels are so friendly to the people, and especially to these women, why they play and jest with [Mary] so happily. It is as though they said, “O dear Mary, are you not our comrade in heaven? There’s no reason for you to be crying. Not only have you not lost your Lord; you can rejoice with us for eternity, because he is already risen.”

This is ours by faith. Whoever does not believe and hold it to be true [is lost]. Many sing about it and claim to understand it, but when it comes down to it, we see that the old, dead Adam reigns in them rather than the living Christ. They do nothing but talk about it. Fig trees without fruit!\(^4\) And they act as though they know more about this than the Holy Spirit and the angels; nevertheless, although they ought to [show the living Christ] in their actions, [one sees in them] the old, dead, sinful Adam. People like this do not [have] the taste or the juice [of the resurrection]; they are still in the old Adam, and they act and make judgments.

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\(^2\) Words in brackets are not in the original text but are provided for clarity in the English version. Interpreters have regarded the final clause of this sentence as a sign that Luther sensed death was near.

\(^3\) With his references to varying numbers of angels and women, Luther is apparently conflating the resurrection accounts in the different Gospels.

\(^4\) According to the critical apparatus of the Weimarer Ausgabe (WA 41,52), “without fruit” is a later addition to the manuscript of the sermon. The body of the sermon contains merely the Latin term *ficus* = "fig" (but also “hemorrhoid”). It is possible that “fig” is more grossly insulting here. The contemporary German translation uses “Dreck!” (i.e., excrement).
accordingly. One can see this among the spiritual fanatics, but [also] among us, in our greed, pride, etc. When we give precedence to Adam, along with sin and death, then there is no room for Christ. This is preached for the sake of Mary and all the other comrades of the angels. Whoever doesn’t want to go along, let them remain [behind]. But we have seen, heard, and felt [the resurrection], so we have no excuse.

First, the angels strengthen our faith and argue with us in the same way they argued with Magdalene and the women. They relate to us Christians as though we, too, were already in heaven; they come to us and let themselves be seen in their brilliant robes and act as though everything was already fulfilled. They make no distinction between themselves and us, and they almost ridicule our weeping, our cares, and our grief. Magdalene is a first image and example of how feebly we believe this article. She is still in the old skin of Eve, which will never be able to send her forth into a future life and the company of the angels. But nevertheless she is awakened and believes that Christ is raised from the dead. Those who, like the angels, can believe and take seriously that Christ is raised and is among us, who [do not seek] the living [among the dead], are as happy as the angels. The more firmly this article [is believed], the more firm our courage and spirit; then we will not fear the devil or Pilate or Herod. But if we are not as happy [as the angels], that is a sign of unbelief or little faith. So, we must see to it that we do not deceive ourselves, regarding ourselves as Christians when we are nothing less [than the old Adam]. Then Christ is dead in us, and Adam lives. Then we are in the devil’s company, falling from the living Christ back into the dead Adam. We see enough examples of that.

Although not all of us receive [the angel’s message], some do. And for these, it is not only the holy angels who are there, playing with us so positively, but Christ himself, the one who holds more in common with us than the angels, who belongs even more closely to us. For angels have no flesh and blood; nevertheless they joke with Magdalene and with all of us. But Christ [who shares our flesh and blood] did not come for his own sake but for the sake of Magdalene. And he says to her: “Go and say to my brothers....” That goes far beyond the angels. It is much more loving and friendly than what the angels had to say, as they, in their merriment, make fun of Mary. When God speaks like this to a person’s heart, that person could never be sad. The Lord himself [acts in this way] to Mary, the one who had seven demons; who was a woman and human being like any other woman. Even Peter and the others, whom Christ calls brothers, were no better than we. They are [all made] of the same dough [as we]? If they are higher than anyone else, it is not because they were born that way; they will have to give credit to the one who calls them brothers. [They will say,] “But now he is gone from us; from now on [he is] no longer here in this life. It would have made sense [for him to call us brothers] earlier, when he was still on earth and not yet transfigured or transferred into

5I.e., our own resurrection from death and arrival in heaven.
glory. Then it would have fit nicely and sounded right [for him to say], ‘You are my brothers, and I am yours; my Father is your Father, and your Father mine.’ But, in fact, [he says it] now, [when] he is so far apart from us—we in misery; he in glory, snatched from death. He says it now for the first time, and particularly to Peter who denied him and to the others [who forsook him]. This is glory beyond all glory!”

We Christians can hold on to this word and thereby strengthen our hearts against Satan himself and against death, because Christ proclaims with his own mouth [that we are] his brothers [and sisters]. Who can express or comprehend what kind of glory [this brings] to a true, believing Christian? And, no doubt, there are those who do find comfort in it, but [alas] those who really take it seriously are few, those who say in their heart, “This word is certainly true: Christ calls me brother! [Christ calls me sister!] The man is a wonder! He [tells me] I can walk with Peter and Paul, and be just as holy, wise, pure, pious, and great as they!”

Just consider what kind of words he entrusted to Magdalene: “Go [to my brothers]!” Without doubt, he calls her sister [as well]. For if [he calls] these [disciples] brothers, that is the same as saying [to her], “Go, my dear sister, say to the servants of my Father and the attendants of my God that they are my fellow citizens, fellow servants, and fellow lords.” Those would be wealthy brothers and sisters who could boast: “[We are] the siblings of the one who no longer lies in the grave, who no longer stands under sin and death, the one who himself is Lord, who [put] death behind him, the one who dooms sin.” Pray for such faith, whoever can!

This is a wonderful sermon from Christ’s own mouth, not from the angels. They did not say, “Go, say to the brothers of our Lord...” or “Say to our brothers....” Instead, they give him the honor of calling brother [even] those who have forsaken and denied him, and those weak [in faith]. And [the disciples] surely needed him to speak to them [now] in this kind way—even though earlier he had already [said to them], “[You are] my friends, to whom the Father has revealed everything.” Peter would have been happy if Christ had only said, “I will not reject you.” But it is only now that he not only leaves them uncondemned, forgives their sins, and calls them his friends, but [also says], “Tell them they are my brothers!” That is speaking tenderly to the heart, to the heart of the confused and troubled, that they might say, “Oh! He is the mouth of truth, the word of truth. He calls me brother, [he calls me sister]—and I will accept it.”

The greatest calamity would be to refuse to accept this communion and brotherhood, thus proving ourselves ungrateful and greedy. [Though it would be] even worse to persecute [Christ’s brothers and sisters] and shed [their] blood. But those who do accept [this word] should keep this text in their hearts, so they [will

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7The addition in this translation of “sisters” where Luther refers only to “brothers” in his original sermon seems fully justified by two realities: (1) “Brüder” (brothers) would have been understood by Luther’s audience to include all followers of Jesus; (2) Luther’s intent is clearly to include also the “sisters” of Jesus, as he demonstrates throughout the sermon in his comments about Mary.

8Cf. John 15:15.
have] everlasting life. Yet, this doesn’t happen! Such a comforting and glorious message as this [is simply cast] to the wind, as though it were a Turkish or Tartar myth. We don’t accept it for ourselves, we are not joyful, we don’t sing it out, even though it is such a great joy that even the angels—to whom [these words] do not apply—[rejoice]. As Peter says, “These saving words—things into which angels long to look—have now been announced to you.” And should not we, to whom it is announced, be moved? God will surely visit us and punish our ingratitude, so that it could be said [of us] as it is of Judas, “It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

Nothing is clearer: “I am your brother, and you are my brothers and sisters.” Or, is this some kind of heretical or diabolical teaching? The world is in the hands of the devil, not just ten times, but a hundred thousand times over, for the world not only condemns [this teaching], it doesn’t even hear it.

So rejoice, whoever can, that Christ did not rise from the dead to be our judge, but that the one who was already our friend could now be our brother, so the one who already loved us could love us even more. [Now he says], “Whoever touches you touches me, your firstborn brother.” To whom does he say this? To Christians, those who are baptized, who hear his word and believe it so they become bold and strong in faith. Mary is called his sister, the apostles [his brothers], and we [his brothers and sisters], despite the fact that we are sinners who have abandoned [him]. What this means is that the heavenly kingdom has begun, the resurrection has happened, the Head is already out [of the grave]—and, in faith, so are we, in our souls; only the body [remains bound to death]. All Christians are already more than half [raised]! For Christ [is raised], and [with him] their souls. Only the sack [remains], in which the soul is held. But the body, too, [will be raised], after the Head has been taken away. The soul, i.e., the kernel, [is already raised with Christ]; and the shell will not remain behind.

Thus, we learn firmly to believe that we are raised with Christ and transferred with him into heaven, that we are already more than halfway to [eternal] life. This is certain because he is our brother and we are his sisters and brothers. May the merciful God help us, that we may believe this and rejoice!

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9 Cf. 1 Pet 1:12.
10 Matt 26:24.