

"We are an Easter People"

A reflection for Easter Day 2020

This phrase, sometimes seen on bumper-stickers, is most often attributed to St Augustine, the fifth-century Bishop of Hippo, a Roman city in North Africa.

The problem is, it's not from Augustine...



While the saint is eminently quotable, he didn't write bumper-stickers. As best I can tell, the phrase comes from a letter of Pope John Paul II written in 1986: **"We are an Easter People and Hallelujah is our song!"**

While I'm ignorant of the ultimate origin of the phrase (*in the Pope's letter it appears in quotation marks but without attribution*), it does have enough of an Augustinian feel to. In a sermon on the Psalms, Augustine wrote:

"The season before Easter signifies the troubles of the life we live here and now, while Easter and the season following it are a foretaste and promise of the joy that will be ours in the future. Easter points to something we do not yet possess. This is why we keep the season before the feast with fasting and prayer; but when the fast has ended we devote these present days to praise. This is the meaning of the Alleluia we sing."

For the fifty days of Eastertide, from Easter Day till Pentecost we celebrate the Resurrection over and over again, day by day, greeting each other with **"Alleluia, Christ is risen! – He is risen indeed Alleluia"** and embroidering our worship with alleluia's.

"Christ is risen," St John Chrysostom says in his Easter sermon, *"and death is overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons have fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one remains dead in the grave."*

Except that they do. The dead do remain in their graves, and we continue to die after Christ has risen. Diseases continue to cripple and kill – a fact we are acutely aware of through the Covid-19 Pandemic. We still slander and enslave each other. Cruelty runs rampant among people and governments, and truth is everywhere discounted for profit. What does the Resurrection mean in such a world?

St Augustine points us to the answer: *"Easter is a foretaste and promise of the joy that will be ours in the future. It points to something we do not yet possess."*

We live in the midst of a world that cannot contain Easter. It doesn't know what to make of the Resurrection, so it parodies it with chocolate bunnies and Cadbury Eggs.

Christ's Resurrection doesn't mean it's all smooth sailing from here on out. Death and disease, sorrow and suffering, cruelty and evil haven't closed up shop and moved on.

What Christ's Resurrection does mean is that the jig is up. All the stuff that we think is so earth-shatteringly important just isn't.

Augustine and Chrysostom and John Paul are right. Death and all the attendant fears and falsehoods following it are as empty as a politician's promises.

Death is overthrown by Christ's Resurrection.

Because Christ is risen, new life does shine forth from the grave.

But not yet... Something remains undone and you and I are a necessary part of getting the undone done. Easter shines with light from the tomb, but the light isn't magical, it's full of grace.

The Resurrection doesn't solve all our problems, it doesn't free us of obligations and responsibilities: it makes us new. It sets us free. Free from the "power" of death and cruelty, free from the necessity to try to be something or someone we can't be, free from the shackles we've chained ourselves with.

In the most basic way, the Resurrection sets us free of our self-concerns and the petty encumbrances we insist on cluttering up our lives with. Grace isn't magic, it's transfiguring. It changes us from what we make of ourselves to what God created us to be. That takes time – your whole life, in fact.

So it turns out the 'bumper sticker Augustine' is right: we are a people of Easter, and Easter, for us, isn't merely a day or even a season. It's a life of resurrection where we die and are reborn every day. *"This is the meaning of the Alleluia we sing."*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

A Prayer for Easter Day

God of glory,
by the raising of your Son
you have broken the chains of death and hell:
fill your Church with faith and hope;
for a new day has dawned
and the way to life stands open
in our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

