

Easter Greetings 2020

At the beginning of this Easter greeting is the ancient and ever new Easter greeting of Christianity: “The Lord is risen! He is truly risen! Hallelujah”. Let us greet one another, even if we cannot do it in direct conversation on site, on the telephone, in the video conference, by e-mail with this alternative greeting: “The Lord is risen” – and the other person answers: “He is risen indeed!” In this spirit, I wish all those who read these lines a happy and blessed Easter!

Often the biblical readings of a Sunday or feast day, which were selected by a commission years, decades and in distinct cases even centuries ago for the liturgical ordinances, apply in a special way to the current situation and almost seem to have been written for the present situation. This also applies to the text from the New Testament, which actually should have been the basis of the sermons in the services of the Easter Vigil in this year 2020; it is written in the second chapter of the second epistle of Timothy, verses 8-13:

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Hold in remembrance of Jesus Christ (or, as it was called in the later Lutheran translations: *Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ*) – I will never forget the joyous hour when I was once privileged to preach in a church service in which a paschal cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach was performed, which sets to music this first movement of our text in the opening chorus: “*Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ, der auferstanden ist von den Toten*” (Hold in remembrance of Jesus Christ who rose from the death).¹ The young cantor played this opening chorus with great vigor and let her choir literally chant the initial “Halt”, which Bach repeated three times in a row, “Halt! Halt! Halt!”. It shook me to the core. It was sung in such a way that it seemed like the words of someone who wants to stop someone else from running into a moving car: “Stop! Stop! Stop!”. And I translated that gruffly sung line “Halt!

¹ Those who do not know the cantata BWV 67 “*Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ*”, can listen, for example, to the performance of the soloist ensemble stimmkunst of Stiftsbarock Stuttgart conducted by Kay Johannsen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWFliBt-FFk>.

Halt! Halt! In remembrance of Jesus Christ” as a wake-up call: In the hectic pace of your everyday life, do not forget the truly central, life-changing message of Easter, among all your everyday worries and small joys. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”: With all the hustle and bustle of your daily life reflect on essentials, don’t lose yourself in the distractions of everyday life, but stop in the memory of Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead. It seems to me that especially in these days of the Corona crisis such a reading of our sermon text makes a lot of sense. It is good and right that we should concern ourselves so intensively with the problems of a pandemic, it is good and right that we should take care of people who need our help, and that some of us should look after the day-to-day life of individual people and that others deal with general crisis management. There is so much to be said about the Johanniter family – how selflessly help is being provided in so many different places. But after so many days of lock down, after concentrating on one’s own four walls, the hospital, the driver’s seat in the bus covered with plastic sheeting, and breathing on a ventilator, it is even more true: “Stop! Stop! Stop!”. There are other things, there are more important things, there is the Easter message of the victory of life amidst death and dying. There is this Easter message that wants to give us strength in our fears and worries. “Stop! "Stop! Stop!”. It too should have a place in our memory, it too should fulfill us, and not only the worries and fears of a crisis that is now taking on very threatening characteristics for many people, so threatening that worries and fears are on the verge of taking over. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”. An Easter wake-up call of the New Testament, wonderfully orchestrated and set to music by the Thomas Cantor from Leipzig in its first year of operation.

In preparation for this Easter greeting, I wanted to hear the opening chorus of the cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach once more – and in the meantime the worldwide web offers a whole range of different styles and performance practices, Richter, Rilling, Kuijken, Leonhardt, Johannsen, Biller ... my superficial search revealed more than fifteen different recordings I listened to with increasing amazement last Wednesday. For most conductors did not interpret the opening chorus at all like the young cantor back then, brisk and jagged as a wake-up call and warning cry: "Stop! Stop! Stop!" On the contrary, they began the piece like a gently swaying dance song, with long, friendly, intense, advertising: “Stop ... Stop ... Stop” on rather long sung notes. Keeping Jesus Christ in mind is a long-term project, a life project. You need a long breath to not fall into indifference as an adult from initial enthusiasm as an adolescent and confirmand, to not despair after leaving a wonderful congregation here to experience lovelessness and chaos in the new parish – “Stop ... Stop ... Stop ...

in memory”, do not give up too soon, remember, keep in your heart the Easter memories of the last years this year, when no Easter fire is burning in front of the church and no cantor sings Easter praise into the darkened church and the organ powerfully intones “Christ has risen” with the big bass pipes and the trombone.

A loud wake-up call or a gentle, advertising call to persevere? “Stop! Stop! Stop!” or “Stop ... Stop ... Stop”? We can also make good use of the gentle, advertising appeal these days. We could need it when someone takes us by the hand and leads us in a gentle dance, helps us to remember Jesus, the consoling message of the victory of life over death, so that we can live in this message, live from this message, and thus deal with the worries and fears, even with the last, great fear of death. “Keep a regular rhythm in your home office”, we are recommended – said and done, we walk in the rhythm of Bach’s music: “Stop ... stop ... stop”. And yet at the same time we need the sharp, rugged wake-up call when we sink into everyday life, into fears, but also into boredom of regularity, instead of the always same rhythm, we need a powerful “stop”: “Halt! Halt! Halt!”.

So, after having listened to one and the same opening chorus many times, I remembered that several years ago I had bought a pocket score for the cantata service, which I pulled out and opened the pages with the opening chorus. The three times “Halt” are half notes in the alto, tenor and bass and the soprano sings long whole notes and only sings “Halt” twice. Looking at the notes, Bach obviously wanted the “Halt” to calm the somewhat agitated scenery of the orchestra, before with “in the memory of Jesus Christ who rose from the dead” the movement picked up again in the choir and accompaniment. If one follows the score strictly, one has to say that my brisk cantor played past the notes with pinpoint accuracy when she took the half notes just like quarters or even eighths: “Halt! Halt! Halt!” is impressive, makes sense, but is an interpretive idea. And also in the Greek original of the Second Epistle of Timothy there is no brief command word in our sermon text, but rather the word that is also used in the words of the Lord’s Supper in a composite: To his remembrance we should celebrate, and to this remembrance we should keep. Christianity is a remembrance of Jesus Christ, the service of God is a remembrance, and our life should be carried by this remembrance.

Memory can be the memory of an absent person. My father used to come to church on the great feasts as long as he could and until he died twelve years ago. He is now kept in my memory as an absent person. He no longer comes to church in his wheelchair.

When it comes to believing in Easter, everything depends on the fact that we do not believe in Jesus Christ as an absent person who at best will be present in our memory as a person who is physically absent. Jesus Christ did not only die, but he rose from the dead, as the first of all the dead. He lives and, in this respect, he is present among us as a living person, is present in our memory as a living person. In the Lord's Supper we may look at this special presence of Jesus Christ as being alive in our midst and sense why the church tradition acknowledged him not only as a true man but also as a true God. We must gently enter into this great, consoling message that one for all has already overcome death. "Stop ... stop ... stop". No loud, brisk shouts will help (and Bach probably guessed this) to remember. In this cheerful certainty we must find our way slowly and patiently back into life, if we had ever experienced it in an Easter Vigil or whenever in life. For not only we are on the long way to believe all this, until we are allowed to see the truth of the Easter message with our own eyes. At the end of the sermon text of this Easter Vigil there is the wonderful sentence that God faithfully follows this path with us when we stray, when he comes out of our memory, when we sink into worries and fears, in this crisis or in whatever crisis. He invites us again and again: "Keep in memory Jesus Christ who rose from the dead", "Keep me in remembrance, for I want to be and remain with you".

"The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah". With this in mind, I once again wish with all my heart a happy and blessed Easter to all who read these lines!

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