

Yes—He lives

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How to understand the death and resurrection of Christ? Let's start with the death of Jesus.

It's Easter-tide, and followers of Jesus of Nazareth variously are making plans to celebrate His death. This event is a thing that distinguishes Christianity. It is not the only thing, nor even the most important thing, that distinguishes Christian faith. But it is an essential thing.

As a little Baptist boy, I remember lots of things about celebrating—lilies across the front of the church; getting new clothes, or our best ones pressed and shined for the day; company coming and Grandma's Easter dinner; and special music in church by Dad's quartet. The church seemed always full and smelling pretty in ways it didn't the rest of the year.

I remember the hymns I thought were great: "Hallelujah Christ Arose" and "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." But I don't remember a day when we celebrated "the death" of Jesus and put on any special clothes for it.

We sing mournful songs about that, though, like "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" But it wasn't a song just about celebrating "the death." In fact, the last verse in it changed the death theme into something else— "Were you there when he rose up from the dead?"

The death was softened by "when he rose up..." Many such hymns do that. Even the prince of all "passion" hymns, "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" from Bach's "St. Matthew's Passion" does it by the title's second word.

Good Friday is the day in history that Jesus of Nazareth was killed by crucifixion in Jerusalem. He died at the pleasure of Rome, approval being given by Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, and by a small circle of Jewish temple authorities, who, in reality, were puppets of the governor.

This is not the end of the story. In fact, we don't know the end of this story yet. Three days after Jesus was observed to have died on the cross and was buried, He was seen again and again—walking in a garden, joining his disciples in a closed room and on a lake shore at breakfast, by more than 400 in one group, by two on the road to Emmaus and more. This was Easter in action. And their report to each other was, "He lives!"

But without the death of Jesus of Nazareth, there is no Easter, no "He lives."