

Look with Joy into the Garden of Glory!

Blessings to you in the name of our risen Savior, Jesus Christ!

The gospel truth that Jesus rose from death and has promised the same for you is what makes this a beautiful day. That's what makes every day a beautiful day for a Christian. In addition to that most important truth and promise in our lives, we are blessed with other things that make beautiful days—especially here in Arizona!

What makes a perfectly beautiful outdoor Arizona day for you? Is it sitting in your yard and watching our gorgeous sunsets? Maybe it's a drive through the majestic saguaros either east or west of town. Or a stop off at Picacho Peak when the spring wildflowers blanket the ground. Is your thing adventuring through pristine wilderness like Aravaipa? Isolated mountain hikes or wandering through desert washes have beauties all their own. Watching the elk up in the White Mountains is beautiful. But so is watching a lone coyote or bobcat pad across the Sonoran landscape. Even the look and smell of your backyard citrus trees has an incomparable beauty. When you enjoy those experiences, in that moment or for an entire perfect day, it makes you wonder how glorious the world must have been when it was first created, when it was perfect, especially that pinnacle of beauty God designed for Adam and Eve—the Garden of Eden.

Sadly, that first garden and the rest of creation, including our beautiful Arizona, were spoiled by sin. But if we can still get a sense of its original glory by looking around us—even though it is spoiled by sin—then imagine how much greater is the glory that comes from the garden where Christ was buried and rose again—a glory that can never fade or be spoiled by sin! Today you and I are filled with joy as we look into this Easter garden, the garden where Christ rose from the grave, the Garden of Glory, we'll call it. This garden of Christ's resurrection brings us joy because of the glorious power and grace we find there.

The Bible tells us that near the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb. Jesus' body had been placed there on Friday. This garden tomb is where the women were headed on that first Easter Sunday since the Sabbath was finally over. They were anxious to finish giving Jesus' body a proper burial. But they quickly found that this wouldn't be necessary. **After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.** (Matthew 28:1-4)

What an amazing display of power in this garden! Perhaps we should not be surprised to hear that the violent earthquake was simultaneous to the angel's entrance into our world. One of the mighty princes of heaven—so powerful as to toss the stone away from the tomb like flicking a penny with your thumb, so fearsome that battle-hardened soldiers dropped in sheer fright—had entered the garden in powerful glory!

But even with that kind of power, he was only a servant of someone much more powerful and awesome—someone who did what the angel could not do, someone who had defeated death. The powerful angel's message to the women about the more powerful Son of God was this: **“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” Now I have told you”** (verses 5-7).

Jesus didn't merely cheat death. He met it head on. He had truly died on Friday. His lifeless body had lain in the tomb until the third day. But then, early on Sunday morning, his body grew warm once again. His eyes fluttered open. His lungs filled with air. He came back to life. When he defeated death, he didn't just do it for himself. He defeated death on behalf of the entire human race. The angel with his power only made an impression in a *certain* garden and only on a *handful* of people. But Christ Jesus swallowed up death for everyone throughout the world and through all generations that came before him or will come after him. So now, with glorious power, Jesus says, **“He who believes in me will live, even though he dies”** (Jn 11:25). Christ's glory is a glory of power!

On the cross, Jesus had set aside the full use of his rights and privileges, and even the full use of his power as God, so that he could suffer and die. But when Jesus rose from the dead, he began to make full use of his power as God once again. We call this his state of exaltation. In his state of exaltation, he passed through the walls of the tomb with his body—invisibly, powerfully, gloriously. In his state of exaltation he is no longer confined by the laws of physics. The Bible says that God **“appointed him to be head over everything”** and that he **“fills everything in every way”** (Eph 1:22,23). The angel did not remove the stone from the tomb to let Jesus out. He opened the tomb so that the women and others could look in and see for themselves that Christ had truly risen.

When you and I plant gardens, we always expect something good to spring up. Those who planted the garden where Jesus' tomb was—would they have expected such powerful glory to spring forth from their garden? You and I LOOK WITH JOY INTO THIS GARDEN OF GLORY because we see that Jesus has risen in glorious power. But what about us? We're still here on earth while he's exalted in heaven. Are we left to fend for ourselves in life and make it through death on our own? Absolutely not! Because the glory that radiates from that garden is not just glorious power, it is also a glorious grace.

Death can be frightening. We fear for what will happen to our children after we die. We're afraid the pain we may experience before death. We fear the burden of medical costs to our families. We're afraid of that moment when we will cross over into death and what that will be like.

As we think about death and our mortality, we also tend to look back and size up our lives. Did we do well? Did we do everything we could have? Did we leave behind us a rose garden, so to speak, or a path of destruction? Death becomes truly dreadful because the divine judge can easily uncover piles and piles of guilty sin left in our wakes. We don't want to face death panicked with guilt.

But the glory coming from the garden of the empty tomb is a glory of grace. Consider what pains the angel took to alleviate the women's fears. You notice he showed no concern for the quaking soldiers at all. But he reached out to those faithful women in the gentlest, friendliest way and told them, **"Do not be afraid."** He reminded them of Jesus' words. He showed them the empty tomb. He highlighted the news by asking them to take it to the disciples. All of this is amazing, glorious grace!

And this grace, this undeserved love, doesn't end there. As the women are on their way, from out of nowhere, Jesus meets them. Does he appear threatening to them? Just the opposite. He comes to them in a familiar, friendly way. They are even able to run up and embrace him. Listen again: **"So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me'"** (verses 8-10).

Jesus calls his disciples "brothers." Even after he has entered into his state of exaltation, he hasn't forgotten *that* he became one of us and *why* he became one of us. He came to take away the punishment for our guilt before God by his death on the cross. His resurrection is proof that he succeeded. Now, to every single person who puts their confidence in Jesus, there is only friendliness and love and goodness and grace and kindness and generosity from God! Past sins are no longer dredged up or thrown in our faces! They are gone, forgiven. Death itself is no longer punishment for sin. Jesus is living proof that we too will rise from death. Jesus is proof of God's grace. This is why you and I are filled with joy as we LOOK INTO THE empty GARDEN TOMB.

Jesus certainly did not leave us alone after he was exalted. If you read your Bible at home and are going to church regularly, the resurrected Jesus still comes to you! He comes in such simple and familiar ways—through the pages of your Bible, through the voice of a pastor speaking God's Word, through the gentle splash of simple water and a promise in Baptism, through the tangible evidence of his body and blood under a mask of simple bread and wine in Holy Communion. We call this Word and these Sacraments the Means of Grace because through these means, we are able to cling to him in faith as the women did that first Easter morning. Through them we are assured that Jesus is with us, that we are forgiven, and that we don't need to fear death.

We will experience the same victory over death as he did, and he will share with us all the glory of heaven that belongs to him. Unlike the beauty of the Garden of Eden or the beauty of Arizona, the glory of this garden can never fade or be ruined because Christ is its glory, and by his grace, we will be with him and live for all eternity. Knowing that truth makes for a beautiful day! Amen.