**THE SERMON, Easter Sunday, Fredrikstad Cathedral, April 20, 2025**

**Bishop Kari Alvsvåg**

**Death was not strong enough to hold him!**

These are the words of the disciple Peter. Fifty-two days have passed since he denied his relationship with Jesus. Three times he replied: I don't know him! Then the rooster crowed, as Jesus had prophesied, and Peter knows with himself: Not even that could I stand by. I am a loser.

Fifty-two days later, after the incredible discovery of an empty tomb. After some encounters with the risen Jesus that are truly remarkable. They're not spectacular, there's no smoke, fire, storm when Jesus appears alive again. It's more like a fragile silence. Jesus speaks gently and softly to the grieving Mary. He comes home to his disciples and greets them with peace. He lights a fire on the beach and grills fish and bakes bread, so they can eat after fishing all night. The loser Peter gets a second chance. Do you love me, Peter? Jesus asks. And Peter responds with the guilty man's slumped shoulders and paralyzing sense of shame: Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Something happens. Peter has straightened his back. He is speaking to a huge crowd. And he states:

**Death was not strong enough to hold him!**

Christ is risen! Yes, he is indeed risen!

Let's stand up and sing with Peter, Mary and the others who stared into an empty tomb:

He is risen, great commandment!

My God is a reconciled God,

my heaven is now open!

The victorious death of my Jesus

The arrows of condemnation broke

And shattered the weapons of darkness!

O voice, my comfort!

By his victory,

which I possess,

hell trembles.

He was dead, but behold, he lives!

The tomb was empty. Mary was the first to discover it. She was awake early, maybe she hadn't slept all night. The grief was so great. The sounds of the scourging of Jesus. From the crowd shouting Crucify him! The weight of the body as they took him down from the cross and laid him in the tomb. She could not rest. Then she got up, even though it was still pitch black outside, got dressed, and went to look at the tomb. Maybe to try to make it real. Try to understand it. He is dead. Jesus is dead.

But the stone in front of the tomb was rolled aside. She runs off to find Peter, and she meets him and another disciple nicknamed “the disciple Jesus loved”. Then they start running too. And they go into the tomb. There they find only the linen cloth in which they had wrapped Jesus' body. And the handkerchief that Jesus had worn over his head. The two pieces are not in the same place. They see an empty tomb, a linen cloth and a headscarf. And they believe. Until then, they hadn't understood what Jesus meant when he told them what was going to happen to him.

Just outside the tomb, Mary is crying. Despairing that the body, the corpse, was also gone. She stands there in the dawn, exhausted by the night's vigil, and her feet are freezing from the dew that has wetted the toes of her open sandals. A chill runs through her. But pale rays of morning sun sneak through the foliage of the trees, and the birds begin to sing. Then she sees the gardener. The working day has begun. Maybe he knows where the body is? Only when the man calls her by name: Mary, she recognizes him. It is Jesus. And she addresses him as usual: Rabbuni! Master!

Mary decides in her heart:

**Death was not strong enough to hold him!**

From Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, the words have sounded for two thousand years. They have taken up residence among people all over the world. They have changed people's lives, they have changed the course of history, they have changed the fate of the universe.

Who was this man who died there in a certain place, in a certain time, in a reality? It's not a fairy tale. It was not a time. It happened in Jerusalem. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus trembled with fear so that sweat ran like drops of blood to the ground. It was in the temple courtyard that Peter denied who Jesus was. It was in the streets of Jerusalem that Jesus carried his cross, was pushed, fell, was helped by Simon of Cyrene. It was in the garden, close to Golgotha, that Jesus' body was laid in a new burial cave. This is not meant to be understood as a myth or a fairy tale. No, the stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection are surrounded by facts, by witness descriptions, by sounds and smells, and are meant to be believed as true and real.

On these real roads in Jerusalem, Christians walked on Good Friday again this year. In a strong ecumenical cross walk with Christians from all the different denominations. They are fewer now, the Christians in Jesus' own country. The war is killing many Palestinians, and the churches in Gaza are hard hit. The war is also making itself felt in the West Bank. “These are terrible times for the Palestinian population. These are really difficult days for the Christians and for the churches. Everyone who can is leaving the country. Can you imagine a Bethlehem, a Jerusalem, without Christians? It would be so tragic. Let's pray for the Christians and for the Christian celebration of Easter in Jesus' own country. Let us pray for Israel's leaders, that they will end the war, stop the bombing and find peaceful solutions for the way forward. Let us pray for the leaders of Hamas, that they will release the hostages and find peaceful solutions for the way forward. Let us support our sister church ELCJHL, the Palestinian Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, with money so that they can maintain their worship services and their active work with schools and other things for the entire Palestinian population.

But the presence and love of Jesus is not limited to the places where Jesus himself walked. For Jesus is more than a man who once lived. Jesus is God, part of the Trinity, and is always the bearer of the eternal. Jesus is the creator, present from the beginning of the world as the creative word, as Logos, and when Jesus is born on earth in Bethlehem as a human being, it is the creator himself who makes his entrance into creation. With a body, a boundary, for a time, not just for eternity. Jesus Christ is the true and clear expression of who God is. God suffers with all who suffer, and in Jesus' own cry on the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? All people's experience of God's abandonment is contained in a complete solidarity with the suffering human being. The incarnation, God's in-carnation, does not end. God is with us in the real world, sharing in our suffering.

So when people on their way to worship on Palm Sunday in the Ukrainian city of Sumy are bombed and killed. Then God despairs together with all who weep, and the nails that pierced Jesus' hands and made wounds, they feel God again being beaten through skin, bones and flesh, and God suffers. When the Ukrainian refugee is turned away at the border, abandoned by authorities who won't recognize her, Jesus knows what she is going through. He himself was denied. There are no limits to the cruelty and pain Jesus knows. He was killed, he was laid in a tomb. He goes down to the grave. He is with everything and everyone who suffers in a compassion that never ends.

But Peter's words still ring true:

**Death was not strong enough to hold him!**

Have you looked at the altarpiece here in the church? I love that altarpiece. After all, none of the four gospels describe what it looked like when Jesus came out of the tomb. The tomb is empty. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, it is one of the most popular motifs in an altarpiece. Jesus emerging from the tomb. And look at this! There is no gentle exit from the tomb depicted here. No, Jesus almost shoots out of the tomb, like a powerful beam in a fountain of light, he stretches his arms in the air, the cloth around his body flutters around him, and the energy splashes in gold and red and you can feel how that body is filled with power, strength and life!

I'll never forget the little three-year-old I met here in church a few years ago. His little brother was going to be baptized, and I met them for a baptismal interview. He was such a curious little boy, and I saw how his eyes wandered all over the church when he came in, he observed the enormous height, he picked at a pew, and then he spotted the altarpiece. Then he raced up the aisle, full speed, until he reached the altar ring, and there he jumped as high as he could, stretched his arms in the air and imitated Jesus with his whole body!

That moment lives in me as an enormously powerful expression of what Christ's resurrection means for us today. Because with the incarnation, Jesus' life as a human being in the world, with the death, and with the resurrection, the triune God reversed the fate of the world. Christ reveals God as one who gives himself, without controlling. Christ creates space for freedom and response, without coercion. Salvation is a relational union with the triune God, in which righteousness is given to us as a gift. Jesus calls us by name. As he called Mary on the first Easter Sunday.

**The incarnation does not end.** For Jesus is the same yesterday and today, even forever. God's solidarity with mankind is eternal, and through Jesus we see how and what God is: Love, light and life. Connection, salvation and liberation. Christ is the face of God turned towards us humans, and we are invited to become part of Christ's body in the world. Through baptism, we are united with Christ, and are grafted into Christ's body and share in his life, death and resurrection.

It is a relational union with the triune God, and our calling is to reflect Jesus in the world.

The three-year-old did that. He mirrored Christ's resurrection with a leap! The call of the church, the call of Christians, is to mirror the mind, actions and will of Jesus in the world today. To show mercy, to do acts of compassion, to bear witness to Jesus. To condemn all evil and call to repentance. To create peace.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us that death will not have the last word. Light and life will always find their way. And it's not just sometime in the future, in eternity, when we will see God as he is. No, it is also now. For the kingdom of God has come near. **The resurrection does not end.** The powers of the resurrection are here and now. They shine where people do good, they work where wars end, they flourish where children are allowed to grow up in safety, they make themselves known as love between people, love for nature, love for God, who is our creator, liberator and life-giver. God who is the giver of all goodness, and who is love, light and life. God who is peace.

I say with Peter.

**Death was not strong enough to hold him.**

We can live in faith that the resurrection never ends. The darkness shall not overcome the light. The sun shall always break forth!

Glory be to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who was, is and will be one true God, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.