



Christ Triumphant Over Sin and Death by Peter Paul Rubens

Painted around 1615, Located in the Columbus Museum of Art

“All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life. . . . We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. . . . For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

– Romans 6: 3-11

Highly acclaimed Flemish painter Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640) was not only a renowned painter, but also a classically educated scholar, a father of eight children, and a political diplomat who was knighted by two kings: King Philip of Spain and King Charles of England. He was Catholic and named after saints Peter and Paul, in recognition of his birthdate falling on the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul. He ran a large bustling art studio for many years in Antwerp. A highly prolific painter, he masterfully employed the Baroque style which emphasizes rich color, movement, and sumptuousness. Living in the tumultuous century after the Martin Luther-led Protestant revolt, Rubens was a leading artist of the Catholic Counter-Reformation style of painting. Many of his works, including this one, evoked images of the Church’s victory over heresy. Among his more than 1400 known works of art, he painted several famous depictions of Christ’s triumph over sin and death.

In today’s day and time, we can read volumes upon volumes in pursuit of deepening our understanding of the divine mysteries of Christ’s resurrection. But as we view Peter Paul Ruben’s **“Christ Triumphant Over Sin and Death,”** it is important to remember that in his day most people were illiterate. Through his art, Rubens undertook the formidable task of communicating deep spiritual ideas to viewers who otherwise had little aids with which to study and contemplate them. Not surprisingly then, there is much to take note of in this exquisite painting. Notice that as Christ rises triumphantly from the tomb, he is no longer a bloodied, beaten, emaciated figure, but rather he is tremendously powerful and commanding, full of vitality, for he has conquered death. The marks of his crucifixion remain, but they hold no restraint over him. He bears a flag-waving standard, indicating he reigns sovereign and is not subject to Roman, or Jewish, or any other worldly authority. His Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, is at hand! Christ Our King firmly plants with his mighty staff a rallying point for his Church on earth, the Church Militant, bringing hope to all generations that the gates of hell will never prevail against it. A large angel adoringly removes Christ’s burial cloth, unveiling the glory of God. The angel is clad in orange, the color in sacred art that symbolizes endurance, strength and courage – virtues which Christ demonstrated in his Passion. Light emanates from Christ, breaking the grip of darkness over the world, for he truly is as he said: the Light of the World. Triumphantly, the smaller angels remove from his head the crown of thorns with which his tormentors mocked him and replace it with a victor’s laurel. Christ victorious powerfully crushes with his left foot both the serpent (which represents Satan and sin) and a skull (which represents death brought on by sin). The fires of hell to his left are very real and ever present, but they cannot touch Christ Jesus Victor, Christ Jesus Ruler, and Christ Jesus Lord Our Redeemer. The Easter morning triumph portrayed in this painting extends out to the viewer on whom Christ gazes. Living the Christian faith involves entering into personal relationship with Our Lord; therefore Christ looks at each viewer personally, invitingly, eye to eye. Because of the triumph of the Cross, those who have died with Christ in baptism, can also be victorious over sin and death and rise with Christ to new life. Therefore, if we take up our own crosses in life, obediently follow Christ’s commands, reject Satan and all his evil works, and enter into loving friendship with Christ Jesus, then, sin, death, Satan, and the fires of hell will have no claim on us either.

He hath loosed the bonds of sin and death! Alleluia!