

“Der Himmel lacht! die Erde jubiliert!” BWV 31

1. Sonata

2. Der Himmel lacht! die Erde jubiliert
Und was sie trägt in ihrem Schoss!
Der Schöpfer lebt! der Höchste triumphiert
Und ist von Todesbanden los.
Der sich das Grab zur Ruh erlesen,
Der Heiligste kann nicht verwesen.

3. Erwünschter Tag! sei, Seele, wieder froh!
Das A und O,
Der Erst und auch der Letzte,
Den unsre schwere Schuld in Todeskerker setzte,
Ist nun gerissen aus der Not!
Der Herr war tot,
Und sieh, er lebet wieder!
Lebt unser Haupt, so leben auch die Glieder!
Der Herr hat in der Hand
Des Todes und der Hölle Schlüssel!
Der sein Gewand

1. Sonata

2. Heaven laughs [with joy/derision]!¹ Earth,
And what it bears in its womb,² exults!
The creator [Jesus]³ lives! the Most High triumphs
And is free of Death's bonds.⁴
The Most Holy One [Jesus], who has chosen the grave for [his] rest,
Cannot decay [in body].⁵

3. Wished-for day! Soul, be glad once again.
[Jesus,] “the alpha and omega,”
The first and also the last,⁷
Whom our heavy guilt put into Death's dungeon,
Is now wrenched from the plight [of death]!⁸
The Lord was dead,
And see, he lives again!
If [Jesus Christ] our “head” lives, then also [we, the church,]⁹ “the
members [of the body of Christ]” live!
The Lord [Jesus] has in his hand

¹The sense of lines 1–2 is probably derived from Luke 6:21, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Selig seid ihr, die ihr hier weint, denn ihr werdet lachen” (“Blessed are you, you who weep here [on earth], for [there in heaven] you will laugh [with joy]”). But there is also an element of triumph, probably reflecting the sentiments of the traditional Christian reading of Psalm 2, where it says that “der im Himmel wohnt, lacht ihr, und der HERR spottet ihr” (“[the LORD God, the father] who dwells in heaven laughs at them [who vainly speak/plot against God's messiah, Jesus], and the LORD [God, the father] mocks them”).

²Not only plants, but also animals, are said in the creation narrative in Genesis 1:11 and 1:24 to be “brought forth” specifically from “the [womb of the] earth”; humans, however, are said in verses 26–27 to be created by God in a special manner. Thus this (Easter) cantata appears to be saying that on earth not only humans rejoice at the resurrection of Christ, but also animals and, apparently, even flora.

³Colossians 1:16 declares that all things were created through God's son, Jesus.

⁴“Todesbanden,” or “Todes Banden,” here probably refers not simply to being almost dead, but also to being ensnared by death as a personification of evil (as, e.g., in Jeremiah 9:20–21). The expression “Todes Bande” comes from Psalm 18:5, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Es umfingen mich des Todes Bande, und die Bäche Belial erschreckten mich” (“Death's bonds beset me, and the [torrential] brooks of Belial [Satan] terrified me”). Luther and his followers took Psalm 18 to be speaking of the crucifixion of Jesus.

⁵“Der Heiligste” (“the Most Holy One”) is a reference to God's “Holy One,” Jesus, expressed in a grammatical superlative; Acts 2:24–27 states that King David, in Psalm 16:10, was referring to Jesus with the words “Denn du wirst meine Seele nicht in der Hölle lassen, auch nicht zugeben, dass dein Heiliger die Verwesung sehe” (“For you [God the father] will not leave my soul in ‘hell’ [i.e., here, ‘in the grave,’ ‘in the state of death’], nor permit that [I, Jesus,] your Holy One might see decay [in body, there in the grave]”).

⁷In Revelation 22:13, Jesus says “Ich bin das A und das O, der Anfang und das Ende, der Erste und der Letzte” (“I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last”); “alpha” (A) and “omega” (Ω) are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

⁸The sense of this line is probably derived from Psalm 116:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “du hast meine Seele aus dem Tode gerissen” (“you [God] have wrenched my soul from death”); later Luther Bibles emend “gerissen” (“wrenched”) to “errettet” (“delivered/saved/rescued”).

⁹The New Testament continually refers to the Christian community, or the church, as the “members” of “the body of Christ” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:27).

Blutrot bespritzt in seinen⁶ bittern Leiden,
Will heute sich mit Schmuck und Ehren kleiden!

The keys of death and of hell!¹⁰
He [Christ “the divine warrior”], who spattered his garment
Blood-red [from trampling enemies] in his bitter sufferings [on the
cross],¹¹
Will attire himself this day with ornament and honor!

4. Fürst des Lebens, starker Streiter,
Hochgelobter Gottessohn!
Hebet dich des Kreuzes Leiter
Auf den höchsten Ehrentron?
Wird, was dich zuvor gebunden,
Nun dein Schmuck und Edelstein?
Müssen deine Purpurwunden
Deiner Klarheit Strahlen sein?

4. [Jesus,] “prince of life,”¹² mighty warrior,
Highly extolled¹³ son of God!
Does the ladder¹⁴ of the cross lift you
To the highest throne of [divine] honor?¹⁵
Will that which, before, bound you
Now be your ornament and gemstone?
Must your [bleeding, regally] purple wounds
Be the streaming of your radiance?

5. So stehe dann, du gottergebne Seele,
Mit Christo geistlich auf!
Tritt an den neuen Lebenslauf!

5. So then, you [Christian believer’s] soul given over to God,¹⁷
Rise up spiritually with Christ.
Enter upon the course of new life.¹⁸

⁶Bach’s original performing part and a Leipzig 1720s cantata-text booklet here read in the plural “in seinen bitteren Leiden” (“in his bitter sufferings”), whereas the librettist’s 1710s printed book of poetry and a Leipzig 1730s cantata-text booklet, along with some modern editions of the cantata, read in the singular “in seinem bitteren Leiden” (“in his bitter suffering”).

¹⁰As proclaimed in Revelation 1:18, where the “Schlüssel” is explicitly plural: “die Schlüssel der Hölle und des Todes” (“the keys of hell and of death”); there are two metaphorical keys: the one to the physical grave (the end of earthly life), and the other to Hades (the spiritual realm of the dead).

¹¹As proclaimed in traditional Christian typological reading of Isaiah 63:1-6, which speaks of the divine warrior’s clothing (in Luther Bibles, his “Gewand” [“garment”]) being red (Luther Bibles, “rotfarb” [“red-colored”]) with the blood of enemies. This warrior is taken to be a foreshadowing of Jesus’s blood-stained death on the cross and also of the battling Christ as the end-time rider of the white horse in Revelation 19:11-16.

¹²“Fürst des Lebens” (“prince of life”) comes from Luther’s rendering of Acts 3:15, where Jesus is given this name, typically understood in contrast to the “Fürst dieser Welt” (“prince of this world”) in John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11, where Satan (biblically associated with death) is given this name.

¹³“Hochgelobt” (“highly lauded,” or “highly extolled”) was an old-fashioned expression in Bach’s day and was generally used only in connection with God. It is applied to Jesus in Acts 19:17, which reports that “der Name des HERRN Jesus ward hochgelobt” (“[In Ephesus] the name of the LORD Jesus was highly extolled”).

¹⁴“Ladder of the cross,” on the face of it, might seem like a strange expression. It is related to the story in Genesis 28:10-22 of a “stairway to heaven” on which Jacob, in a dream, sees “angels of God” going up and down. This stairway was rendered “eine Leiter” (“a ladder”) in the Luther Bibles, and thus the cantata can speak here in lines 3–4 of the cross as a “Leiter” onto which Jesus is hoisted to be lifted up toward and into heaven, to the throne of honor.

¹⁵This line draws on the language of the Luther Bible’s idiosyncratic rendering of Jeremiah 17:12, “die Stätte unsers Heiligtums, nämlich der Thron göttlicher Ehre, ist allezeit fest geblieben” (“the place of our sanctuary, namely the throne of divine honor, has always remained secure”). In traditional Christian reading, the “throne” of this verse points prophetically to God’s throne in the heavenly Jerusalem, where Jesus the son, risen from the dead, dwells with God the father.

¹⁷The adjective “gottergebene” means “given over to God,” not “God-given” in the sense of “given by God.” The idea of the Christian believer’s soul being given over to God is derived, e.g., from 2 Corinthians 8:5, “Sie ergaben sich selbst, zuerst dem HERRN und darnach uns” (“They [the people of the churches in Macedonia] gave themselves over first to the LORD and afterward to us [i.e., the apostle Paul and his fellow missionaries, as God’s representatives]”).

¹⁸The sense of this line is derived from Romans 6:4, “gleich wie Christus ist auferweckt von den Toten durch die Herrlichkeit des Vaters, also sollen auch wir in einem neuen Leben wandeln” (“just as Christ is raised up from the dead by the glory of [God] the

Auf! von den toten Werken!
 Lass, dass dein Heiland in dir lebt,
 An deinem Leben merken!¹⁶
 Der Weinstock, der jetzt blüht,
 Trägt keine tote Reben!
 Der Lebensbaum lässt seine Zweige leben!
 Ein Christe flieht
 Ganz eilend von dem Grabe!
 Er lässt den Stein,
 Er lässt das Tuch der Sünden

[Rise] up from dead works!¹⁹
 Let [the truth] that your savior lives in you²⁰
 Be observed in your life!
 [Jesus,] “the grapevine” that now blossoms
 Bears no dead shoots.²¹
 [Jesus,] “the tree of life” has its branches live!²²
 A Christian flees
 Very quickly from the grave [of Jesus, with fear and great joy]²³
 He leaves the [rolled-back] stone [of Jesus’s grave];²⁴
 He leaves [behind] sin’s [sweat-]cloth²⁵ [that was on Jesus’s head],

father, so we also are to walk in a new life”)—i.e., in the libretto, “den neuen Lebenslauf” apparently means not “the new way/course of life” but “the course of new life.”

¹⁶The wording given here for lines 4–6 is the one found in the printed libretto booklets distributed to Bach’s fellow congregants at his performances in the 1720s and 1730s. Bach’s own score of this cantata, composed in the 1710s, does not survive. The only surviving separate vocal part for this movement was prepared by one of Bach’s copyists for a performance in the 1730s. Its somewhat clumsy-seeming text reads (with its older-German orthography) “Auf, von des [apparently altered from ‘den’] Todtes Wercken! / Laß, daß dein Heyland in die Welt, / an deinem Leben mercken!” (literally, “[Rise] up from the works of Death! / Let that your savior into the world be noted/observed in your life”).

¹⁹With the phrase “von den toten Werken” (“from dead works”), the librettist was presumably drawing upon Hebrews 9:14, “Denn so der Ochsen und der Böcke Blut, und die Asche, von der Kuhe gesprengt, heiligt die Unreinen zu der leiblichen Reinigkeit, wie vielmehr wird das Blut Christi, der sich selbst ohne allen Wandel durch den Heiligen Geist Gott geopfert hat, unser Gewissen reinigen von den toten Werken, zu dienen dem lebendigen Gott!” (“For if the blood of oxen and goats and the sprinkled ashes of the heifer sanctify the impure person unto bodily purity, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the Holy Spirit offered himself immutable to God, purge our conscience from dead works, to serve the living God?”). The Lutheran takeaway here is that works are “dead” because they can do nothing to justify a person in the face of God’s wrath. According to Lutheranism, persons can be justified before God only by having Christ’s righteousness imputed to them, as appropriated through the unmerited gift of faith.

²⁰The librettist was presumably drawing here upon Galatians 2:20, “Christus lebt in mir” (“Christ lives in me”).

²¹In older German, “Reben” had a variety of different but related meanings: not only “vines/grapevines” or “fruit/grapes,” but also “branches/shoots.” Here it appears to be used in that third sense, as lines 7–8 draw on John 15:5, “Ich bin der Weinstock, ihr seid die Reben; wer in mir bleibt und ich in ihm, der bringt viel Frucht, denn ohne mich könnt ihr nichts tun” (“I [Jesus] am the grapevine, you [disciples] are the shoots/branches; whoever abides in me, and I in him, he brings [forth] much fruit [from the shoots/branches; i.e., more followers], for without me you [disciples] can do nothing”).

²²The narrative in Genesis 3:22 proclaims that if one were to eat of the “Baum des Lebens” (“tree of life”) in the garden of Eden, one would “lebe ewiglich” (“live eternally”). Lutheranism taught that this tree of life was a “type” of which Jesus (the “grapevine”—see fn. 21, above), the one who gives his followers eternal life, was the foreshadowed “antitype.” The cross of Jesus, too, which Luther called the “Holz des Lebens” (“wood/tree of life”), was considered a foreshadowed “tree of life.”

²³“Fleeing” from the tomb (of Jesus) is narrated only in Mark 16:8, and leaving the tomb “quickly” (and “with fear and great joy”) only in Matthew 28:8.

²⁴As narrated in Mark 16:4, Luke 24:2, and John 20:1.

²⁵The “Tuch” (“cloth”) here is not a general “Leichentuch” (“cerement,” or “burial-shroud”) but the “Schweisstuch” (“sweat-cloth”) that is spoken of in Luther’s translation of John 20:7, namely his literal rendering of the Bible’s “soudarion,” a loanword in Greek, from the Latin “sudarium” (derived from “sudare” [“to sweat”]). The “soudarion” is a large cloth or small towel for wiping off perspiration (John 11:44, 20:7; Luke 19:20). “Napkin” is a traditional reading in English, and “shroud” is sometimes employed, but these renderings miss the biblical idea emphasized by Luther, that in dying on the cross Jesus not only bleeds but also sweats for the sins of his people. The “sweat-cloth” points to Jesus’s entire Passion, in a sense that Christians had traditionally read as foreshadowed in Isaiah 43:24, “Ja, mir hast du Arbeit gemacht in deinen Sünden und hast mir Mühe gemacht in deinen Missetaten” (“Yes, in your sins you have made [a great deal of] work for me [i.e., the LORD; typologically: Jesus], and in your misdeeds you have made [a great deal of] trouble for me.” Note that the libretto from Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* accordingly alludes to this verse at movement 67, “die Müh ist aus, die unsre Sünden ihm gemacht” (“the trouble is over that our sins have caused him”).

Dahinten
Und will mit Christo lebend sein!

Back there [in the grave],²⁶
And will be alive with Christ!

6. Adam muss in uns verwesen,
Soll der neue Mensch genesen,
Der nach Gott geschaffen ist.
Du musst geistlich auferstehen
Und aus Sündengräbern gehen,
Wenn du Christi Gliedmass bist.

6. [The Old] Adam²⁷ in us must decay
If the New Man/Adam, who is created after [the likeness of] God,²⁸
Is to grow and thrive²⁹ [in us].
You must [—as one does in baptism—]³⁰ spiritually rise up
And come out of sin's graves
If you are a member of [the body of] Christ.

7. Weil dann das Haupt sein Glied
Natürlich nach sich zieht,
So kann mich nichts von Jesu scheiden.
Muss ich mit Christo leiden,
So werd ich auch nach dieser Zeit
Mit Christo wieder auferstehen
Zur Ehr und Herrlichkeit
Und Gott in meinem Fleische sehen!

7. Because, then, the head naturally draws
Its [other bodily] member[s]³¹ after itself,³²
Therefore nothing can separate me [the member] from Jesus [the head].
If I must suffer with Christ,
Then after this time [when his glory is revealed]³³ I will also
Rise up again with Christ
Unto honor and glory

²⁶As implied of the disciples, when they went away again, in John 20:7-10.

²⁷“Der alte Adam” (“the Old Adam”; or, “the Old [type of] Human”—the Hebrew word/name “adam” means “human being”) is a biblical-theological term that is contrasted in the New Testament with the biblical-theological term “der neue Mensch” (“the new human being”; or, “the New Adam”), used most prominently in Colossians 3:9-10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Zieheth den alten Menschen mit seinen Werken aus und ziehet den neuen an” (“Put off the [fallen] ‘Old Adam’ and his [sinful] works and put on [as metaphorical clothing] the ‘New [Adam]’—the sinless Jesus Christ”).

²⁸This line draws on the language of Genesis 5:1, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Da Gott den Menschen schuf, machte er ihn nach dem Gleichnis Gottes” (“When God created man, he made him after the likeness of God”), and on Ephesians 4:24, “zieheth den neuen Menschen an, der nach Gott geschaffen ist” (“put on [as metaphorical clothing] the ‘New [Man/Adam]’—the sinless Jesus Christ], who is created after [the likeness of] God”).

²⁹“Genesen” has a very wide variety of meanings in older German. Here it appears to be used in its sense as an antonym for “verderben” or “verwesen” in their sense of “to waste away” (or “to wither and die”).

³⁰The standard Lutheran teaching (e.g., in Luther’s “Small Catechism,” 1529) was that the water in the sacrament of baptism signifies that “the Old Adam in us” with all sins and desires is to be drowned and die, and on the other hand that the “New Man/Adam” is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness; Luther wrote there that this was proclaimed in Romans 6:4, “So sind wir ja mit ihm begraben durch die Taufe in den Tod, auf dass, gleich wie Christus ist auferweckt von den Toten durch die Herrlichkeit des Vaters, also sollen auch wir in einem neuen Leben wandeln” (“Thus we [followers] are buried with him [Jesus] through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of [God] the father, so we too might walk in newness of life”).

³¹The singular accusative “sein Glied” (“its member”) in line 1 is best taken for the purposes of English translation to be a poetically clipped version of the accusative plural “sein[e] Glied[er]” (“its members”), having been employed to accommodate a rhyme with “sich zieht” (“itself draws”). With regard to Christ as “head” and the church as his bodily “members,” see line 8 of movement 3, above.

³²The sense of these lines is taken from John 12:32, “Und ich, wenn ich erhöht werde von der Erden, so will ich sie alle zu mir ziehen” (“And I [Jesus], when I am lifted up from the earth [on to the cross], then will I draw them all to me [toward God in heaven]). Lutheranism taught that this verse had been foreshadowed in Song of Solomon 1:4, “Zeuch [i.e., an older-German form of ‘zieh’] mich dir nach, so laufen wir” (“Draw me [the female beloved; typologically, the Christian soul] after you [O king, the male beloved; typologically, the messiah-king Jesus], then we will run [together]”).

³³This line draws on 1 Peter 4:13, “freuet euch, dass ihr mit Christo leidet, auf dass ihr auch, zur Zeit der Offenbarung seiner Herrlichkeit, Freude und Wonne haben möget” (“rejoice that you [beloved Christian friends] suffer with Christ, so that you also, at the time of the revelation of his glory [on the Day of Judgment], may have joy and bliss”).

And, [when I am again] in my flesh, [I will] see God!³⁴

8. Letzte Stunde, brich herein,
Mir die Augen zuzudrücken!
Lass mich Jesu Freudenschein,
Und sein helles Licht erblicken!
Lass mich Engeln ähnlich sein!
Letzte Stunde, brich herein.

8. Last hour, break forth
To press my eyes closed.
Let me behold Jesus's joy-halo³⁵
And his/its bright light;
Let me be like angels.
Last hour, break forth.

9. So fahr ich hin zu Jesu Christ,
Mein' Arm'³⁶ tu ich ausstrecken;
So schlaf ich ein und ruhe fein,
Kein Mensch kann mich aufwecken,
Denn Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn,
Der wird die Himmelstür auftun,
Mich führn zum ewgen Leben.

9. Thus go I hence to Jesus Christ;
[Like Simeon,] I stretch out my arms [to depart in peace];³⁷
Thus I fall asleep and rest well;
No person can awaken me [from this sleep of death]
Other than Jesus Christ, God's son,
Who will open the door of heaven
[And] lead me to eternal life.

Salomo Franck

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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³⁴The sense of this line is derived from the way Job 19:25-26 is rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day: "Ich ... werde darnach mit dieser meiner Haut umgeben werden, und werde in meinem Fleische Gott sehen" ("I [Job] ... will afterward [in rising up out of the earth/grave] be encased with this skin of mine, and will, [when I am again] in my flesh, see God").

³⁵The "Freudenschein" is a synonym for "Gnadenschein," the halo that surrounds Jesus's head and back in artistic depictions of his glory.

³⁶In four of the five surviving original vocal parts for this cantata, the text is given as "mein Arm'," thus suggesting the expression is meant as a poetically clipped version of the accusative plural "mein[e] Arm[e]" ("my arms," which makes good sense in light of the apparent allusion to Luke 2:28—see fn. 37, below), not the accusative singular "mein[en] Arm" ("my arm"). In modern printings of the libretto, this is sometimes given as "mein' Arm," which would indicate the singular; at other times as "mein' Arm'," which would indicate the plural; and other times as "mein Arm," which is ambiguous.

³⁷This line is apparently a (fuzzy) allusion to the narrative in Luke 2:28 about Simeon, an elderly devout messiah-expecting person, who is described as taking the child Jesus, God's messiah, into his arms and declaring to God that he (Simeon) can thus depart his earthly life in peace.