

Easter Oratorio BWV 249.5

[1. Sinfonia]

[2. Adagio]

3. Kommt, eilet und laufet,¹ ihr flüchtigen Füße,
Erreicht die Höhle, die Jesum bedeckt!
Lachen und Scherzen
Begleitet die Herzen,
Denn unser Heil ist auferweckt.

4. [Maria Magdalena]

O kalter Männer Sinn!

Wo ist die Liebe hin,

Die ihr dem Heiland schuldig seid?

[Maria Jacobi]

Ein schwaches Weib muss euch beschämen.

[Peter]

Ach, ein betrübtes Grämen

[Johannes]

Und banges Herzeleid

[Peter, Johannes]

[1. Sinfonia]

[2. Adagio]

3. Come, hurry and run, you fleet feet,
Reach the [burial] cave² that enshrouded³ Jesus.
Laughing and sporting
Accompanies our hearts,
For our salvation is risen [from the dead].

4. [Mary Magdalene]⁴

O cold masculine disposition!

Where has the love gone

That you [Peter and John] owe the savior?

[Mary, mother of James]

A weak woman must shame you.⁵

[Peter]

Ah, a grieved bemoaning

[John]

And affrightened heartache

[Peter, John]

¹The earliest of the liturgical versions of BWV 249, which set the text of this movement as a duet for tenor and bass, had read “Kommt, fliehet und eilet” (“Come, flee and hurry”), but at some point the word “fliehet” was scraped out and replaced with “gehet” (“go”) in both of Bach’s original performing parts. When Bach copied out a new score (BWV 249.4), retaining the setting of this text as a duet, the line was given as “Kommt, eilet und laufet” (“Come, hurry and run”), and he kept this revised reading when he later expanded the duet into a chorus for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Forms of “fliehen,” “eilen,” “laufen,” and “gehen” are distributed through the four biblical narratives of Jesus’s resurrection.

²The “Höhle” (“cave”) is the “rock-hewn tomb” of Matthew 27:60, Mark 15:46, and Luke 23:53.

³“Bedeckt” (“enshrouds,” if the apparent present tense is read literally) here is a poetically clipped form of “bedeckte” (“enshrouded”), “bedeckt hat” (“enshrouded”), or “bedeckt hatte” (“had enshrouded”). More or less based on a traditional compilation into a single account, by Johann Bugenhagen, of the four differing canonical gospel narratives of the resurrection of Jesus, the narrative logic of Bach’s *Easter Oratorio* libretto is a bit strained. In any event, “bedeckt” presumably cannot mean present-tense “enshrouds” here, not least because this enshrouding situation was depicted as in the past already in the biblical narratives: all the gospel accounts relate that the various followers of Jesus were informed that the tomb was empty before they ran to it. (The Gospel of John at this point says only that the tomb is empty, whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke right away indicate also that Jesus was risen from the dead.)

⁴The character designations are from an earlier version of the work; they are not specified in the set of performing parts for this latest version. The four vocal parts in Bach’s original materials give at their main headings both voice and biblical-character designations: “Maria Jacobi [/] Soprano,” “Maria Magdalena [/] Alto,” “Petrus [/] Tenore,” and “Johannes [/] Basso.” The character names identify who is speaking in the narrative movements, namely in the recitatives; the libretto’s aria-poetry movements, however, are meditative, and not necessarily identified with the specific biblical characters even if they are being performed by the very same singers. (This is true also, for example, of the *St. Matthew Passion*, where in Bach’s original materials the bass part of choir 1 is labelled “Jesus [/] Basso 1. Chori”—this means that the first-choir bass sings Jesus’s narrative material of the recitatives and ariosos, but it does not mean that it is “Jesus” who sings the meditative material of the choruses and arias.) Even if the character names had not been designated in the distributed printed libretto booklets, however, Bach’s intended audience would readily know that various biblical individuals were “speaking” in the dialogue portions of the narrative movements in his oratorios.

⁵This language, concerning the weakness of women compared to men, echoes 1 Peter 3:7, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “ihr Männer, wohnet bei ihnen mit Vernunft, und gebet dem Weibischen, als dem schwächsten Werkzeuge, ... Ehre” (“[I, the apostle Peter, exhort] you men [or ‘males,’ or ‘husbands’]: dwell with them [your wives] with reason [in your governance], and give honor to the female, as to the weakest instrument [among the sexes]”). The women of the story as projected in this libretto do not know Jesus has been raised, and they assume Peter and John have, like them, come to anoint Jesus’s body. To the men’s shame, the women have apparently beat them to the task. According to John 19, Jesus’s corpse had already been prepared with spices for burial, but Mark 16 and Luke 24 assume that it had not been anointed by this point in the gospel story.

Hat mit gesalzenen Tränen
Und wehmutsvollem Sehnen
Ihm eine Salbung zgedacht,
[*Maria Jacobi, Maria Magdalena*]
Die ihr, wie wir, umsonst gemacht.

5. Seele, deine Spezereien
Sollen nicht mehr Myrrhen sein.
Denn allein
Mit dem Lorbeerkranze prangen,
Stillt dein ängstliches Verlangen.

6. [*Petrus*]
Hier ist die Gruft
[*Johannes*]
Und hier der Stein,
Der solche zugedeckt.
Wo aber wird mein Heiland sein?
[*Maria Magdalena*]
Er ist vom Tode auferweckt.
Wir trafen einen Engel an,
Der hat uns solches kundgetan.
[*Petrus*]
Hier seh ich mit Vergnügen
Das Schweisstuch abgewickelt liegen.

Has, with salty tears
And doleful yearning,
Planned an anointment for him
[*Mary, mother of James; Mary Magdalene*]
That you, as we, have done in vain.⁶

5. Soul,⁷ your spices
Shall no longer be myrrh.⁸
For only
Being resplendent with the laurel wreath⁹
Stills your anxious longing.¹⁰

6. [*Peter*]
Here is the crypt
[*John*]
And here the stone
That covered this [crypt].
But where might my savior be?
[*Mary Magdalene*]
He is risen from death.
We encountered an angel,¹¹
Who announced this to us.
[*Peter*]
With pleasure¹² I see here
The sweat-cloth¹³ [of Jesus] lying unwrapped.¹⁴

⁶To accommodate the scansion, the poet has left out the helping verbs in the German text: “die ihr [habt], wie wir [haben], umsonst gemacht” (“which you [have], as we [have], done in vain”).

⁷That is, the soul of the one who receives the Easter proclamation.

⁸That is, your “spices” will no longer be associated with death, as myrrh can be biblically (e.g., Mark 15:23 and John 19:39).

⁹An indirect allusion to the sentiments of 1 Peter 5:4, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “So werdet ihr ... die unverwelkliche Krone der Ehren empfangen” (“Then [in heaven] you [followers of Jesus] will receive the never-withering crown of honor [the crown of eternal life]”). This type of “crown” is a plaited victory wreath of laurel, olive, or ivy that otherwise (i.e., in natural circumstances) would wither.

¹⁰In the earlier versions of this work, the B section reads “Denn allein / Sich mit Lorbeerkränzen schmücken, / Schicket sich vor dein Erquickten” (“For only / Adorning yourself with laurel wreaths / Suits your being [eternally] revived”).

¹¹An angel in Matthew 28 (but said by a young man in Mark 16; by two men in Luke 24; and left unsaid by two angels in John 20, because Jesus makes a resurrection appearance at that moment in the narrative of John’s gospel).

¹²According to John 20:3-10 and to Bugenhagen (see fn. 3, above), it was not Peter—as specified only in the earlier versions of this work—but the “beloved disciple” (traditionally identified as John) who drew significance from what was to be seen in the empty tomb.

¹³“Sweat-cloth” is a literal rendering of Luther’s “Schweisstuch,” which in turn is his literal translation of the Bible’s “soudarion,” a loanword in Greek, from the Latin “sudarium” (derived from “sudare” [“to sweat”]), a large cloth or small towel for wiping off perspiration (John 11:44, 20:7; Luke 19:20). “Napkin” is a traditional reading, and “shroud” is sometimes employed, but these renderings miss the biblical idea emphasized here, that Jesus not only bleeds but also sweats for his people (see fn. 14, below). The idea of drawing religious edification from the “Schweisstuch” had a long history already in the legend known then in English as “The Handkerchief of St. Veronica” and now as “The Veil of Veronica,” but known both then and now in German as “Das Schweisstuch der heiligen Veronika” (literally, “The Sweat-Cloth of St. Veronica”). Some modern performances of Bach’s *Easter Oratorio* have significantly modified the (German) texts in movements 6 and 7 to avoid all mention of the (for them, aesthetically and otherwise embarrassing) “Schweisstuch.”

¹⁴In Luther’s rendering of John 20:7, the “Schweisstuch” (see fn. 13, above) is described as “eingewickelt” (“wrapped together,” i.e., rolled up), not—as in Bach’s *Easter Oratorio*—“abgewickelt” (“unwrapped,” i.e., unwound), in a place separate from the “die Leinen” (Greek: “othonia” [“linen wrappings,” or “shroud”]). Bach’s librettist is saying, in any event, that it is a pleasure to see that

7. Sanfte soll mein Todeskummer,
Nur ein Schlummer,
Jesu, durch dein Schweisstuch sein.
Ja, das wird mich dort erfrischen
Und die Zähren meiner Pein
Von den Wangen tröstlich wischen.

8. [*Maria Jacobi, Maria Magdalena*]
Indessen seufzen wir
Mit brennender Begier:
Ach, könnt es doch nur bald geschehen,
Den Heiland selbst zu sehen.

9. Saget, saget mir geschwinde,
Saget, wo ich Jesum finde,
Welchen meine Seele liebt!
Komm doch, komm, umfasse mich;
Denn mein Herz ist ohne dich
Ganz verwaist und betrübt.

7. Gentle shall be my contemplation of death,¹⁵
Just a slumber,
Jesus, by means of your sweat-cloth.
Yes, it will refresh me there [in heaven]¹⁶
And comfortingly wipe
The tears of my pain from my cheeks.

8. [*Mary, mother of James; Mary Magdalene*]
Meanwhile we sigh
With burning desire;
Ah, if only it could indeed happen soon,
To see the [risen] savior himself.

9. Tell, [you redeemed tongues,]¹⁷ tell at once,
Tell me where I may find Jesus,
Whom my soul loves.
Come indeed, [Jesus,]¹⁸ come, embrace me;
For without you my heart
Is entirely orphaned¹⁹ and grieved.

there is a cloth of any sort “lying unwrapped.” Jesus is apparently risen and has left the tomb, his “Schweisstuch” having been found in a place by itself. This was considered theologically important, because it touched on the question of why Jesus’s tomb was empty. Attributing the empty tomb to the simpler likelihood that his dead body had been stolen could be dismissed, for surely robbers would not have gone to the trouble of stripping it first and putting the “Schweisstuch” in a separate place. The reference to the Schweisstuch at all is designed to elicit the joy of Jesus’s resurrection, but the poet also reminds listeners of the cause for the sweat of Jesus’s labors. It points to Jesus’s entire Passion, in the 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., 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 no. 67, “die Müh ist aus, die unsre Sünden ihm gemacht” (“the trouble is over that our sins have caused him”). Regarding Jesus’s sweat, consider also Luke 22:44, which depicts Jesus in agony at the Mount of Olives: “Und es kam, dass er mit dem Tode rang, und betete heftiger; es war aber sein Schweiß wie Blutstropfen, die fielen auf die Erde” (“And it came [to pass] that wrestling with [the figure of] death, he [Jesus] prayed more intensely; but his sweat was like drops of blood, trickling to the ground”).

¹⁵“Todeskummer” here is apparently a synonym for “Todesbetrachtung” (“contemplation of death”; often given in Latin, “meditatio mortis”). The logic in lines 1–3 of this movement is that a believer’s naturally expected fear of death is softened by the spiritually expected comfort of Jesus.

¹⁶The poem’s wiping away of tears is a reference to Revelation 21:1-4, which says “ich sah einen neuen Himmel und eine neue Erde ... und Gott wird abwischen alle Tränen von ihren Augen, und der Tod wird nicht mehr sein, noch Leid noch Geschrei noch Schmerzen wird mehr sein” (“I [John] saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and God will wipe away all tears from their [his people’s] eyes, and death will not be anymore, nor will suffering nor crying nor agonies be anymore”).

¹⁷“Saget” is a second-person-*plural* command. In the A section of this movement, the people the singer is commanding to “tell me where I may find Jesus” (“*saget mir, wo ich Jesum finde*”) are presumably the same as the “redeemed tongues” of line 5 in movement 11. But a second-person-*singular* version of the command, namely “*sage mir, wo*” (“tell me where”), appears within the gospel’s narrative: in John 20:15, Mary Magdalene, standing just outside Jesus’s tomb after Peter and John have left, says to a man she thinks is the burial site’s gardener but who is actually the risen Jesus, “hast du ihn weggetragen, so *sage mir, wo* hast du ihn hingelegt” (“if you have carried him [Jesus] away, then *tell me where* you have laid him”). Bach’s librettist might simply have garbled the gospel’s narrative in the “*sage[t] mir, wo*” allusion, thinking erroneously that Mary had commanded the “zwei Engel in weissen Kleidern sitzen” (“two angels in white clothing sitting [in Jesus’s empty tomb]”) of John 20:12 to tell her where to find Jesus. A notion that the plural “you” being commanded in Bach’s work is Peter, John, and Mary the mother of James, or any two among these three, would make no narrative sense because they are quoted in the text as saying they do not know what Mary Magdalene asks.

¹⁸In the B section of this movement, the person the singer is commanding, in second-person-singular, to “embrace me” is the risen Jesus. In the gospel’s narrative (at John 20:16-17), Mary sees that the man she had thought was the gardener is actually Jesus, and he says to her “rühre mich nicht an! (“do not touch me” [i.e., do not hold/embrace me]).

¹⁹This language is derived from John 14:18, where Jesus says to his disciples “Ich will euch nicht Waisen lassen; ich komme zu euch” (“I will not leave you [as] orphans; I [will] come [back] to you”).

10. [*Johannes*]
Wir sind erfreut,
Dass unser Jesus wieder lebt,
Und unser Herz,
So erst in Traurigkeit zerflossen und geschwebt
Vergisst den Schmerz
Und sinnt auf Freudenlieder;
Denn unser Heiland lebet wieder.

11. Preis und Dank
Bleibe, Herr, dein Lobgesang.
Höll und Teufel sind bezwungen,
Ihre Pforten sind zerstört.
Jauchzet, ihr erlösten Zungen,
Dass man es im Himmel hört.
Eröffnet, ihr Himmel, die prächtigen Bogen,
Der Löwe von Juda kommt siegend gezogen.

10. [*John*]
We are glad
That our Jesus lives again,
And our heart,
Once melted into and suspended in sorrow,²⁰
Forgets the agony
And thinks upon songs of joy;
For our savior lives again.

11. May laud and thanksgiving
Remain, Lord, your song of praise.²¹
Hell and devil are vanquished;
Their gates are destroyed.
Raise a shout, you redeemed tongues,²²
So that it can be heard in heaven.
You heavens, open your magnificent archways;²³
The Lion of Judah, [Jesus,]²⁴ comes drawn-in,²⁵ [to
heaven,] victorious.²⁶

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV249.5> for an annotated translation

²⁰There is an awkward double metaphor here. The heart is both melted (i.e., softened—*zerflossen*) such that it can weep, and simultaneously halted (i.e., suspended—*geschwebt*) such that it is unable to move forward.

²¹“Dank und Preis” (“thanksgiving and praise/laud”) is the heavenly song of the angels in Revelation 7:12.

²²This line derives its language from the earthly song of God’s people in Isaiah 35:10, “die Erlösten des HERRN werden wiederkommen und gen Zion kommen mit Jauchzen” (“The redeemed of the LORD will return and come to Zion with [songs of] shouting”).

²³“Himmelsbogen” referred to the earthly sky’s curvature, conceived as the archway to God’s heaven.

²⁴The “Lion of Judah” is a messianic title, understood to refer to Jesus in Revelation 5:5, “Siehe, es hat überwunden der Löwe, der da ist vom Geschlecht Juda, die Wurzel Davids” (“Look, [Jesus] the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered [death]”).

²⁵“Gezogen” here is apparently a poetically clipped version of “eingezogen” (“drawn-in”). The sense of this line is probably derived from Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Psalm 24:7, “Machet die Tore weit und die Türen in der Welt hoch, dass der König der Ehren einziehe” (“Make the gates [in the kingdom of heaven] wide open and make the doors in the [kingdom of the] world opened up, that the king of honor [God’s messiah, Jesus] may draw in”).

²⁶The adjective “siegend” is an older German synonym for “siegreich” (“victorious”). The sense of the line is “Jesus enters heaven as victor [over death],” not “Jesus enters heaven in a victorious manner.”