

**Message of
His Excellency Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay
to the Faithful
on the occasion of Easter 2017**

We are Witnesses to His Resurrection (Acts 2:32)

Beloved Children of our Maronite Eparchy,

1. "He is Risen... and we are witnesses to that" (Acts 2:32; 10:38-40). The Easter journey is a journey from the darkness of the tomb to the light of the Resurrection; a journey from the suffering of the Cross and the sorrow of death to the joy and glory of victory over pain and bereavement. The purpose of this journey is the attainment of eternal life. This great hope flowing from the historic event of Easter, is a witness to the death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This hope has endured through the centuries and reaches us today, for each one of us was in the mind and heart of Christ on the day of his crucifixion and also on the day of his Resurrection. As such, every person is invited to believe in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and to proclaim the Paschal mystery, which is the passage of man, through the grace of Jesus, from death to life.
2. The Resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead is a truth, as bright as the sun. In the Gospels, we find the witnesses to this truth. Their testimonies complement one another and they are beyond any reasonable doubt. The first witness to his death and Resurrection is Jesus himself, who prophesied this several times. The Evangelist Matthew records Jesus speaking about his death and Resurrection on six different occasions. (12:38, 16:21 , 17:9, 17:22-23, 20:19, 26: 31-32)
3. Before I come to the witnesses of Christ's Resurrection, let us consider the testimonies to his death:
 - a. The first testimony of Jesus' death on the Cross was by the centurion who was responsible for the crucifixion (Matthew 27:45-65; Mark 15:33-41, 45).
 - b. The second testimony records that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph asked for the body of Jesus to be taken down from the Cross. He wrapped it in linen and had it placed in a new tomb. A large rock was rolled before the door of the tomb. It was

sealed by orders of King Herod and watched over by guards. (Matthew 27:57; Mark 15:46; John 19:39-40; Luke 23:50-56)

4. The testimonies in the Bible to the Resurrection of Christ from the dead are many:

- a. First, the narrative of the empty tomb and the angel's statement to the women, saying: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" The angel also told them to proclaim the good news to the apostles. (Matthew 28:6; Luke 24:6)
- b. The second testimony to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is from the disciples Peter and John, who after hearing the news, came quickly to the place where Jesus was buried. They found the empty tomb, and the linen strips and handkerchief on the ground and believed that He had truly risen (John 20: 3-8).
- c. The third witness came from the guards at the tomb who felt the earthquake. They witnessed the stone roll from the door of the grave and were surprised to see the angel of the Lord sitting on it. His face was like the lightning, and his garments white as snow. The guards went into the city and reported to the elders and chief priests everything that had happened. But the chief priests devised a plan and gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them to say that Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole him away while they were asleep. (Matthew 28: 2-4,11-15). This raises the question, how could the guards see the apostles steal the body of Jesus if they were asleep?
- d. The final proof of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus is his several apparitions after the Resurrection: first to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), then to Peter (Luke 24:34) and then to the disciples of Emmaus with whom He walked and to whom he revealed Himself with the breaking of the bread (Luke 24: 13-35). All these appearances to the apostles were to strengthen their faith. However, the appearance of Jesus to Thomas, who was not with the apostles on the previous occasions, with its clear and tangible proofs, is the most beautiful and strongest testimony of his Resurrection. Today, we renew our faith in the death and Resurrection of Christ, despite the many attempts to discount and

distort this truth in today's world, and we utter a cry of faith with the Apostle Thomas saying: "My Lord and my God!"

Dearly Beloved,

5. Christian life is built on faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and on constant witness to his Resurrection from the dead. This is the truth that our Maronite Church has lived and experienced generation after generation, and in defence of which it gave the blood of its martyrs. We are today called to renew our faith in this truth. With this belief, our Patriarch, His Beatitude and Eminence Mar Bechara Boutros Cardinal Rai, along with the Maronite Synod of Bishops, declared a year for martyrdom and the witness of the martyrs, starting on the Feast of Saint Maroun on 9 February 2017 and concluding on the Feast of St. John Maroun on 2 March 2018. This also marks the passing of 1500 years from the martyrdom of the 350 monks of the Monastery of Saint Maroun in the year 517.
6. In order to be witnesses to the Resurrection of the Lord in today's society, we must be spiritually renewed by practicing the sacrament of reconciliation, participating in the Holy Mass, and receiving the body and blood of Jesus every Sunday, and even every day if we can. This is the best way to renew and strengthen our faith in Jesus, risen from the dead. We live this faith in our church through the intercession of the Saints. If our Church is to bear a better and broader Christian witness in Australia, we need to meet and put together spiritual and pastoral plans. We need to discuss the social problems and challenges that face us, especially the challenge of passing on the faith, the faith of our forefathers, to new generations.
7. With the aim of improving our Christian witness and strengthening the family and defending marriage, we launched, three years ago, plans to hold a Diocesan Assembly for our Maronite Eparchy in Australia. The good news today is that the Assembly will hold its first general meeting from the 24th to the 26th of November 2017 in Sydney, with the participation of parish and ecclesial representatives and Maronite organisations from all over the country.
8. Finally, with St Augustine we repeat: "It's no great thing to believe that Christ died; even pagans and Jews and wicked people believe that. They all believe that he died. The faith of Christians is Christ's resurrection.

This is the great thing: we believe that he rose from the dead." As such, we understand that it is not possible to be true Christians unless we believe in the Resurrection of Christ. Jesus risen from the tomb and victorious over evil, sin and death, is ever present in the heart of the world, present through his Holy Spirit, through His living word, and in His body and blood in the Eucharist. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we then call to mind the truth of his suffering, death and Resurrection and his constant living presence with us. He is closer to us than ourselves because Jesus is the same: yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). We live in hope of the revelation of his Glory in the second coming.

9. On this Holy Day, we all turn to Jesus and cry out with one voice and in one faith: "Come, O Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). Come and seal our hearts with the seal of your glorious Resurrection. Strengthen our faith that we may witness to you and boldly declare the truth of your Resurrection saying:

"Christ is Risen, Truly Risen... and we are witnesses to that."

+ Antoine-Charbel Tarabay
Maronite Bishop of Australia
Easter Sunday, 16 April 2017