CHRIST JESUS LAY IN DEATH'S STRONG BANDS
(Christ lag in Todesbanden)

This is an old hymn! Based on a Latin worship song (Victimae Paschali laudes), it was first sung at Erfurt in 1524, more than 450 years ago. Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote the German text himself. The English words come to us from Richard Massie (1800-1887), the first of twenty-two children born to the wife of the rector (minister) of St. Bride's Church in London.

This is a tough hymn--theologically! In a nutshell, it is the story of Jesus' struggle with the enemy powers of darkness and his defeat of the greatest enemy of all, DEATH. Because death is conquered in Christ's Resurrection, the Easter Eucharist, Lord's Supper, or Mass is an occasion of joy, as are any of our ordinary or festival worship services.

This is also a tough hymn--musically! Although the melody may sound a wee bit odd to us, it has such a serious joyfulness that it is worth the extra effort it takes to learn it. The hymn tune is based on a plainsong melody, which means it should be sung in unison. Notice that Lines 1 and 2 are the same. The real challenge to our ears and voices comes in Lines 3 and 4 where there are some tricky descending "intervals" or skips:

The most fun comes in the final "Alleluia." (Hooray, we made it!) It includes the only 8th notes in the whole tune.

You may have noticed that the hymn printed here has nothing to do with Johann Sebastian Bach. Don't worry, he made good use of this chorale too. He based all seven parts of his Cantata No. 4 for Easter on this tune, and also used it in Cantata No. 158 and two organ pieces. Here is a line from his harmonization: