

Holy Week and Easter 2024 Messages From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

Palm Sunday – March 24 – “Who Is This? On A Donkey!”

*Maundy Thursday – March 28 – “The Bloodbath Of God
MT 24”*

Good Friday – March 29 – “The Hands Of Christ”

Easter Sunday – March – “Listen! What Do You Hear?”

Second Sunday of Easter – April 7 – Not Available

*Third Sunday of Easter – April 14 – “Can An Empty Tomb
Bring Peace?”*

Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 21 – “I Have Other Sheep”

*Fifth Sunday of Easter – April 28 – “Not Just A Number
To The Lord”*

*Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 5 – “What A Friend We
Have In Jesus”*

*Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 12 – “The Gospel
For Underdogs”*

“WHO IS THIS? ON A DONKEY!”

Message for *Palm Sunday*
From Pastor Norman Staker
March 24, 2024

MARK 11: 1-11 – PHILIPPIANS 2: 5-11 – MARK 15: 1-39 (40-47)

**GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND
FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.
HE IS RISEN!!**



Palm Sunday, also called the Sunday of the Passion if you noticed that on the bulletin inserts.

As you have maybe noticed in our readings for today, the events of that week in Jerusalem take a strange, unexpected turn. Who in that crowd on that first Palm Sunday would imagine that just 5 days later, the crowds that were crying out “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” who welcomed Jesus into their city with palm branches and

laid out their coats on the road, would turn into a vicious, bloodthirsty mob. The shouts by Friday would turn to “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” As far as the claims of his being a king, they claim “We have no king but Caesar!” Indeed, quite a change from the beginning of the week!

We've marked both events today during our service. We started our service by hearing the Gospel account of that first Palm Sunday. We saw the palm branches being waved; we even began our service by waving our own palm branches; we heard the cries of "Hosanna"; we joined in the joyful song of those people in that Palm Sunday crowd. But then, our service took a dramatic turn, as we turned our attention to the Passion gospel, which you heard read from Mark's account this year. Instead of joyful hymns of "Hosanna", we sing words set to more somber tones, verses of hymns like "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross". The two themes sure seem like complete opposites, don't they? Can they possibly be about the same guy?

In addition to today being Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, it also marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week of the church year where we focus on Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. Through the scripture readings and sermons you'll hear this week, you'll be transported back to Jerusalem, 2000 years ago, and you'll be going various places. We already started by being a part of that Palm Sunday crowd, shouting our praises to our King, riding triumphantly into King David's city! As the week progresses, we'll go with Jesus to the upper room, see Him institute the sacrament of Holy Communion, pray in the Garden, be betrayed by one of his disciples, arrested, tried, beaten, and crucified. We'll see a lot of evil, and I mean a lot, going on in these events. People at their worst moments. We'll be called to ponder all of this, and ask, so, what's this week all about?

As you go through Holy Week this year, I'm going to encourage you to see yourself in each of the places we'll visit. As you do, you'll realize that at times, we're all a part of that fickle crowd in Jerusalem. We'll find at times, we're ready to praise Jesus so loud, no one can keep us quiet. We'll also find that because of our sin, we also abandon Jesus. We don't always speak up for

our faith when we should. We don't always acknowledge that we're children of God by the things we say, do, or think. We'll find a bit of Judas in us, I know that hurts doesn't it, we're willing to betray our Lord for whatever type of silver sin sets in front of us, and we'll find it's our sin that condemns him to be nailed to the cross. We're going to find that in reality, while it's so easy for us to be angry with those who treated our Savior so badly that week in Jerusalem, that if we were there, we wouldn't be any better.

But, we also know that the ugly sights, horrific sounds, the undeniable pain that our Savior suffers, is not for Himself, but it's for us and for our sins. When we look at the cross on Good Friday, and the road that leads us there, we'll see that Jesus walked that road for you and for me. He did it so that we can be sinless, spotless before our God. We'll see that there's no more beautiful, no more important week in our lives, than this week, Holy Week. It's a journey that I look forward to taking each year, and I pray you'll join me in taking that journey with me.

I always loved this cute little joke and I know I've told it before but a little boy was sick on Palm Sunday (this joke has been told using a little girl, a grandchild, a niece, or nephew) but the little boy stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, "Why do you have that palm branch, dad?" "You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him, so we got palm branches today." The little boy replied, "Aw shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!"

What is Palm Sunday all about anyway? What was Jesus' agenda in this event?

Today, I would like to share with you a couple of ideas of what I believe is what this day is all about.

First of all, it was to bring attention to His purpose, not to Himself, but to His purpose, His destiny and ours. In the 17th chapter of John, Jesus declares what He wants to draw attention to: the glory of the Father and the hope of eternal life. Yes, Jesus could have easily drawn the wrong kind of attention – fame, political power, etc. but rather, He chose to draw attention to His true purpose and passion which was and is the redemption of mankind.

Then, the real question: do you understand who Jesus is and does He have your attention?

Secondly, to bring comprehension or understanding to His purpose. The people gathered there that day unwittingly declared what Jesus' purpose was: "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven."

Lastly, it was to bring devotion to His purpose. Some followed Him and others became followers; some followed Jesus because of who they thought He was, others followed Him because of what they knew He was.

We know that everything Jesus did ultimately led to the cross which is more than a passing fad; it is our hope for eternal life.

At the cross we are faced with another decision: are we going to be devoted to Him or simply cheer for Him for the time being until something else or someone else comes along? Is there supposed to be something else or someone else to come along since Jesus is not here in the flesh like he was those 2000 years ago?

On this Palm Sunday, I am disappointed that all of us Lutherans are not worshipping together. The thing is, it does not matter to Jesus. He wants His story told. These great events, the Triumphal Entry of Jesus on Palm Sunday, the Holy Supper on Thursday, the Friday Crucifixion, the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, must be told. Those who were gathering on the streets of Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday were asking: "Who is this?" They wanted to know. There are still those who want to know. We exist to tell His story.

The arrival of Jesus on Palm Sunday was about to change the normal understanding of life and death. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the stench of being dead for 4 days. Soon, very soon, His/Jesus' resurrected body would change normal thoughts about life after death on planet Earth.

There was nothing normal about the "parade" in Jerusalem, when Jesus entered the city on a donkey. The visitors to Jerusalem had just witnessed a Roman military parade. Pontius Pilate had also recently entered Jerusalem from his home in Caesarea. His procession was in the Roman style—complete with a display of Rome's military might. Pilate was perched atop a majestic stallion. He had all the trappings of Roman wealth and prestige. His Roman officers were in polished armor displaying the banners of captured, vanquished armies.

His parade was a proclamation of Rome's superiority. And it came with an undeniable message directed to the pilgrims who had gathered in the city from near and far for the Passover festivities: "Keep the peace, or we will control you by force!"

The Palm Sunday parade with Jesus on a donkey was different, so people were asking: "Who is this?"

Nothing would have seemed more unlikely, a Jewish king riding on a donkey. He didn't look like a king. No crown. No army

marching behind. No banners flying in the wind. It's not hard to imagine the Romans laughing as they watched the spectacle. A pauper king, riding on a borrowed donkey, his saddle a makeshift layer of cloaks, attended by an unruly mob whose only weapons were palm branches.

This little donkey was part of the great plan of redemption that God had for all of Creation. Jesus knew how this parade would end. He knew the same people who were shouting praises to God would, five days later be screaming "Crucify Him!". He knew that Jerusalem was where his most antagonistic enemies had the most power. He knew they wanted to kill Him. He knew this was God's plan to fulfill the promise of God to Adam and Eve. His death would secure the forgiveness of sins. The fear of human death will be destroyed when Jesus rises from death and the grave. To the Romans, He didn't look much like a king that day riding on a donkey, "nothing to worry about," they said to each other. This parade, on the cobble stone payment of Jerusalem, did not impress Rome.

Most of us know the general outline of the story. But I suspect that some have never considered the story in any detail. Why did Jesus send two of his disciples into the village to secure a donkey? He has walked into Jerusalem hundreds of times before. He has healed people in Jerusalem before. Why ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey? Why did the people wave palm branches, this time? Why did they cry out "Hosanna!" as he passed by? What does it all mean?

Matthew tells us why; Jesus was fulfilling an ancient prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, words written almost 600 years earlier—predicted that when the Messiah came to Israel, he would come riding on a donkey.

He's a king, but he's not like any earthly king. The Palm Sunday parade was an "acted out parable," in which Jesus was sending

a clear message to the nation. "This is who I am! I am your King, but I am not the King you were expecting!" I am not a king who will throw out the Romans. I am the King who will defeat Satan. My cross and empty tomb will strip Satan of His false power.

On that first Palm Sunday, the day began much like all other day. An early sunrise. The sound of merchants opening their little shops. The aroma of freshly baked bread floating on the air. Bethany wasn't a large town, or even a town at all. More like a village, really, a simple cluster of homes. Here and there the farmers made ready to go to the fields—planting season was upon them. Mothers busied themselves getting their children up and dressed.

Jesus enters the ancient city. The crowds went wild with their cheering. "Hosanna to the Son of David". People grabbed anything they could get their hands on. They tore palm branches from trees. They took the clothes off their backs to throw them in his path. It was a red carpet 4th of July parade all wrapped up into one for the Messiah, the King of the Universe.

It was Passover week. The city was packed with Jews from all over the world who had come to remember God's action in their history. The inns were full. They were sacrificing lambs, remembering the blood on the door posts in their Egyptian homes that saved lives when the angel of death passed over. Soon, very soon, the blood of the Lamb of God staining a wooden cross beam, would save people from their broken commandments.

God's holy and righteous character demands punishment for the sinner. We know it. We feel it in our soul. Human beings are seeking peace with their Creator. As we remember, from the message two weeks ago, Nicodemus thought "his genetics, his

Jewish blood heritage, his keeping of Jewish laws” would allow him to wear a white hat. Jesus said, “no”. In the past God had always accepted the offering of a lamb, a bull, or a goat, because the blood made atonement for sins. But now He has arrived in Jerusalem in the midst of his people, in the person of His son, Jesus. John 3:17: ‘For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world but that the world thru Him might be saved.’

Jesus was the substitute, the perfect Lamb of God whose final steps to the cross would free us from slavery to sin and the fear of eternal death.

You and I know that we are going to die someday. We do not know the day or the hour, but Jesus did. He knew that His “holy” week would end not on a Roman cross but at an empty grave, and a resurrected body. Jesus knew even at the age of twelve He was about His Father’s business. Just a few Sunday’s ago we read about a conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus. Jesus reminded Nicodemus that Moses made a metal snake and put it on a pole so that all who looked at it might be saved from the bite of poisonous snakes. So, on this Palm Sunday, Jesus knew how and why His parade would end at a cross.

On this Palm Sunday we too need to look past our weekly journals of recorded life events lived. The promise of Jesus: “In my Father’s house are many mansions and I will come back and bring you to where I am.” That is a promise that changes normal ideas of death and dying. We who lift our eyes to the cross on which Jesus was crucified, will be saved from the poisonous broken commandments that alienate us from the harmony and peace with our Creator.

Palm Sunday and the events of “Holy Week” proclaim a promise of forgiveness that God made to Adam and Eve.

God, the Creator of the Universe, was pleased to have all his full deity dwell in Jesus, in order to bring humanity back into harmony and peace by His blood shed on the cross.” Promise fulfilled. Sins forgiven. Satan and death defeated.

So, while there’s a lot going on this week, I’d encourage each of you to walk the road to the cross with Jesus and while doing so, to think about what He’s done for you. Read the various Passion accounts in the Gospels. Come to His house for all the special services this week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, to take part with your fellow travelers on this journey to the cross, as we consider the events that took place. May this Holy Week be more than just another week for you; may it be a week where you journey with your Savior, and through the Word and Sacrament, understand that all of this, all of this, everything that happened this week, was done for you, for the forgiveness of all of your sins, no matter who you are, where you come from, what color your skin, no matter what you’ve done. Jesus endured all of this for you!

AMEN!!



“THE BLOODBATH OF GOD-MT 24”

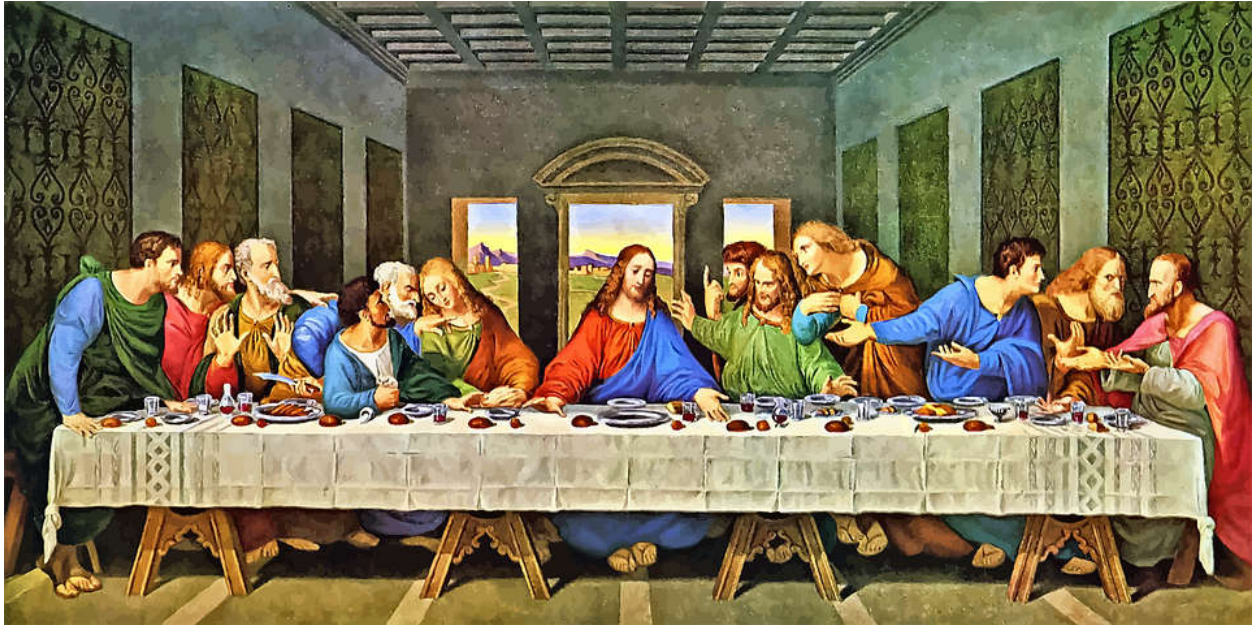
Message for *Maundy Thursday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 28, 2024

EXODUS 12:1-4(5-10)11-14 – 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. THIS IS MY BODY; THIS IS MY BLOOD. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED.

The story is told about a famous preacher long ago who pastored a church that was filled every Sunday by people who traveled miles on foot just to hear his messages. One day, as the church was emptying, a passerby asked one of the people in the church why this preacher's messages were so compelling. The person responded without hesitation, "This preacher will take you up to the mountain and down to the valley; he will bring

you to laughter and to tears; he will have you jumping with joy and then falling to your knees, but, by the time he is finished, he will always have you at the foot of the cross!”

This week is such a week, where the mixture of emotions goes from the exuberance of Palm Sunday and the crowds that followed shouting ‘Hosanna, Hosanna’ through the streets of Jerusalem--- to the intimacy of the Last Supper on Thursday and the anger of the announcement that one of his closest friends would betray to the desperate prayers in Gethsemane’s garden late Thursday night -----for now, this is the final week of Jesus’ life on this earth and we want to experience the full range of emotions and circumstances yet, ultimately, we yearn to find ourselves at the foot of the cross on Friday...to witness the sacrifice of a Savior for the sins of the whole world including your sins and mine.

And the week we call ‘Holy Week’ began this past Sunday with “Palm Sunday.”

That one event is detailed in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If four of us in this room were all sent to the same parade and then were asked twenty or thirty years later to write down our recollections of that event, we would certainly focus on different aspects of our experience based on what we saw and to whom we were offering our thoughts. Such is the nature of the four gospels, or, the four versions of the life and ministry of Jesus. In each one we have a unique perspective yet, as we read all four, we get the whole picture, or at least all we need to know from God’s Holy Word.

Now, tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, we in the community of faith around the world gather at a table of remembrance and thanksgiving. We gather around the symbols of our faith to speak words of blessing and then to break bread and to drink from a common cup. This is a table of radical welcome, a table where no differences of tradition or education or wealth or

social level or gender or age or power or marital status or culture or ethnic background or length of time in the faith or anything else should separate us. This is a table from which no one, no one, is excluded. Let me say that again: this is a table from which no one, no one at all, is excluded.

Do you believe that; do we believe that? Do we, the present day disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, who ate with sinners, who touched lepers, who spoke with the outcasts, who talked not just to women but with women, do we believe that? Do we entrust this table, this bread, this wine to God with our whole hearts, without judgment of the souls who come to eat here? Or have we encircled this table with moats of self-righteousness, with fences of pious regulations, and the barbed wire of doctrinal tests? Have we demanded that people be clean and presentable, married, single or widowed, but never divorced? Have we insisted on Baptism, in spite of the fact that none of the original disciples, none of the original 12, was a baptized Christian? Have we laid down rules about bread made with wheat and fermented grape liquid, regardless of whether such bread or wine is available to the people who are gathering or can be eaten and drunk by the people present? "Do this in remembrance of me."

This is a table of radical welcome because Jesus was a radical host.

Have you ever considered The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Holy Eucharist, to be the bloodbath of God and I am not getting the events of Good Friday mixed in with this!. Think about it; we have the sure and true Word from the Son of God: "Take and drink; this is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." The only thing that we could add if we could add to the Lord's words, and we're not supposed to, would be 'This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of "your" sins!

That word, "bloodbath" is not a word that brings pleasant images to mind. If you were to pull some books off the library shelf, you'd find descriptions like these for the word "bloodbath:"

yes, it was a bloodbath or it was an annihilation of all the inhabitants or even it was cruel and not at all holy.

"Bloodbath" is not a pleasant word but the prophet Isaiah talks about a different kind of bloodbath; Isaiah tells of a good bloodbath, God's bloodbath for us and for our salvation. Isaiah foretells of Jesus who "will sprinkle many nations" with His blood. That will be Good Friday. Billy Graham was once told that if he wanted to be a good preacher, he needed to quit preaching about the blood of Christ. He told his critic that that was the only way he could preach about Christ was to talk about the blood of Christ. Folks, are any of you offended by the use of the blood in my messages?

Sin is such an offense and an affront to a holy and righteous God that blood must be spilled for sins to be forgiven. Someone or something sinless or spotless must die for you to be forgiven. God mandates that blood be shed, a bathing of blood to wash away your sins. The writer to the Hebrews tells it like it is: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness."

Sometimes, the animals sacrificed were in the thousands. When Solomon dedicated the Temple, the blood flowed from tens of thousands of sheep, goats, and cattle. During the Old Testament Passover ceremony, the priests would form bucket brigades at the Temple, pouring out the blood from the thousands of sacrificed lambs. Young boys would often line up at the Kidron Brook to be the first to see the water turn pink from the outpouring of blood from the Temple mount.

These bloodbaths were part of God's old covenant with His people Israel. God worked through these sacrifices, through which He promised to be present, granting forgiveness at His temple. The Old Testament people of Israel lived and breathed in these blood-spilled events, events that anticipated and pointed forward to Christ's spilling of blood for us.

When God set up His first covenant with Israel, He told Moses to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed animals on the people. The blood was called "the blood of the covenant." When the priest sprinkled the blood on the Israelites of old, they entered the covenant with God. They were heirs of God's covenant promises of forgiveness, blessing, and eternal life. As the blood was sprinkled on them, God graced His believers with forgiveness, the forgiveness of Jesus' sacrifice that would even work its way backward through time to save the Old Testament believers. Isaiah spoke of this, about what Jesus would do in the new covenant, that He would "sprinkle many nations."

In some Old Testament sacrifices, God commanded the priests to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed animal on the altar before God. This was one way for the priest to offer the life of the animal, which died in place of the sinful people. At other times, the blood was sprinkled on the people.

The people would also gather and watch as the priest laid his hands on the head of the animal that was to be sacrificed. This transferred the sins of the people to the animal, which was placed on the altar and killed. The people would watch as the blood flowed from the animal, dying because of the people's sins.

This act proclaimed God's law. For the wages of sin is death. The people's sin, transferred to the animal, mandated the life of the animal to be poured out with its blood. But this act also

proclaimed God's Gospel, for it was the life-blood of the substitute that was poured out for the sins of the people.

Jesus is the eternal Son of God. That's why the sprinkling of blood that He offers is infinitely more valuable than the slaughter of animals. His shed blood pays for the sin of the entire world. His sacrifice was of infinite and universal value. Because of that, Christ only needed to die once, for all time and for all people.

Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice did what the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament could not do--full pardon and peace for every man, woman, and child. Again, Hebrews says, "We have boldness to enter the holy place through the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh."

So here's the big question! How do we get this forgiveness that Jesus won for us on the cross? This is where the sprinkling comes in. In the Old Testament "the blood of the covenant" was sprinkled on the people, literally and physically. The leaders of the people then ate and drank in God's presence and communed with Him. Tonight, we remember the new covenant that Jesus set up to supersede and replace the old covenant, the old covenant that required that animals be killed and sacrificed to forgive sins. Tonight, we remember the new covenant that Jesus set up also to forgive sins. And what is this new covenant?

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." Again, after supper, he took the cup and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness

of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

In our Lord’s meal, we receive what Jesus says we receive. He calls the bread His body; He calls the wine His blood. These are His words. In His meal, His supper, we receive what Jesus says we receive: His body and His blood.

His body and His blood; He gave and shed on the cross to forgive us of our sins. In the Old Testament, believers received forgiveness in the old covenant when the blood was sprinkled on them. Today, we also receive God’s forgiveness, but it’s in the new covenant when we eat and drink Christ’s body and blood.

To put it another way, we could say that in the new covenant, the Lord’s Supper, that God washes our robes white in the blood of the Lamb. We could also say that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. We could say that Jesus has freed us from our sins by His blood. And we could say that we have peace with God by the blood of His cross.

Wow, Jesus’ blood is powerful! And Jesus says He gives you His blood in His Supper! And so His Supper is powerful--because in it you receive Jesus’ own blood. What a wondrous gift this new covenant is. No longer do we have to sacrifice animals pointing forward to Jesus’ sacrifice. No, in the new covenant, Jesus gives you His actual body and blood that He shed for you on the cross. And so we no longer sacrifice animals. Instead, we receive Jesus’ body and blood, given and shed for us on the cross. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us, “without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.”

The amazing thing is that he gives this meal in the night in which he was betrayed. He doesn’t give it to the deserving. He doesn’t give it to those who reciprocate his love. No, in spite of

our inadequacy, in spite of our hostility toward him and each other, in spite of our inability to comprehend who he is or exactly how he comes to us in this meal, he gives! "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin."

Holy Communion is real. It is Jesus' action to serve and save us. We do not trust our subjective sensations of sight and touch to believe this. We have an even more-sure Word from the Son of God: "This is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Yes, here, God gives us a most precious and holy bloodbath. For where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

So draw near and take the body of the Lord, and drink the holy blood for you out-poured; He offered both for all people, the greatest and the least; He was Himself the victim and Himself the priest. Come forward then with faithful hearts sincere, and take the safeguard of salvation here: Christ's own body and blood, offered into death, given and shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

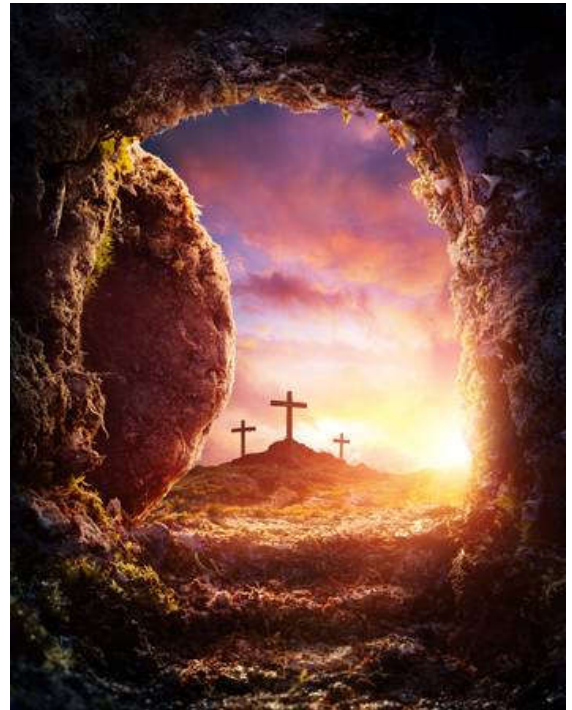
Amen.

“THE HANDS OF CHRIST”

Message for Good Friday
From Pastor Norman Staker
March 29, 2024

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12 – HEBREWS 10:16-25 – JOHN 18:1-19:42

**GRACE. MERCY, AND PEACE FROM
GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR
LORD AND SAVIOR THE CRUCIFIED
JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.
HE IS RISEN!!**



In some prisons in America there is an area known as Death Row. It's where those who have been sentenced to die go to wait for the time of their execution. Every day on Death Row is a day closer to death. So for a prisoner, after five or ten years, even 15 or 20 years, there might be only 30 days left, then only

20, then 5 days and suddenly it's down to 24 hours and those hours tick away. The convicted felon wonders, "Will this be my last meal? Will I be granted a reprieve?" Until the hour comes, and it's time to go.

We know or have read or heard that crucifixion is the cruelest form of execution created by man. Death is not always quick; the convicted slowly suffocates as his muscles give out and his body collapses while still being hung on those nails.

I did a little bit of research on Death Row and please understand, this is not a plea or argument in favor of or against

the death penalty. Not in the least. A man from Japan holds the record for being on death row the longest; Hakamada Iwao is still on death row after some 45 years. It's all about the appeals process; that's what keeps so many convicted criminals alive even though they are on death row. The shortest term was just 252 days, a little over 8 months. I looked into some characteristics of death-row prisoners. Men make up 98% of those on death row; Jesus fits that. The median education level of death row prisoners is 12th grade; Jesus does not fit that. 55.5% of death row prisoners have never married; Jesus was never married. Over 28% are between the ages of 25-44; Jesus was 33. About 10% of death row prisoners had a prior homicide conviction; Jesus never killed anyone. Over 2/3 of those on death row had prior felony convictions; Jesus never broke the law; remember, he was the sinless, perfect Son of God.

How long would you say Jesus sat on Death Row? A few hours, a day. How about 33 years? From the time he was born, he was sentenced to die. There is no known case of a person being on death row from birth, except Jesus. His life was always moving toward that certain and terrible end: He'd be executed on the cross. He knew this, because the Scriptures pointed to it. He knew this, and He predicted it himself more than once during his ministry; He told his disciples very plainly what was going to happen at Jerusalem.

It has been a long countdown, and the countdown has come to this, the last days. In John's Gospel we notice the seconds ticking away. For example, at the close of John 11, the leaders get together to plot his murder. Then in chapter 12, Jesus is anointed with expensive perfume—and Jesus says that it's an anointing for his burial! Then on Palm Sunday, just last Sunday, He is received with praise, 'Hosanna, Hosanna' and that makes his haters only more angry.

With the growing tension, there is no mistake that the moment is near, the countdown to death is almost at zero. Notice how Jesus keeps saying “now” in our text: “Now my soul is troubled... Now is the judgment of this world... Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. Jesus will soon be betrayed and arrested, judged and sentenced to death. So if our Savior could run at this moment, would He? If He could find a different way, would He have done it? This is what we see in John 12, in his final hours, Jesus stays on the road to death. As the Lord stood on the edge of his deepest suffering, He understood what was about to happen. Sometimes people portray Jesus as if He stepped blindly into a trap, got caught up in something He never intended. But Jesus knew what lay around the corner. And it caused him deep suffering.

“Now my soul is troubled,” He declares. Whose wouldn’t be? Here is the first “now” of our text. The full meaning of his mission is striking home: “Now my soul is troubled.” Of course, Jesus had been troubled before. He suffered all throughout his ministry. He endured the frailties of being human. He was troubled when people misunderstood why He’d come. There’d always been trouble. But now all that pain was getting worse.

The story of the crucifixion is probably the most repeated and familiar story of the Bible. The image of the cross is an ongoing reminder of the events that happened that day beginning in Jerusalem and ending on a hill called Calvary/Golgotha. The events that took place may look like a bad day, because they are.

Jesus was taken to Pilate and tried before the Roman procurator, false witnesses brought forth. It was Friday and Pilate could find nothing to charge Jesus with, but the crowd persuaded him to hand Jesus over. ‘Give us Barrabas,’ whose name means “Son of a liar and murderer”, the crowd that day chose between the “Son of a murderer and liar” and the Son of

God. We know that Pilate washed his hands of Jesus and the case.

Maybe it is Friday for you, being falsely accused, told lies about. Maybe you're being lied to, told you are no good, or worthless, maybe you are feeling unloved and unwanted.

Maybe it is Friday for you, take heart.

And Judas, seeing he has betrayed innocent blood, does not think that God can forgive him, goes and hangs himself. He tried to give the money back but they refused to take it; and they just laughed at Judas. Those who were his friends just looked the other way, putting the blame on him. This is Good Friday; by whose definition of 'good?' Jesus is taken aside and beaten; it's called scourging; and the guards loved to do it on other convicted criminals, but today, they seemed to enjoy it even more. Talk about a gruesome instrument of punishment; sure, crucifixion was cruel and very painful, but the tool they used to punish the criminal. It was the cat o' nine tails and it was already coated in other men's blood. It was made with nails and other sharp objects to bite into the skin of Jesus, but not just bite, to rip and tear into his skin, shredding it like paper, muscles, tendons all showing, blood flowing. 39 times those soldiers whipped Jesus, turning his flesh to hamburger. Many times, in the frenzy and hysteria that those guards were in, in the enjoyment of inflicting so much pain on the individual, including Jesus, they would whip that cat o nine tails around and those nails, those pieces of bone, glass, would wrap around the criminal's head and those teeth would rip out the eyes of the criminal, literally rip them out of their sockets, that instrument of punishment caused so much pain and blood loss that some criminals died before being hung on the cross, but that day, the guards were loving every minute of it and after the scourging, then they took him and beat him, spit on him, and

mocked him and like I said, they were loving every minute. That was Friday. Will it ever end?

Maybe you're going through the same, your friends seem to have turned on you. You're being beat up mentally or emotionally. People enjoying your shortcomings, taking opportunity to jab you with sharp cutting words, leaving you emotionally or mentally scarred.

The soldiers wove a crown of thorns, Jubian thorns hard as nails, and beat it down on the head of Jesus. They placed the cross on his shoulders and made him carry it up the Via Dolarosa, the way of the cross, the steepest street in Jerusalem. The crowd jeered and mocked him, literally pulling his beard from his face as he stumbled up the street. Isaiah tells us that his features were so beaten he was beyond recognition. He fell carrying the cross so the soldiers made Simon of Cyrene carry the cross. It was Friday; will it end?

Jesus was on the cross, hanging between two thieves. The soldiers below him casting lots for his clothing, the crowd jeering him, he saved others let him save himself. Yes, it's still Friday! The thief on the other cross says "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Today you will be with me in paradise. If what you're going thru is paradise, Jesus, I don't want any part of it! But you and I know it wasn't what Jesus was referring to but remember, it was Friday, Good Friday. Whose idea was it to call it good anyway? Jesus cries out "My God My God, why have you forsaken me?" It was Friday and Jesus experiences for the first time in his life separation from His Father. It was Friday and Jesus says "It is finished; Father into your hands I commit my Spirit" The curtain in the Temple is torn in two. And it got dark, very dark, at 3 in the afternoon. The centurion standing there confessed "Truly this man was the Son of God" It was Friday and Jesus died,

Are you surrounded by darkness, does it seem like you are all alone, take heart, that is the way it was for Jesus that Friday.

It was Friday when they took him from the cross and laid him in a borrowed tomb, sealed with a Roman seal, and a legion of soldiers placed to guard the tomb. The disciples were saddened and distraught, the women were in mourning, the enemies were worried.

Have you ever been weakened, overcome with stress, overcome with worries, distraught and dejected? Were you alone, your self esteem at an all time low? Did you feel the walls closing in around you like there is no way out? That is how Jesus may have felt that Friday.

No matter what the world has done to us, Jesus says "I have told you these things so that in me you will have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart; I have overcome the world."

It is Good Friday! A name that stirs a bit of confusion within my soul. Really what is so good about this day? A man died for my sins. A man gave his life for the things that I had not even done yet, but here I am 2000 years later observing it, some say celebrating it. How can I celebrate?

In the US we have termed the Friday before Easter as Good Friday. It is the day that Jesus was crucified. Really I have to ask again what is so good about it?

Many other countries call the same day "Holy" Friday, some call it "Sacred" Friday. Some think that Good Friday comes from the phrase "God's" Friday, much the same way that good-bye means God be with you.

I don't know really, what to call it; maybe sin day or something of that nature. Good Friday sure does not convey to me what happened and why.

When I read the story of the cross I vision the pain and agony that Christ must be going through. I hear the screams of the crowds, possibly the laughter of the Roman soldiers. I hear the sound of a thud as the cross hits the ground. I see the sight of soldiers tossing a tired beaten man on top of that cross. Perhaps the most ear shattering sound of all, the hammers hitting the nails. Really we want to call this Good?

In all the chaos of the story I can barely focus on the man, the man on the cross. What did he do? Nothing!

What really hurts when I look at this story is what I did to put him there. The fact that selfish, fleshly desires of doing things wrong and my way has caused another to suffer is intolerable. I am faced with the fact that I have not done what is right and have sinned. That my short comings separate me from the eternal bliss of a relationship with God. All throughout the New Testament I am reminded that I need to have a relationship with God but the only possible way that I can is through this horrendous act of sacrifice.

Sin cannot be ignored, it must be atoned for. A penalty has to be paid for it. That penalty in the Old Testament was always paid with a blood offering from a sacrificial lamb; an act of contrition to signify that I have acknowledged my error and want to restore my relationship with God.

God does have the answer, the answer that foils all logical thought and precepts of our modern age. It is simply God's path to restoration that is on display here The drastic has to happen in order for His plan to be fulfilled as we journey throughout our life. There will never be a way to fully explain or

understand what has taken place on the cross until the day we meet Jesus.

I only wish that I could stop having to go back to the cross and seek forgiveness. I wish that I could not error in my life. I wish that troubles would not befall me. I wish that the price of one's life had not had to be paid because I could not keep my covenant with my creator.

I guess Good Friday is good after all! It is an example of tremendous love. It tells me that no matter who I am or what I have done in life that I am loved. My creator loves me enough to ensure that my mistakes do not burden me with guilt.

My life would have been over before it started if not for Good Friday. I would die in my sin and rebellion. The fact that three days later he arose and covers me with the grace I need is an act of love that has taken place in no other way in history.

I am saved, I know, I confess it, I just struggle to live it. I know that there is no way that I can fix my situation on my own. I know that I am covered and loved. I know that death does not end me.

This Journey that I embark on is not easy. It is filled with battles and disappointments. It is filled with pain, heart ache and at times loneliness. It is, however, filled with the pure love of a savior and that covers all.

When I hear the sounds of nails, it reminds me of whose I am. My desires should be replaced with the desires and love of the One who suffered for me.

Yes I guess Good Friday is good after all.

AMEN!!

"LISTEN! WHAT DO YOU HEAR?"

Message for *Easter Sunday*
From Pastor Norman Staker
March 31, 2024

ACTS 10: 34-43 – 1 CORINTHIANS 15: 1-11 – MARK 16: 1-8



**GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD
OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD
AND SAVIOR, THE RISEN JESUS
CHRIST. AMEN.**

**HE IS RISEN!!
HE IS RISEN INDEED!**

Words are powerful, aren't they? Words can change a person's life. Words can change history. Consider how three words on Easter morning, "He has risen!" have changed human history and ultimately, have changed your history! "He has risen!" He is not here!

You've heard these words before: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." John F. Kennedy – January 20, 1961

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed..." – Dr. Martin Luther King – August 28, 1963

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” – Ronald Reagan – June 12, 1987

“I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon.” – George W. Bush – September 14, 2001

Again, I ask, have you heard those words before? They were just a few words, but they were memorable. Why? Because of the circumstances that surrounded them, and because of the impact they had. Three words spoken 2000 years ago spoken to less than a handful of people changed the course of all of history. At a cemetery outside of Jerusalem, an angel announced, “He has risen!” With those three words the course of human history was changed forever. With those few words, your history, my history has been changed. Now maybe you think that I’m overstating it a bit, but I don’t think that you can possibly begin to overstate the impact of those three words, “He has risen!” To fully appreciate the impact of those words, we need to understand the circumstances that surround them.

Let’s back up; it’s Saturday evening. The sun had set. The Sabbath had ended. People were out in the streets, and shops had reopened for the evening. But for these three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome: you have heard of Mary Magdalene before. She was from the town of Magdala, on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. Salome was the wife of Zebedee. She was the mother of James and John, the sons of thunder. Mary the mother of James, was a different Mary, and the mother of a different James. James the Lesser, which doesn’t sound too complimentary. He’s called lesser because we think he was the younger of the two. Sometimes he’s called James the Little. So these two women are the mothers of Big Jim and Little Jim, as it were.

This was no ordinary shopping trip; those three women were on a mission; to buy spices to anoint the body of Jesus the next day. They need the spices and there was no time to buy them on Friday. Even if they had had the spices, they could do no work on the Sabbath. Now in the cool of the evening, they had just enough time to complete their shopping. The real work of anointing would have to wait until morning.

Now it's Sunday morning. Those same three women who had been followers of Jesus went to the cemetery outside of Jerusalem. They went to the place where they had seen Jesus' lifeless body placed in a tomb three days earlier, on Friday evening. A large stone had been rolled in front of the tomb and as added security, Roman soldiers were stationed there to prevent anyone from rolling the stone away and stealing Jesus' body. Friday night had passed without incident. All day Saturday had passed, nothing. Saturday night had passed. Still nothing.

But early on Sunday morning as the sun began to rise, the earth began to shake. The Bible tells us, "There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow." An angel was probably the last thing that these women ever expected to find when they went to that cemetery on Sunday morning. Their purpose for going there was simple. They had hoped to complete the burial process. But when they arrived, they received some rather unexpected news, "He has risen!"

This was not what they expected. You don't go to a cemetery to see if the person is still there. You go because you know the person is still there. This contradicted everything they had ever known and experienced. This is usually where a person's story comes to an end. But Jesus' story continued after his death. He

had died, but now he lives! What amazing news those women received! How wonderful to think that their friend and teacher was not dead, but was alive! But it was so much more than that; they were getting back someone they cared about. This was not only for them. This was an event that changed all of history, that changed your history.

You see, there was another event that drastically changed the course of all human history. It takes us back to the beginning of time. God created a world intending for it to be a place that would reflect his glory, where everything and everyone would work together in peace and harmony. He made two human beings from which every human has come, with the intent that those people and everyone after them would live with him forever in this glorious place. But those first two people decided that God was not worthy of their trust, that he was in some way withholding his goodness from them. They doubted God and they disobeyed God. And when they disobeyed God, in an instant history was changed. That perfect world and perfect relationship that God wanted to have with all people was ruined. Like smudgy little fingerprints left on a once clean window, sin now leaves its dirty fingerprints on every aspect of our lives. We see the fingerprints of sin in our hearts. We see it in the jealousy and greed that continually compares what we have to what others have been given. We see those fingerprints in broken relationships and promises that leave lives shattered and hearts broken. We see those fingerprints in our bodies as a few rogue cells or disrupted DNA cause disease and suffering. We see those fingerprints throughout the history of the world. One group of people oppresses another resulting in violence, war and genocide. School shootings, abused children and neglected elderly. People can try to re-write history, try to “clean it up,” but that’s like trying to clean the fingerprints off a window using your bare hand. It doesn’t help. It only creates more fingerprints.

God wanted to change that history and he knew that there was only one way to do that. He himself would need to intervene. And so that's what he did. God entered human history. Jesus was born as a human like any one of us. But because he was also true God, he was able to be and do what we cannot be and do. He lived a life that always glorified God. He obeyed, loved and trusted God his Father at all times. Jesus' life came to an end after just 33 years in this world. But before he died, Jesus would suffer the worst part of sin, the part that we cannot see or experience in this life. Jesus suffered the eternal death of hell. He suffered the separation from a holy God that every sinner deserves to face at the end of their life.

Jesus did that to change your history. You see, this isn't like Tiger Woods winning the Masters which some claim as the greatest comeback in sports history. Did any of you get a check on the Monday after Tiger won the Masters? Me neither. Tiger won; he gets the recognition and the paycheck. His win didn't change my life! Sin changed his life; it changed yours and mine!

Jesus did not just come to MAKE history. Jesus came to CHANGE history. The perfect life that Jesus lived and sacrificed at the cross as the payment for sin was not to work his way into the record books. He did it for you. Your history, the story of your life that is covered with the filthy fingerprints of sin, has been re-written by Jesus. God promises, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Sinless is your new story in Jesus. And not only has he re-written your past - he has given the story of your life a new ending. It is now the same ending that those women witnessed on Easter Sunday when they went to the grave of Jesus. Death no longer needs to be followed by the eternal death of hell. For those who trust in Jesus, death is now followed by life. That's what Jesus promised with these words, "The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." For those who believe in Jesus, death is now

immediately followed by a life that is free from every fingerprint of sin – life as God intended it to be.

I understand that for many people that sounds too good to be true. People make and break promises regularly. Why should this be any different? But think about it. When someone really wants you to trust them on something big, they will build up your confidence by keeping other promises. And usually those other promises are things that the person knows they can actually do. For example, you don't want to say to your 5 year-old daughter, "I promise that I will give you a unicorn on your birthday." That's kind of going to shoot your credibility for any future promises you make. You want to pick something you can actually deliver on, maybe promise a dog or a kitten – something small and easy.

Now think about Jesus. Jesus doesn't pick something small and simple like, "Trust me because remember I gave you a puppy or kitten." Jesus picks the hardest thing. Jesus picks the one thing that no one else has ever been able to do – the one thing that only God can do – come back from the dead. And Jesus places his entire credibility on that one thing. As the apostle Paul wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." Those three little words, "He has risen" are life-changing! Those three little words not only mean that what Jesus promised he HAS done; those three little words also mean that what Jesus has promised he WILL do for you.

That helps us to see through the fingerprints of sin in our lives because sometimes it's hard to see God's goodness or his plans through all those fingerprints. When life has not exactly turned out the way you had planned or wanted. When you're struggling to do the right thing and the failures seem way too regular. Folks, hear the words again, "He has risen." This is proof of God's forgiveness and faithfulness to all that he has

promised. Know that he has promised not only to help you through the problems, but to use them to draw you closer to him, for your good and the good of others. Know that your forgiveness is not dependent upon your history, but only upon Jesus'. Know that when your life comes to an end, that your loved ones will be able to stand beside your grave, and like those women on Easter morning, they will know that your death has been followed by life eternal just as Jesus promised.

The audience was small, just a few women, but the impact of those three words spoken by the angel were felt throughout all of history. They have changed your history!

The empty tomb is the first and most fundamental sign of Easter. Nothing – the absence of Jesus' body – that's the first indication of the resurrection. Jesus wasn't where they left him!

The empty tomb is all about absence. Something is missing, and that something is death. Death went missing on Easter morning.

Romans, Chapter 6: Do you not know that 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, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall surely be united with Him in a resurrection like His.

Because Christ is raised, you too shall be raised from the dead. In Him you are a new creation and you shall live with Him in the new heaven and the earth. It's a solid, unmovable, unchangeable fact. It was written in stone.

Let us claim this day and this story as the central, binding miracle of our faith, not merely because God raised Jesus from the dead, but because through that resurrection, God has shown us what God intends for us. The resurrection shows us what God is ready to do for us right here, right now, if we are willing to accept God's invitation. Peter in our Acts reading says, "I truly believe that God shows no partiality." NO partiality; folks, none.

This is the day which God has made holy and glorious! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

For Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. He is risen. He is risen, indeed, Alleluia and

AMEN!!



HE IS RISEN!

“CAN AN EMPTY TOMB BRING PEACE?”

Message for the Third Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 14, 2024

ACTS 3: 12-19 — 1 JOHN 3: 1-7 — LUKE 24: 36B-48

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR THE RISEN CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN!

It's a word that has nothing but negative implications. According to Oxford Languages, it can mean containing nothing, not filled or occupied; to remove all contents of a container; as it relates to words, lacking meaning or sincerity, meaningless, aimless, vacant, blank. It can mean a container left empty of its contents. It can be an adjective, a verb or a noun. Empty is a negative word; consider maybe you're very hungry; your stomach is empty; you need to run to the store but your gas tank is empty, no gas; and after someone is kind enough to loan you some money for gas, you get to the store but your wallet is, what, empty! You have no money and you don't believe in credit cards! Empty is not a good thing or is it? All those negatives but on that Easter Sunday, when the women went to the tomb, it was empty, which right off, was a negative. Did someone steal the body of Jesus; did the guards dispose of the body of Jesus; regardless, the body wasn't there, the tomb was empty, and it was a bad thing, or was it? How do we turn a negative into a positive? My message is titled, 'Can An Empty Tomb Bring Peace?'

Can an empty tomb bring peace? Technically the answer is “NO.” All four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, tell us that the grave, where the body of Jesus was placed after his death, was empty on Sunday morning.

Mary Magdalene's first reaction to an empty tomb was overwhelming grief. In the Gospel of John we read: “Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look in the tomb. When the angels asked her why she was crying, she

said, “they have taken my Lord away. I don’t know where they put the body.” She thought the gardener had taken the corpse and placed it elsewhere.

Peter and John ran to the tomb. They, too, had looked in the tomb but only saw the linen shroud that had been covering the body of Jesus – but there was no body.

Even the enemies of Jesus admitted that the tomb had been robbed of Jesus’ dead and ripped to shreds body and the tomb was empty. They spread the rumor that the disciples had absconded with the body of Jesus during the night. (pause) The opponents of Jesus did not deny the body gone. Negatives. What happened to the body of Jesus? Those opponents, those enemies of Jesus, did not see the empty grave as an action of God.

An empty tomb, a burial shroud neatly wrapped and left behind, cannot in and of themselves bring peace to one’s heart regarding humanity’s basic two problems: 1) How can I find peace with God? Broken commandments bring alienation. 2) Is there life beyond the grave?

The tomb is empty! This is not the message of Christianity. He is risen! He is risen indeed! This is the experience and message from the disciples. If there was no resurrection from death, there would be no Christian church today. I told you empty was a negative.

The Apostle Paul writes: “Jesus our Lord was put to death for our trespasses, raised for our justification.” When the women who were near the cross on Friday arrived at the burial plot of Jesus, they experienced an earthquake and an empty tomb. They also heard an angel say: “He is not here; He is risen!”

In the New Testament, the empty tomb proves nothing. The view of the empty tomb only resulted in fear, trembling and worry. It is the appearances of the risen Jesus that are most important.

In I Corinthians 15, Paul writes: The risen Jesus appeared to Peter, James, to all the apostles, to me and to more than 500 at one time, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote this letter some 25 years later. The Gospel of Matthew reports the appearance of the risen Jesus to the women and to the apostles. Luke reports the appearance of the risen Jesus to several women, to Cleopas, Peter, and the eleven disciples.

In spite of all the centuries of human experiences, that death was the end of human life, the Christian message from the lips of these disciples was clear. “Do you believe that there is a God who has power over death? And God raised Jesus from death. Of course we know that when Paul spoke of the resurrection from the death in the streets of Athens, many people laughed.

Luke tells us that the Jewish authorities were “greatly disturbed because the apostles were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.” They were upset folks! What would you do if you went to the grave of a loved one and found it dug up and the vault lid was lifted off and casket was gone?

In I Corinthians 6:14, Paul writes “God raised Jesus and will also raise us up by His power.” In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul writes: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we believe that the Lord will return from heaven with a loud command, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are still alive will be caught up with them to meet the Lord and so we will be with the Lord forever.”

“Our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our bodies so they will be fashioned like his glorious body”. Wow, talk about a promise!

A resurrected body – not limited by time and earthly space. Suddenly, with doors locked, the resurrected Jesus appeared in the room with the disciples.

At first they were startled; who wouldn't be; all doors and windows locked; no one heard a knock at any door; no one opened any doors and yet, here He was, standing in their midst. They thought he was a ghost. Jesus said, “Peace be with you.”. Don't be afraid – don't let doubts arise in your mind. Look at my hands, my feet; see that it is I myself; touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. They touched his body. Jesus said, Have you anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate in their presence. When was the last time you heard that a ghost ate solid food; even more, when was the last time you actually saw a ghost eat real food? Probably not since this episode but Jesus was real; he was definitely not a ghost!!

I'd like to ask you a question: Why do we need a Savior? Why do we need a Savior? We've seen how God has entered into our lives and poured out

tremendous spiritual blessings for those who are His children. We've seen how God has chosen us from before the creation of the world and predestined us to be adopted into His family. We've seen how Jesus has redeemed us from slavery to sin and an empty life. We've seen how the Holy Spirit is in our lives as a guarantee of our spiritual inheritance. And we've seen how God fills our lives with His resurrection power. But that still doesn't answer the question: Why did God need to do this in our lives?

Maybe Paul realized that his readers may have been asking that very same question. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul takes his readers back to what their lives were like before they experienced God's grace. Let's read how Paul puts it: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

I can't answer for you but I don't want to get too caught up in what my life was like before Jesus redeemed me. The Bible is clear that our present lives are not to be paralyzed by thinking too much about what has happened in the past. But at the same time, I don't think that we can ever fully recognize the significance of what God has done for us without understanding exactly what we were like at one time. What if our Lord were to hold up a gigantic mirror that allows his readers to look and see what they were like before God entered into their lives?

Quite frankly, it's not a very pretty picture. In fact, there is a sense in which is one of the hardest truths in the Bible because most of us don't really want to hear just how bad we are apart from Christ.

We're kind of in the same boat as a man I heard about this week. His doctor called him and said, "I've got some good news and some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?" "Well the good news, I guess," the man replied. "I just got the test results back from the lab and you only have 24 hours to live," said the doctor. "That's the good news?" asked the man, "What could be worse than that?" "I've been trying to reach you since yesterday." That's pretty much what our lives were like without Christ. We may have still been walking around, but for all practical purposes we were dead.

Let me take you back to the question I asked just a few moments ago: Why do we need a Savior? I think that most Christ followers would answer that question something like this: “I have sinned and am guilty before God, so I need a Savior who can forgive my sins and take away the punishment I deserve.” And while that statement is true, it just doesn’t go far enough. Folks, without a Savior, we’re not just in God’s dog house – we’re in the morgue.

Before God entered into our lives, we were completely unable to respond to Him in any way, since we were spiritually dead. That’s why it’s crucial that it is God who is the one who initiates our relationship with Him.

Without Christ, that is also an accurate picture of what is happening to us spiritually. Since we’re spiritually dead, and there is not a thing we can do about it on our own, we’re decaying spiritually. Our lives are becoming more and more corrupt each day.

Every person who comes into this world enters it as a sinner. No one has to teach us how to sin because, as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, every person is born with this sin nature.

The resurrection of Jesus assures us of God’s forgiveness. Forgiveness is one of our most basic needs.

After the resurrection Jesus offers peace. His blood was poured out for the forgiveness of sins. He died in our place so that we might have harmony – friendship, acceptance, peace with God. “If Jesus had not been raised, your faith would be futile, you would still be in your sins.” (Paul I Cor. 15:14, 17-18)

The resurrection validates the cross. The resurrection brings God’s power into our lives for he can change human nature, making selfish people unselfish, making immoral people moral, making sour people sweet. When these character traits change, the result will be peace between people.

The resurrection assures us of our own eternal destiny, the guarantee of our own resurrected body.

The resurrection of Jesus assures us of God’s forgiveness, power to live, to have changed lives, and to guarantee ultimate triumph. We can face our past, confident of God’s promise to remember our sins no more; folks, Jesus died for our sins and

was raised. The resurrection enables us to live in the present with power and brings us peace in an insecure world.

And so we gather. Sometimes what we offer to the time of worship is not very exciting, sometimes nothing seems to happen. But sometimes, it is a powerful experience, filled with energy. All the time it is a reminder of what God has done for us, what God promises for today and assures us of for tomorrow. But we come, because we know God is at work, God is busy showering us with love and grace. God is promising us much needed peace and this is the place we know we can receive it. Peace be with you.

AMEN!!



HE IS RISEN!

“I HAVE OTHER SHEEP”

Message for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 21, 2024

ACTS 4: 5-12 — 1 JOHN 3: 16-24 — JOHN 10: 11-18

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

A woman brought a very limp duck into a veterinary surgeon. As she laid her pet on the table, the vet pulled out his stethoscope and listened to the bird's chest. After a moment or two, the vet shook his head sadly and said, "I'm sorry, your duck, Cuddles, has passed away."

The distressed woman wailed, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure. The duck is dead," replied the vet.

"How can you be so sure", she protested. "I mean you haven't done any testing on him or anything. He might just be in a coma or something." The vet rolled his eyes, turned around and left the room. He returned a few minutes later with a black Labrador Retriever. As the duck's owner looked on in amazement, the dog stood on his hind legs, put his front paws on the examination table and sniffed the duck from top to bottom. He then looked up at the vet with sad eyes and shook his head. The vet patted the dog on the head and took it out of the room.

A few minutes later he returned with a cat. The cat jumped on the table and also delicately sniffed the bird from head to foot. The cat sat back on its haunches, shook its head, meowed softly and strolled out of the room. The vet looked at the woman and said, "I'm sorry, but as I said, this is most definitely, 100% certifiably, a dead duck." The vet went to his computer terminal a few feet away, hit a couple of keys and produced a bill, which he handed to the woman. The duck's owner, still in shock, took the bill. "\$750!" she cried, "\$750 just to tell me my duck is

dead!" The vet shrugged, "I'm sorry. If you had just taken my word for it, the bill would have been \$25, but with the Lab Report and the Cat Scan, it's now \$750!!

Have you ever thought about the fact that church is the only place you hear someone described as a sheep like it's a good thing? Outside the pages of Scripture, no one describes being sheeplike as anything desirable, You've never heard of a sports team being called "the sheep." Think about it; we know and love the UK Wildcats, that's a real strong name but how would we react to them if they were known as the UK Sheep, forget the 'wild' part. You've never heard of a gangster called Tony the Lamb.

Or, Bill, what kind of truck do you drive? A Dodge Ram. Would you have bought it if it was a "Dodge Sheep?" Come to think of it that may be why Yugo went out of business. No one wanted to drive a car named after a female sheep, ewe-go!

No one wants to be described as a sheep. If you look up "sheep" as it refers to human beings you get a person who is described as meek, stupid, timid, submissive, unimaginative, easily led, without initiative. docile, compliant, or easily influenced.

In 2017, Webster's dictionary officially added "sheeple" to the dictionary. Sheeple is a combination of "sheep" and "people." The word was used for people who uncritically took everything the media or the government or politicians told them at face value. It hit its peak during Covid.

So it is interesting that most of us would never want to be known as a sheep. And yet, Psalm 23:1 is the 8th most searched for Scripture passage on Google, and the most popular funeral passage. We just read it; but you know it already, don't you: "The Lord is my ... [audience]."

So if the Lord is your shepherd, what does that make you? [sheep]

But that's weird. That's counter-cultural. Most people today, especially those who don't have any Biblical frame of reference, would hear us talking about being the sheep of God's pasture and go—why would anyone want to be a sheep? Stupid, timid, submissive, unimaginative, docile, compliant, helpless, weak, easily influenced. That's not me. I'm the captain of my fate. I'm the master of my soul.

But here is the big idea for this sermon: if you have a good shepherd, it's okay to be a sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd! Guess what that makes you!

This morning, we are going to study Jesus' 4th I Am statement: I am the Good Shepherd: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.'

In chapter 9, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. Now this was significant, because the Old Testament prophet Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would open the eyes of the blind and there is no record anywhere in the Old Testament of anyone opening the eyes of the blind. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law are grilling this guy to try to figure out who Jesus is. Because, Jesus had done this miracle on the Sabbath. And so the Pharisees are having some cognitive disagreement between two opposing ideas: First, Jesus has to be from God, because no one else could heal a man born blind, but second, Jesus can't be from God because no one coming from God would break the sabbath. So they don't know what to do with Jesus. He's breaking their rules. But he's doing things that only someone who came from God could do.

So the scribes and Pharisees are freaking out. And they had already said that if anyone said Jesus was the Messiah, they would be barred from the synagogue. Sure enough, the man born blind said he believed Jesus was from God, so they chucked him out.

And maybe you are wondering what any of this has to do with Jesus being the Good Shepherd.

The main idea is this: if you have a good shepherd, it's okay to be a sheep. The reason most people hate the idea of being a sheep is because they've never experienced a good shepherd.

Then along comes Jesus, who says, "I am the Good Shepherd." Jesus says I know my sheep and they know me. I call them by name. He knows each of us by name and it isn't hey you, which, if you caught that, is a play on a female sheep, 'hey you!' No, Jesus knows us by our name.

The point of John 10 is that all of these religious and political leaders who are fattening themselves on the flock are just a bunch of clowns. And Jesus is the Good shepherd, who knows his sheep, who calls his sheep, and who lays down his life for His sheep.

But I want us to look closely at verses 17-18, because I think sometimes we miss the second half of the sentence. Jesus didn't just lay down His life for His sheep. Think about that. You've got this picture of the shepherd, guarding the opening to the sheepfold, and Jesus saying He lays down His life for the sheep. But you know, if the pack of wolves kill the shepherd, then the sheep are unprotected and the wolves just come straight in. So it wasn't just that Jesus laid His life down. The gospel comes in the second half of the verse: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."

Jesus laid down his life—but three days later he took it up again. He defeated death! That's the reason the last verse of Psalm 23 says, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!"

The death of Jesus was a strategy, not a tragedy!

That's the gospel message. But as we close, I want you to think about this: The gospel message isn't just for the sheep that are already in the sheepfold. This is maybe the biggest difference between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus.

Look at verse 16: 'And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'

When God became man in the person of Jesus, He came to earth as a regular person. He wasn't surrounded by thunderbolts; He wasn't wearing a halo around His head. He came into this world as a helpless newborn baby to an everyday couple. He skinned his knuckles in the carpenter's shop of his stepfather Joseph; probably got a splinter or two. Even when He began His public ministry, He decided to hang out with the blue-jean type crowd. We know that at least half of the twelve apostles were fishermen, plain, every day, ordinary guys. At least one was a hated tax collector. But those are the ones Jesus wanted as his disciples, those 'other sheep.'

Every year we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. We hear a passage from John chapter 10 where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is invested in the sheep because they're his own. There's nothing he won't do for his flock. He endures all kinds of weather. He spends his days and nights with the sheep. He places himself between ravenous predators and his vulnerable sheep. He absolutely will not abandon his flock! This shepherd is no poorly paid hired hand. He doesn't do this unglamorous job because it's his only option for employment.

Of course, we know Jesus isn't really talking about farm animals here. WE are the sheep! He's talking about us, about humanity. We are his flock, his dear ones!

Jesus shows the full extent of his love and care for us. He lays down his life for our sake. He's willing to die, to face our enemies, to sacrifice his own welfare so that we might live.

In 1 John, John writes, "We know love by this." Love isn't something that you learn in a book. You don't pick up on love by watching a Dr Phil talk show. Love is something you experience.

In that same letter, John writes, "We love because God first loved us." God is the source of love, the maker and originator of love. It's love that caused God to bring all things into being. It's that same divine love that prompted Jesus to take on flesh and dwell among us. And that never ending and unquenchable love demonstrated its inevitability and reach in Jesus' actions on the cross. It's a love that cannot be extinguished. On Easter Sunday we came to KNOW LOVE.

This love gives all of itself away. But mysteriously, wondrously, in so doing, that love is magnified and multiplied. The more it gives itself away, the stronger and bigger it becomes!

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us." This is Jesus our good, good shepherd. And we are his people, the flock of his pasture.

It's good to be in Jesus' flock. It's good to receive that love, that abundant life. In his letter, John takes it to the next level. Now that we know love, now that we have encountered the love that first loved us, now that we know the source of all love, we are called to love one another. "Let us love," John writes, "not in word or speech, but in truth and action." A love of such magnitude cannot simply settle

into our hearts and stay there. No, that's not how love operates. Love is always growing. It multiplies and expands. It can't possibly just remain within us.

God's love is an outward force. It moves out, it grows and takes us along for the ride. Once planted inside us, love takes us to new avenues. It causes our eyes to focus on things yet undiscovered, new people and creatures to love. This love can't possibly stay put.

That's why it's not a bit surprising when Jesus says he has sheep of another flock. Jesus shares something significant. "I have sheep that don't belong to his fold," he says, "I'm bringing them, too. They'll listen to my voice, just like you."

It's a surprising statement. Are we ready or able to hear that? "You mean, Jesus, there are other people besides our community? There are other people whom you love as well as us?"

Other sheep? Who are these other sheep? What are they like? You know, not all sheep are alike.

Christ's church is comprised of an enormous rainbow coalition: we are people of every nation, tribe and race. We speak different languages, we come from varied cultures. And yet we are one flock.

We worship differently, we like different hymns. We have alternate methods of baptizing believers, varied understandings of communion. And yet we are one flock.

Christ's church is filled with able-bodied and disabled. Its members include straight and gay and transgender. It contains rich and poor, privileged and disadvantaged. But we are still one flock. Christ died for all people. As verse 16 says, 'So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'

Can you sense the urgency of Jesus as he describes himself as the Good Shepherd? Yes, he loves you and knows you and takes care of you. But there's something else on his mind too. I have other sheep, he says. There are other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, not yet anyway. And then he expresses a sense of urgency; I must bring them also! I must, he says.

He doesn't say, if I feel like it, or if it's convenient or let me ask the good people at Bethel, Russell, KY or those folks at Bridges. A lot of people don't like anyone

involved in the LGBTQ+ community but they are still my sheep, and I still love them. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, Jesus says, and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd. Jesus cares very much about people who are not yet Christians. The way Jesus talks here about those other sheep: there are really two kinds of people; there are the Christians, like you and me, and there are the "not-yet-Christians."

We pray: Dear Lord Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd, and there are other sheep who are not yet following you. Bless us as we live among them. Bless us with opportunities to speak our faith, and bless the words that we say. Cause them to listen to your voice, and follow you.

Amen.



“NOT JUST A NUMBER TO THE LORD”

Message for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 28, 2024

ACTS 8: 26-40 — 1 JOHN 4: 7-21 — JOHN 15: 1-8

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, THE TRUE VINE, JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

What if I told you that you are not just a number to the Lord!

2**-*4-**74 is a very important number to me. Can you guess what significance there is in those numbers? It's not a phone number; it's what Uncle Sam calls me. You see, there are a few Norman Staker's living in the US, I know the thought terrorizes you, it does me; anyway when I fill out official documents like tax forms and wage statements, the government identifies me by calling me not Norman Staker, and granted, again I could be the only one, but I doubt it, so instead I have the privilege of being named 2**-*4-**74, my Social Security Number. Nothing makes you feel more important than having a 9-digit number assigned to you.

Actually this world does a good job of making us all feel like just another number, going through the rat-race called life. The friendly crew member at McDonalds who takes your order gives you your Big Mac, smiles, and tells you to have a nice day. And you feel really special, like someone cares about you, until you realize that they wish everyone a nice day. They say it so much that it really doesn't mean much. And often those "have a nice days," are said with so little interest that I've heard "have a nice day's" that sounded more like "here's your food, now get lost," because you are just one of billions and billions served, and we have to move on to the next number. Our world has a way of making us not feel very important; we are all just numbers. Before I put our phone number on the national do not call list, our home phone was ringing off the hook. And you would think by how many people called us that there were a lot of people that cared about us. And you might

feel popular or important for a while until you realize that all those telemarketing companies don't really want to be your friend, but they are calling you because they want to in some way separate you from your money. Do you ever feel that you are a 2**-*4-**74, and many of the people who do show interest in you are really more interested in what they can get out of you?

In verse 26 of our first reading today, it says, 'An angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' We're told in parentheses that 'this was a wilderness road.' But Philip, it says, 'got up and went.'

I don't know what Philip was thinking when he received this command, but I would have thought something like this: "Things are going great here. I've got tons of people to work with and share the Gospel and help them grow in faith. And now God wants me to go hang out in the desert?" But, God doesn't view people as just an insignificant number. Each soul is precious to him. And there was one struggling soul that needed Philip's attention. He was the Ethiopian eunuch. Do you know what a eunuch is? He's a guy who was fixed, who wouldn't be having any kids. And you might wonder what on earth is going on here. Why does the Bible make a point some 5 times in this text to refer to him as a eunuch? In the ancient world which was ruled by royal families, sometimes high officials in government were required to be eunuchs before they could hold high positions. That seems really weird to us, but it gave the royal family peace of mind, because the king knew that he wouldn't have to worry about one of these fixed officials murdering him and taking over the throne and setting up his own royal family. So there was a little logic to this strange practice. It was kind of a mixed blessing in the ancient world to be a high official. Yes, there would have been a lot of power and money and honor; he had the good job and the big house, but it would have been a very lonely life, with no family to come home to each evening. There would be no Mothers Days celebrated at his house, no Fathers Days, and any birthdays he would have celebrated by himself.

And this eunuch would have felt even more unspecial during his trip to Jerusalem. Yes, he was a wealthy man, but his black skin would have made him stand out. I wonder how many people stared at him, or how many mean comments and jokes he overheard as he walked by. And you'd think, well, at least when he got to church, that sort of thing would go away, but eunuchs were forbidden by the Law or Moses to become full Jews. They could come near the Temple, but they couldn't go through the gates. Could you imagine how well that would go over here at Bethel if we would tell people with certain medical conditions that they

were welcome here, but they couldn't come into the church building? They would have to wait outside instead and catch as much of the service as they could hear through the double doors. So the eunuch had traveled for many miles to learn about the Triune God, but the closest he could get to church was the door. Maybe that's why he bought a scroll, but it wasn't doing him much good because he didn't understand it.

I imagine that it was a frustrating trip to Jerusalem. This eunuch might have felt like he was just another number; maybe the person who sold him the scroll muttered a "have a nice day," but he knew that nobody really cared about him. Whoever showed any concern had probably noticed his nice rich clothes and was just after this money. But the Lord loved this lonely man.

It was a journey of some two thousand kilometers—from Jerusalem all the way back to what is modern-day Sudan. The lone traveler had come to worship at the Temple. And I can only imagine that it was for him a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

As his horse plodded along, he occupied his time by reading from a scroll he had no doubt acquired during the course of his stay in Jerusalem—the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

Something I found out while researching this passage in Acts, in those days no one read silently. Believe it or not, that practice wasn't to come about for another thousand years. So Philip, a Jesus-follower, who happened to be traveling along the same road, could hear every word that the Ethiopian was reading.

Curious, he asked the traveler, "Do you understand what you're reading?" To which came the reply, "How can I without someone to explain it to me?" With that he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him in the chariot. And here is what he was reading: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.'

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his descendants? For his life was taken away from the earth.'

The traveler asked him, "So who was the prophet talking about? Himself or someone else?" And this was all Philip needed to begin to tell him about Jesus.

‘As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

What in the world does getting wet have to do with being spiritual? Why the urgency of the Ethiopian to wade into a body of water to experience baptism back then, as we heard in our first reading from Acts? And today, what makes us believe that a person is more acceptable to God and a better member of a church as a result of having been baptized? Why do we Christians persist with the practice of baptism?

One denomination gets its name not only on its insistence on the importance of baptism, but also on the method of baptism and the commitment of a candidate for baptism. What does getting wet have to do with being spiritual?

The strongest answers to those questions may be the most negative ones. For example, baptism is not about winning God’s favor in order to receive God’s acceptance. Nothing happens in baptism that makes a person more acceptable to God than was the case prior to baptism. It’s all about God’s grace; God’s acceptance of us, like His love for us, is strictly a matter of grace.

Is Christian baptism important? Yes, the answer is an emphatic one ‘yes.’ At the same time, however, baptism is neither uniquely Christian nor a sure-fire guarantee of maturity.

A pastor tells the story where he baptized a boy, not as a baby but as a 12 year old youth on Easter Sunday morning. The next week he asked the boy if he was reading his Bible that the church had given him in honor of his Baptism. He said, “Yes, but I have a question. How did Jesus die the second time?”

The pastor asked him, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, I mean I know he rose from the grave three days after he was crucified. But what happened after that? Did he get married? Did he have kids?”

Most people, whether they believe in Jesus or not, have a pretty good handle on the Easter Story. They know about Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey while people waved palm branches and cried out Hosanna. They

know about the Last Supper, and the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus praying, and Judas' kiss, and Jesus' arrest and trial. They know about the scourging and the crown of thorns and Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross and the worst part of it all, the Crucifixion.

And they know about Resurrection morning. They know about the women coming to the tomb, and the stone being rolled away, and the soldiers, and John outrunning Peter, and all of that.

But the funny thing is most people, even those who have been in church their whole life, know very little about what happened after the resurrection.

From Easter to Jesus' leaving, His Ascension, there are 40 days of things He did. On our calendar this year, since Easter was March 31, that would mean the day Jesus left earth to go to heaven would be May 10th. That's still a couple of weeks away!

So think about it for a second; do you know what Jesus did after Easter? We've been in the book of John and we've looked at some of Jesus' "I am" statements. Twice in his Gospel, John said that Jesus did a whole lot of things that aren't recorded in his gospel. At the end of John 20 he said, 'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

Did you catch that? We don't have a record of everything Jesus said and did. In the very last verse of John, the gospel writer tells us the world wouldn't be big enough to contain all the books it would take to tell everything. But the Bible tells us everything we need to know in order to believe in Jesus and to have life in his name.

This morning, we are going to look at one of those events that happened during the forty days between Jesus' resurrection and the day he ascended back to heaven. But before we get to it we are going to look at the last I AM statement of Jesus—I am the True Vine. Because here is the truth; sometimes the truth hurts and I'm going to lay it down: what Jesus did with His disciples after Easter doesn't mean anything if we don't do anything with Jesus after Easter. Think about that; what Jesus did with His disciples after Easter doesn't mean a thing if we don't do anything with Jesus after Easter.

Jesus wants his followers to remain with Him like grapes on a vine. He wants us to remain with him so much that he went to the cross in order for it to happen. He wants the same thing for us as well.

In our Gospel today, Jesus said: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”

Jesus says, “I am the true vine. My body is like the bread we’ve just shared. My blood is like the wine you’ve just drunk. And you are going to have to remain in me and rely on me for sustenance and depend on me daily just like you do this wine. I need to be part of every celebration. I need to be a part of every time of sadness and mourning. I need to be a part of every table conversation.

Folks, you and I are not just a number to God. The fact that you are sitting here in God’s house today proves that. How many things did God do for you to make sure that you would be here today? What Philips did God send into your life to explain Christ’s work for you, his death for you, his resurrection for you? Whom did God put into your life to make sure that you were baptized? Who took time to teach you the Scriptures so that you would be ready to take Holy Communion? The world out there is mostly just interested in taking your stuff. God, here in his house, wants you to know that he is interested, not in taking stuff away from you, but in giving things to you. God wants you to know that in Christ, he has given you a seat at his heavenly table. No matter what your sins, they have been taken care of, and so you will be with the Lord forever.

And maybe we need to do a better job at remembering why we are here. We all want Bethel to keep growing, but why? Why do you want our church to grow? Shame on us if we view new people and prospects as merely additional sources of revenue for the church. That’s how the world views people. At McDonald’s they tell me to have a nice day so that I come back and spend more of my money there. In church, we want members and prospects to keep coming back so that God gives them more and more spiritual strength and peace in the heart as they hear the word

and their faith grows. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that talking about offerings has no place in the church. It does. We can become selfish with our treasures, and when our mind shifts into worldly mode, that needs to be addressed. We do need to be reminded from time to time that God has placed us here and given us stuff so that we are blessings to others, and the greatest blessing that we can be to a person is a way that they hear the Gospel and live in heaven forever. That's why we're here. That's why we pray that God would let Bethel continue to grow, so that through our congregation's efforts, more people are pried away from Satan's clutches and won't have to live in hell, but instead, like the Ethiopian, they will have the joy of being with Jesus forever.

AMEN!!



HE IS RISEN!

“WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS”

Message for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 5, 2024

ACTS 10: 44-48 — 1 JOHN 5: 1-6 — JOHN 15: 9-17

GRACE, MERCY AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, OUR FRIEND, JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED.

A pastor once told his wife; 'Nobody likes me.' She replied, 'Honey, don't say that; everybody hasn't met you yet.'

Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you.”

‘You did not choose me but I chose you.’ Let me ask you; what qualities do you look for in a friend? Social media sites, don’t you just love them, but social media sites have expanded the definition of ‘friend’ to encompass not only friends and relatives, but also acquaintances and even those who are only indirectly connected to you. Because of Facebook, those who are the friends of the friends of the friends of your friends can be called your friends too. So it probably isn’t too hard for us to draw up a list of the characteristics of a good friend.

What is a friend? A friend is someone who is loyal, compassionate, and caring; kinda sounds like your pet dog. A friend is someone who is fun to be with, willing to do things with you and for you. A friend is someone who accepts you for who you are. Now I know it’s your pet dog!

But here’s where we separate the humans from the canines. A true friend is willing to be honest with you and gently tell you those hard things and uncomfortable

truths that you really need to hear. A friend is someone who knows your strengths and weaknesses. A friend is someone who won't take advantage of you. A friend is someone you can turn to when you need help, someone who will look to you for help in return. A friend is someone who is resilient and forgiving, and is willing to give you a second chance. A friend is someone who really knows you, yet likes you anyway.

Friendship is a powerful relationship. In our gospel today, Jesus proclaims that we are his friends. Jesus doesn't say, 'You are my servants.' He doesn't say 'You are my followers, or my flock, or even my disciples, family, co-workers, colleagues, teammates, neighbors, or acquaintances.' Jesus says, 'you are my friends.' For some, thinking of Jesus as a friend is a familiar, comfortable, and comforting idea. We might even think of the hymn that we just sang/that we'll sing at the end of the service "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Its message being that Jesus is one we can turn to and rely on when we're having a hard time.

Joseph Scriven, the man who wrote the hymn (What A Friend We Have In Jesus), was born in 1819 in Ireland. Things seemed to go well in his life until he became engaged. The evening before the wedding, his bride drowned. Scriven moved to Port Hope, Ontario where he became engaged again. But tragedy struck once more when his bride became ill and died just before the wedding. In 1855, when his mother in Ireland became sick, Scriven wrote the words of "What A Friend We Have In Jesus."

Why would Scriven write such a hymn when his life as an adult had been marred by tragedy? Even closer to home, have any of us been hit with such tragedies all close together? He had to wonder, and we would too, if Jesus had really been a friend to him? Has Jesus been a friend to you? It might not always feel like it but through the words of our text we'll see the many ways in which Jesus is a friend to us.

Jesus spoke the words of our text the night before he was crucified for our sins. The crucifixion alone shows what a friend we have in Jesus. Jesus himself said in our text: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Any time someone sacrifices his life for a friend, that act makes front-page news. What makes Jesus' sacrifice so much more amazing is that he gave up his life to save people who by nature were not his friends. Think of how the people Jesus came to help often pushed him away. For example when Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth to tell the people there that he was the Messiah, what was their reaction? They tried to throw Jesus off a cliff! We do the same when Jesus

speaks to us about the way he would have us honor marriage, our governing officials, our parents, and our teachers but instead of obeying Jesus, we tell him to take a flying leap! What a friend we have in Jesus that he would give up his life to pay for these sins we commit against him. Imagine diving into a burning garbage dump to save mildew that had been scraped out of the corners of your bathroom. That's what Jesus did when he died on the cross; he gave up his life to save musty old sinners like us.

Jesus' friendship doesn't stop with his saving us. Jesus went on to tell his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." What would it be like to have a close friend in the Oval Office at the White House? You could be the first to learn of the kind of decisions the leaders of our country are making, decisions that can affect everyday life. When Jesus says that he has made known to us everything the Father made known to him, he's saying that we have inside knowledge of the kind of things that affect not only everyday life, but also eternal life. For example we have knowledge of how the Father has planned to work everything, even sadness and pain, for the good of believers. We also know what he has planned for the end of the world. Sure, we might not know when the end will come but we do know how we can be ready for the end – by being friends with Jesus.

Those who have friends in high places not only know what's going on, they have access to power and influence. With Jesus as our friend we have that blessing. Jesus said: "the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." What exactly does it mean that the Father will do whatever we ask "in Jesus' name"? It does not mean that the Father will do whatever we demand of him. If you're like me, you've heard the public service announcement: "Friends don't let friends drive drunk!" True friends will do what is best for us, no matter what it is we demand from them. Someone who has had too much to drink may still want to drive home, but a friend will know that that's a bad idea and won't give his friend the keys to his car no matter how much he pleads, whines, or threatens. In the same way, we can be sure that our heavenly Father will only give us that which is good for us no matter what we demand from him. So we may demand relief from our pain. We may demand a bigger paycheck. The Father will give us those things only if it will help us grow in our friendship with Jesus. If it will harm that friendship, he will withhold those things from us. We can be certain, however, that when we ask for spiritual blessings like forgiveness or a stronger faith, our heavenly Father will give us these blessings for Jesus' sake. What a friend we have in Jesus that he causes the heavenly Father to listen to and answer our prayers!

We've seen how Jesus is a friend to us but now let's find out why he is such a friend. Jesus explains in our text: "I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." Jesus became our friend not only to save us but to make us productive in God's eyes. So what kind of lasting fruit does Jesus want from us? Jesus said: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

What Jesus wants from us is that we love one another as he has loved us. We shouldn't think of this as a burden that he imposes on us. The reason he wants us to love one another is so that our "joy may be complete." Jesus knows what he's talking about, doesn't he? There is joy in speaking to your spouse with tenderness and affection. There is joy in empathizing with those who are in pain. There is joy in being patient with our children and grandchildren. When we don't do these things, we feel guilt and shame, not joy.

But showing love to each other is easier said than done, isn't it? It's hard to love those who aren't appreciative of what we do for them. It's hard to love a teacher, a spouse, or a boss who nitpicks our work. How can we love people like that? Jesus tells us how. In our gospel lesson from last week Jesus said: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." As long as we continue to remain in Jesus, that is, as long as we continue to hear and believe his Word, we will bear much fruit, we will love each other. Note! Jesus did not say we might bear fruit if we remain in him. He said we will bear fruit. That's a promise!

"What a friend we have in Jesus!" Jesus became our friend when he died for us. He solidified the friendship by sharing with us everything the Father shared with him and by opening the Father's ears to our prayers. He maintains the friendship through his promise of forgiveness. Get the most of this friendship with Jesus. Continue to remain in him and continue to love one another. Jesus says "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you." Listen to those words again; "You did not choose me but I chose you." What a friend we have in Jesus; all our sins and griefs to bear; what a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer! Oh what peace we often forfeit; oh what needless pain we bear, All because we do not

carry, everything to God in prayer! Scriven hit the nail right on the head when he wrote that hymn, didn't he?

Amen



HE IS RISEN!

“*THE GOSPEL FOR UNDERDOGS*”


Message for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 12, 2024

ACTS 1: 15-17, 21-26 — 1 JOHN 5: 9-13 — JOHN 17: 6-19

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

 n May 6, 2023 the world was captivated with the coronation of King Charles III. The Coronation of The King and The Queen took place at Westminster Abbey. It was a spectacular display of British pride, a military parade with all the King’s men and horse’s at their best. The King and Queen traveled from Buckingham Palace in The King’s Procession to Westminster Abbey in the Diamond Jubilee Gold State Coach. Created for Queen Elizabeth II to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Her late Majesty’s reign in 2012.

The music at the coronation concert was fabulous. The concert had a world-class orchestra play a host of musical favorites along with the Royal Opera House, The Royal House of Music all taking part.

The concert was attended by the cheering of people numbering in the hundreds of thousands, fireworks were on display. There were street parties and coronation lunches throughout England.

The King’s Ring is composed of a sapphire with a ruby cross set in diamonds. The ring was made for the Coronation of King William IV in 1831, and all British kings from King Edward VII on have used it at their Coronations. The crown is a 1661 replica of the Crown for Charles II. Made of solid gold and weighing five pounds, it contains 444 gemstones, including rubies, sapphires, garnets and diamonds.

It was a glorious event watched by millions, but the pageantry can not compare to the coronation of Jesus in heaven.

When you got to church this morning, did you already know that this past Thursday, May 9, was Ascension Day, the day Jesus ascended into heaven, which is why the Epistle lesson is from Acts 1. It is impossible to overstate the importance of Good Friday, when Jesus died for our sins, and Easter Sunday, when He was raised from the dead — but His earthly ministry did not stop on Easter Sunday. His earthly ministry continued through the apostles, the Church. Jesus promised every apostle and every Christian the same Holy Spirit that dwelt in Jesus so that through us, through the church His ministry, His message of forgiveness and salvation might continue to be told.

After the resurrection, Jesus taught his disciples about God's kingdom for forty days and then He was "taken up" to heaven. The cross and empty tomb are at the very heart of the gospel message proclaimed by Jesus's followers throughout history. However, for many evangelical Christians and churches, Jesus's ascension is simply an afterthought to Easter and Good Friday. Yet His ascension is critical. Without His coronation, His death and resurrection and the Holy Spirit would not be validated by God.

According to the Apostles' Creed, Jesus "ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." That is our confession...and we dare not overlook its importance. Jesus is taken up to heaven in a cloud. When Stephen was being stoned to death he declares that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

The ascension of Jesus, His return to heaven, is the answer to the prayer of Jesus in John 17. "Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." That sentence alone is astounding if we stop to think about it. He was at creation, He existed before creation.

The Old Testament prophet Daniel was given a vision of the future coronation of Jesus. Daniel 7 records the coronation. "As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. "

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

God the Father exalted Jesus above all and enthroned him as Lord over all. He is now eternally seated at the right hand of his Father in heaven, and from his throne he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. This we confess in the Apostle’s Creed.

Revelation 5 is exactly what Jesus is referring to in His prayer in John 17. Jesus said: “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” What did Jesus do? He healed the leper, enabled the lame to walk, give sight to the blind, raised the dead.

Then Jesus went to the cross as the sacrificial “Lamb of God”. He carried on His shoulders all our broken commandments and He left them there so that all who believe in Jesus will not experience the wrath of a just and holy God.

The Book of Revelation always brings great curiosity, yet the book of Revelation tells us more about heaven than any other book in the Bible. When reading Revelation people often get confused. Just a few weeks ago we read that famous promise of Jesus in John 14: “do not let your hearts be troubled. In my Father’s house are many mansions....I am going there to prepare a place for you.”

Jesus told his disciples that where He is going they could not come. But He would return and take them to be with him forever. Jesus was talking about the cross. They could not go to the cross for the redemption of humanity. He was talking about His ascension to the throne of Heaven. But Jesus promised that He would return and bring them to where He was. Heaven.

When Jesus was on earth His death and resurrection secured our forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation with God. Jesus is now in heaven interceding for his people as our true high priest and advocate. (Hebrews 8) Jesus did not leave the disciples nor us to “make it on our own” until He returns. He was very clear. On the day of Pentecost He gave every disciple “His Holy Spirit.” The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to enable each Christian to “imitate” Jesus and display His character

traits in our daily lives. His Spirit will help each of us remember “His words” and be involved in convicting people of their broken commandments. His Spirit will produce in us love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control.”

His Spirit will provide us with the “gifts of the Spirit so that we might witness and tell the story of God’s salvation through faith in Jesus. And then on the last Day when Jesus returns His Spirit will raise us from the grave and Jesus will give us a glorious resurrected body to live in the new heaven and new earth.

It’s Mother’s Day today. It’s a time we show our thanks and appreciation for our mothers. Wives, grandmothers, aunts, girlfriends, too. All women. They do so much. And we are grateful. Mothers love their children. At least most mothers love their children most of the time. It’s instinctive. Mom holds that little one, and there is nothing that she won’t do for that baby. She loves that baby fully, completely, unconditionally. And she keeps loving as that baby grows to a toddler, a child, an adolescent, a young man or woman. And during those years, that little one leaves its mothers arms, and goes out into the world. There, however, love is not the same. Love is not full, complete, or unconditional.

In this life, in this world, we are constantly being accepted and rejected. We are valued, and we are ignored. We feel that others don’t care about us. Maybe they do, and they don’t express it, or maybe we just don’t understand it. Or maybe it’s true, that they don’t care about us, value us, or cherish us. That they don’t love us. Regardless of what is actually happening we feel that they don’t care. That they don’t love us. And that hurts. Deeply so, doesn’t it? More than we often admit.

Because we are immersed every day in these experiences with our fellow human beings, experiences less than perfect, and at times rather unpleasant, we start to think, believe, and feel that God must act and behave as people do. We think, “In the same way that people have loved and not loved me, so too God must love and not love me.”

Jesus tells us that that is not so. God does not love us as others love us. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” Imagine for a moment that love within the Trinity. That love between God the Father and His Son. As the Father loves the Son. How is that? Eternally. God the Father has loved His Son from before time began. He loves Him now, and He will love Him throughout eternity. The Father’s love for the Son is eternal. And the Father loves His Son completely. There is nothing lacking in the Father’s love, for God is love. His love is complete.

And the Father's love is unconditional. Perhaps for us, this is the most important. For as the Father loves the Son, the Son, Jesus Christ, has loved and does love us. Eternally. Completely. Unconditionally. We do not have to gain Christ's favor. He loves us. "You did not choose Me, but I chose You." "And while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Christ does not love us most of the time. He love us all the time.

His love for us does not turn on and off like a switch. He does not withhold His love from us. He loves us unconditionally. His love for us does not depend on our living the Christian life. He has redeemed us. We are his children. He loves us. Day in, day out. Good days. Bad days. When we are behaving, and when we are sinning. God loves us even when we are sinning. Now, He does not love it that we are sinning, but He still loves us. "Those whom He loves, He chastens." God would not be tracking us down, and correcting us, pulling us back out of sin, if He did not love us.

But Pastor, it sounds like God's love is conditional. Jesus says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." Isn't that conditional? That Jesus loves us if and when we keep His commandments? No. It's an "if" sentence, a conditional sentence, but Christ's love is not conditional. Let's look at it closely. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love. It does not say, if you keep my commandments, I will love you. Christ loves us. Fully, completely, unconditionally, and nonstop. So what is conditional here? Our abiding in His love. His love is not conditional but our abiding in it is.

Christ loves us nonstop. He tells us to abide in His love, remain, and stand in it. His love is there. We can wander away from it. He doesn't want that to happen to us. So He tells us to obey His commandments, because when we obey Him, we live and dwell and remain where He wants in, within His perfect plan for us.

Having reassured us that His love for us is eternal and unconditional, what does Jesus say? "Love one another as I have loved you." How do we do that? Love in Christ is kind and caring. As when our mothers do all the many things they do for us. Because we deserve them? No. Because she loves us, and cares for us. Not just cares for us as an emotion, but takes care of us. Day in, day out. With a love that is unconditional and safe.

As the Father loves Jesus, eternally and unconditionally, so too, Jesus loves us, eternally and unconditionally. We live in His love, and His love lives in and through us. By His love we love one another. Oh, not perfectly. But we love eternally and unconditionally. For it is not our love, but His.

In that room, at the conclusion of the meal, Jesus offered a prayer, which we now call the High Priestly prayer. We heard part of that prayer in our readings. He prayed that His Father would keep his disciples from the evil one. He did not ask that they be taken out of the world, but that they be made holy – sanctified, and be kept safe. He asked that they would be united, be one, even as He and His Father are one. Think of how close is the eternal unity of the Father and the Son. It is that same unity that Christ prayed for His disciples. And for us.

Not everything in Scripture is directed to us. God has not commanded us to build an ark, nor to march around Jericho seven times. But we can have confidence that Jesus's prayer offered that night, in the Upper Room, was not only for His disciples then, but is for us now, too – for you and for me. For Jesus Himself says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word." Jesus' prayer that evening was for you. He said so. It is true.

It is these same requests that we pray in the prayer He gave us. "Thy Will be done, ... Deliver us from evil, lead us not into temptation." In the Lord's Prayer we are continuing the prayers which Jesus made that night, in the Upper Room and in the Garden. But we know, don't we, that like the sleepy disciples we fail to pray sometimes. But we need not despair. For our prayers do not depend on us. Not only did Christ pray for us in the Upper Room, He Himself prays for us continually. St Paul writes, "Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."

Christ offered Himself as the perfect and eternal sacrifice. By His death and passion, we have been washed and sanctified. By His resurrection He has restored us to life in His Name. He has not taken us out of this world. We still battle evil. We still face the time of pressing. But we know that we are His. We know that He has and will deliver us from the evil one. And we know that He prays for us, even though we fail to pray for ourselves.

Amen.



HE IS RISEN!