

Holy Week and Easter 2025 Messages

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

- Palm Sunday – April 13 – “What Happens When The Cheering Stops?”*
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“WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE CHEERING STOPS?”

Message for *Palm Sunday*
From Pastor Norman Staker
April 13, 2025

LUKE 19: 28-40 * ISAIAH 50: 4-9a
PHILIPPIANS 2: 5-11 * LUKE 22: 14- 23: 1-49

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



“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

That is some heavy stuff. We might even have to get serious about life were we to take this passage to heart. And many do.

What would it be like to walk around as someone else? Children do it, dressing up in mommy’s shoes or daddy’s shirt or even big brother’s baggy

jeans. I used to put on my dad's hat that he wore, his business hat I'll call it, and walk around the house pretending to sell insurance which my dad did for over 35 years. Think about it; actors get paid for doing stuff like that. I didn't see the movie, 'Ray,' but I read a review that said watching the movie Ray, it was hard to remember that it was Jamie Foxx on screen and not Ray Charles. And we know how bad identity theft has become in this country, maybe someone here has been a victim. It can be very lucrative to walk around as someone else. The Federal Witness Protection Program offers government assistance to those who need to create new identities. And if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery has anything to do with it, then Paul's idea of letting 'the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus' must be the ultimate act of honor.

And some years ago, Ken Burns, filmmaker, released his nine-episode documentary titled simply 'Baseball.' Actor Billy Crystal, actor and not ballplayer, recalled his childhood in New York in the fifties and how he and his buddies would argue over who had the greatest center fielder, Mickey Mantle of the Yankees, Duke Snyder of the Dodgers, or Willie Mays, the Say Hey kid, of the then New York Giants. Three players, three opinions of the greatest center fielder of all time. It's an argument that really can't be settled which is part of the fun of that argument.

Think of all the "Greatest Grandma in the World" t-shirts out there. I got one that said "greatest grandpa in the world" and since there are no others that say that, I must be the greatest grandpa in the world. Sure there's a fight over who is the greatest grandma in the world and since they all can't be the greatest, well, to someone they are!

Greatest film! Greatest book! Greatest car! Greatest President! Fun to talk about. What about greatest...disciple?

That's the question that is asked in today's passage. The scripture reads: 'A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.' On this Passion Sunday/Palm Sunday some Christians celebrate the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Others recall the institution of the Last Supper, the agony in the garden, the bitterness of betrayal, the travesty of a trial, the cruelty of the crucifixion, and the solemnity of the burial.

With all that, we may want to know why even ask this question of who is the greatest at all? It is usually overlooked, and some would say with good reason. Let's set the scene:

The argument begins right after what we call the Last Supper. But those who were present didn't think of it that way. It was one of many suppers, and perhaps several Passovers, they had enjoyed with Jesus. The only ones who knew beforehand that anything was up were Jesus and Judas. Everyone else was busy with the joy of Passover. And Passover was a joyous time.

It must have been quite the sight, the people lining the lingering road that lead from the Mount of Olives down and then up into the city of Jerusalem. People were scrambling to get a glimpse of the man whom they had heard about, but maybe never got a chance to actually see themselves. This wasn't the first time that Jesus had been welcomed by people lining the streets or had drawn such large crowds of people. Throughout the last three years of his ministry, Jesus regularly had thousands who would come to hear him preach and teach. Remember that account of Jesus' feeding the 5,000? Crowds would wait and line the roads when they heard that Jesus was coming to their town. So maybe this day which we call Palm Sunday wasn't quite as unique as we think. In fact, it probably wasn't even the largest or maybe even the loudest crowd that Jesus had experienced.

But there WAS something different about that day, something different about the atmosphere, something different in the actions and the message of the people. They had cut down palm branches and used their cloaks to line the roadway, something that was reserved for arrival of a king or head of state. Suddenly the crowds were not afraid to publicly proclaim who they believed or wanted Jesus to be. They cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

It was the one thing to think that about Jesus, or to even say it up north in Galilee where no one really cared what happened, but it was a totally different thing to say it out loud in Jerusalem, during the Passover Feast that packed this city full of people, when Romans soldiers were keeping a close watch for even a hint of rebel activity against the Roman Empire. If word got back to government officials what these people were saying, that there was a new king in town, this could get ugly rather quickly. It could end in executions.

But the crowds didn't care. The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus said to those who were telling him to keep these people quiet, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." The cries of the crowd could not be contained! "Hosanna" which means, "Save us!" continued to come from the people. But FROM WHAT did they want Jesus to save them? And FOR WHAT did they want Jesus to save them? What did they actually want Jesus to do?

How many of them simply looked to Jesus to save them from the problems of their lives? Save them from the oppression of the Roman Empire, foreigners who had invaded their land, treating them like second-class citizens at best and were taxing them into submission. Save them from the problems that they knew waited for them when they went back home: a sick child, a difficult marriage, the pain of chronic disease, the

uncertainty of employment, the sadness of having lost a loved one, the loneliness of an empty house. They cried out to Jesus, "Save us!" but what did they want Jesus to save them from? How many were looking to Jesus and thinking, "Jesus, take away the problems and make our lives more enjoyable, more of the way we think it should be, more of the way we would like it to be. Jesus, save us!"

It makes me wonder, if Jesus decided to make a visible appearance today in our world, how many people do you think would line the streets and cry out to him, "Hosanna! Save us!" Now there might be cynics who would say, "Not many" but I'm not so sure. How many people have already been doing that WITHOUT Jesus making a visible appearance? How many people throughout our world have been calling out to God, "Save us!" If you listen carefully, I think there have actually been quite a few. It's kind of the natural response when tragedy strikes, when sadness overwhelms, when life is hard, when the future seems uncertain, when financial ruin stares us in the face, how many people cried out to God to save them when the stock market took the plunge it did, and hasn't regained it yet or when we are reawakened to our limitations, to our weaknesses, to our mortality – people are quick to cry out, "Jesus, save us!" But again I ask, FROM WHAT are we looking to be saved? And FOR WHAT are we asking to be saved? Saved from the things I don't like, that are uncomfortable, that are scary? Save me from those things so that I can have the life I want to have? So that I can do what I want to do? What are we looking for Jesus to do for us?

Please don't misunderstand me. Does the Lord Jesus care about the things that you are going through in your life today? Absolutely he does! In fact, it is God who invites and promises us, "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me." Yes, the Lord sees and is concerned about your struggles, your sadness, your fears, the problems that you face.

He is interested in you and wants to help you. Just look at Jesus' life and ministry. They were not conducted in a vacuum, away from people. Not at all! Jesus was interested in people, he was involved in their lives and in their problems. His miracles relieved people's suffering and removed limitations which allowed them enjoy life more fully. Yes, Jesus can and, more often than we probably give him credit for, does save us from our problems, take away pains and give us strength to endure them. But if that's all that we're looking for Jesus to do, then like many in that Palm Sunday crowd, we've also missed who this man riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday truly is for us.

If Jesus is only someone to save us from the problems of this life and make us comfortable for now, then Jesus isn't much of a Savior at all. Then he's just wining and dining us during this life while knowing that when it comes to an end, we will be lost forever, separated from him for an eternity in hell. But at least he gave us a good time while it lasted, right? No!

Jesus wants so much more for us. Jesus did not just want FOR AWHILE, Jesus wants FOREVER! Jesus does not just want you to be comfortable or to know joy or happiness for awhile, he wants you to know it without end. While those things are always temporary in this world, Jesus wanted you to have them permanently. What would that take? It would take Palm Sunday. It would take the Lord God Almighty, the creator of all things and everyone coming into this world and taking our place. You see, Jesus is not riding into Jerusalem on a donkey because he always wanted to know what it would be like to ride on a donkey instead of a white stallion or because he needed an ego boost. No!

- Jesus goes to Jerusalem for you and me.
- Jesus goes to Jerusalem, fully knowing what is waiting for him there and what would happen to him over the next week:

hatred, betrayal, desertion, arrest, suffering, crucifixion, death.

- Jesus goes to Jerusalem to offer his perfect life in the place of imperfect people – people like us – people who have at times manipulated Jesus into the type of Savior we want him to be instead of the Savior we need him to be, for people like us who have robbed him of the honor he rightly deserves by doing what we want instead of what He wants. For us Jesus goes to Jerusalem to sacrifice his life at the cross as the payment for our eternal life with him.

- Jesus goes to Jerusalem to die so that when our life comes to an end, it will not be the end, but the beginning of perfection, joy, happiness, peace, healing, that will have no end. You might be familiar with the glimpse of heaven's glory that Jesus gives in Revelation 21:4, "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old things have passed away."

- That's what Jesus came to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday for, that's what Jesus is saving you for! That's what the empty tomb of Easter morning assures us is waiting for us at the end of this life – a perfect life that has no end.

There we are crying out to Jesus, "Save us!" and it seems like he's just riding on by, not listening to us. While we might be tempted to think his answer is, "No!" actually his answer is, "Not yet." That's why we need Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday points us to the Savior who rode into Jerusalem to save us – to save us not just for awhile from the hardships of this life, but to save us forever. And so we continue to call out with confidence and praise to Jesus, "Hosanna! Save us!" knowing that he already has. That's why he came to Jerusalem – to save us from sin and to save us for heaven's never-ending glory.

I'm going to go out on a limb this morning. I'm going to suggest that we start an argument in this church, an argument about who is the greatest servant among us. And let's settle it by practicing the sacrificial form of living that Jesus demonstrated to his disciples. Let us pick up our cross.....and follow!!! AMEN!!

AMEN!!



“WHY DID JUDAS DO IT?”

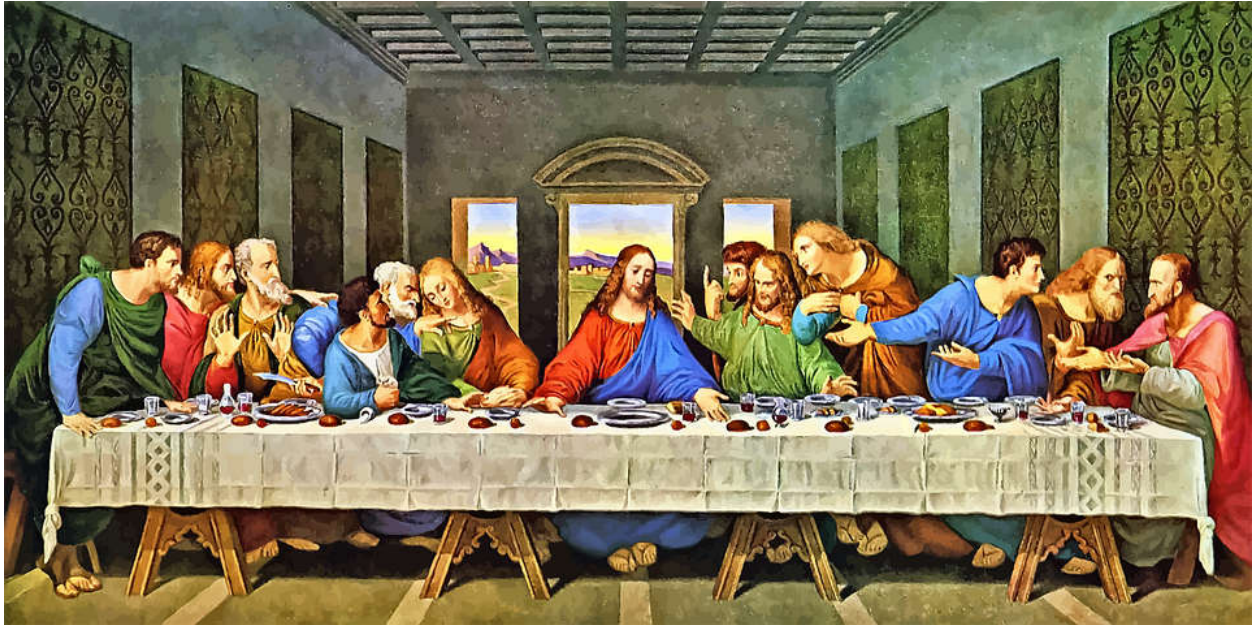
Message for *Maundy Thursday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 17, 2025

EXODUS 112: 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. AMEN. HE IS
RISEN!!**

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.”

Why Judas; why not any of the other 11? Peter, the rock on which I will build my church; John, the disciple Jesus loved, why not him; Matthew, the former tax collector who got very rich collecting taxes, especially when he charged more than

was required; Thomas, no I doubt he'd do anything like that; James or Andrew, so many choices. But why Judas?

For a prosecutor to win a conviction in court, they must offer a reasonable motive for doing the crime, 'beyond the shadow of a doubt.' A jury will want to know why someone did the particular deed. In life, we expect some rational explanation for human behavior.

So too, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, arranging for his arrest, demands some explanation, a reason for what he did. What was his motive --- and why did he do it?

Judas seems to have had every possible spiritual advantage. He was chosen to be one of the twelve by Jesus. For three years he traveled and lived as a disciple. Judas heard Jesus teach, preach and tell parables; he saw the many healings and other miracles.

He helped pass out food during the feeding of the 5000; he was there to see Jesus raise the dead and he was even in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm at sea.

Imagine what those three years must have been like.

How could Judas do such a thing, after all that he had seen and done? How could he be exposed to Jesus everyday, for all that time, hearing the incredible things Jesus said, seeing the amazing things Jesus did, how could he in the end, betray him? How could he be so unmoved, so little effect on him as to not respond with amazement and gratitude?

Doesn't it make you wonder, how come and why did Judas do it? Why..did Judas do it?

The Bible is quite explicit, that it was Judas, he had a choice. The text holds him responsible for his decision; he wasn't a patsy or a pawn, wasn't powerless to do anything else.

On the night of the Last Supper --- there in the Upper Room, he was next to Jesus in the place of honor, and Jesus washed Judas' feet as an expression of love. Jesus washed Judas' feet as an expression of love! Have they changed the definition of that word 'love?' Eros or filial or surely not agape, or was it? Jesus knew agape love from the day he was born. Jesus knows that Judas will betray him and yet he washes Judas' feet like he did the other disciples. In other words, we do not get to choose whom we serve. We can't just serve friends and family and call ourselves followers of Jesus. We can't just cherry pick the jobs and people we want to do as Christians. Like Jesus, we must become equal opportunity servants, washing the feet of anyone and everyone. I believe that even then, Jesus was holding a door open, a possibility, a desire, for Judas to repent, and to not go through with his terrible arrangement. Judas had another option, but he chose to betray his Lord.

As I prepared for tonight's message, I read that some theologians believe the primary sign of being a Christian is not baptism or Communion but is the washing of feet. Can you imagine for a moment that when bishops and pastors are ordained, that instead of being given the symbols of the office, the ritual involves having the bishop or pastor wash the feet of some stranger off the street? Can you imagine that when corporate or government leaders are installed in office instead of being given a handshake and a contract worth millions, they are given a towel and a plain washbasin and told to wash the feet of the least paid employee on their staff?

The motive for Judas' decision to betray has long fueled attempts to explain his character and reasons. In choral music and stage productions, often Judas is the most interesting part,

the most complex and best developed character. Theologians and artists love to speculate about Judas, and suggest justifiable motivations for his betrayal of Jesus.

Most suggest that Judas became disenchanted with Jesus over time. He may have followed Jesus expecting to be on the ground floor, of the coming kingdom where he would rule with Jesus. But when he realized that it wasn't going to happen, that there would be no fame or fortune, he cut his losses by taking the 30 pieces of silver.

If Judas signed on expecting Jesus to overthrow Roman tyranny, perhaps by having Jesus arrested, he hoped to force Jesus into a rebellion against Rome.

Maybe, wanting Jesus to bring about an earthly kingdom, Judas meant to make it happen, sooner not later.

Or, maybe as a good Jew, Judas was scandalized when Jesus claimed to be God, and for religious reasons, he had to stop this blaspheming dangerous false teacher.

Some suggest that Judas was tricked by the religious leaders, or maybe they threatened him, forcing him to betray Jesus. Maybe Judas was afraid that if Jesus did in fact, cause a rebellion, then the Romans would kill anyone associated with Jesus.

These are all good reasons and understandable motives, but they don't match the testimony of Scripture. The gospel writers do tell us why Judas betrayed Jesus, quite clearly, that he did it for the money.

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver.

And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

The Greek is quite specific that Judas was negotiating a deal, a business arrangement, seeking economic advantage, by getting the best price that he could manage, and so for 30 pieces of silver he sold his relationship with Jesus.

They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began looking for an opportunity to betray him. It seems pretty clear; he did it for the money, in today's dollars, anywhere from 90-440 dollars.

I find it revealing that writers and commentators search endlessly for a motive other than his greed for money.

I suppose because we are offended by such cold crassness, as 'betrayal for bucks' or 'The Price is Right,' Judas Iscariot, come on down!! You're the next contestant. Surely, it wasn't just about the money.

But from my experience in the business world, when someone says, "it's not about the money," generally, it is about the money or lack of. I remember one customer I went to see to try to collect his payment. He apologized and said, 'He was so poor he couldn't even pay attention!' Honestly, I couldn't help but laugh at that comment, but I apologized to him after.

When a complaining customer or disgruntled employee said, "It's not about the money," it was; of course it was about the money.

A corrupt love of money is a powerful and terrible motivator. Just think of what people driven by greed will do for money.

Consider the impact of money on our political system, the pressure on politicians to vote based on contributions.

Business leaders who go along with immoral & unethical decisions, as driven by greed and a quest for higher profits.

Or consider how once close and caring family members, will get shredded in battles over disputed inheritances.

Or as if a divorce weren't agonizing and brutal enough, the bloodbath of bitterness and greed when dividing the assets.

Greed and the love of money can bring out the very worst in people; it brought out the worst in Judas, to betray his Lord, and that ought to get our attention and it ought to concern us very much.

In Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, "The Last Supper," he first drew Judas with the face of his worst enemy and critic; but then unable to sleep and feeling guilty, he redrew it to portray some of his own features.

An interesting insight, recognizing that the capacity to betray lies within us all, Judas did it for the money, and that ought to awaken us and frighten us; because we too share that same motivation; we too struggle with greed & the love of money in our lives.

Since Judas did betray Jesus for the love of money, despite walking with Jesus everyday for those three years, and since we too struggle with the issue of money and greed, then we need to know and understand how and why it caused him to do such a terrible thing.

What was the process --- how did Judas fall? ... and what can we learn from his failure and sin?

In our text last week, from John 12, where Mary has anointed Jesus' feet with the expensive nard, and Judas got all bent out of shape, we read: He (Judas) was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.

Jesus spoke against the destructive danger of greed and materialism more than any other topic in the New Testament. Don't you think it was a little bit important!

Judas heard all that, he was exposed to every word, and yet he still embezzled funds from the group, he stole from the money they all shared.

Judas was probably a good and faithful treasurer, at first; but then along the way he began to compromise, which grew into full blown greed and love of money, and eventually yielded the terrible fruit of betrayal.

Judas really didn't care about what happened to the others.

Judas hadn't gotten what he expected for having stayed and traveled with Jesus for those three years, so to cut his losses – to salvage what he could, he betrayed the Lord for 30 pieces of silver, getting the best deal that he could arrange.

By letting money and greed become his master, Judas made his relationship with Jesus a fraud; preventing openness and authenticity with his Lord. And so increasingly untouched, unmoved by the love of Christ, money came to mean more to Judas than his friendship with Jesus.

I take seriously what the Bible reveals about Judas, as a warning: - that just being a disciple wasn't immunity from corruption. - that even proximity to Jesus, won't necessarily shield us from the power of greed.

Judas chose to love and value money more than he loved Jesus, and so too some of us are in danger and at risk for the same thing. Is your trust in the Lord, or is it in your stuff, your possessions? How anxious and worried do you get over money?

Does a downturn on Wall Street take away all your joy? It had people spinning last week, didn't it?

Our spiritual well being and our faith walk with God has a lot to do with our attitude toward wealth, and we will answer for how we have used God's blessings

The difference between a healthy view of money and possessions, and the greedy love of money that infected Judas, is wonderfully illustrated by Mary's extravagant anointing of Jesus, in stark contrast to the harshness of Judas, complaining about the high mis-spent cost.

The material blessings, the rich abundance from our Lord, can either strengthen our faith walk and trust in God, can be the means of serving, pleasing, glorifying God, can be used to accomplish great things for God, OR our wealth or lack of possessions can eat at our souls,

and so consume all that is of value within us, and thereby prevent our spiritual growth.

Why did Judas betray Jesus?

He did it for the money; he loved his money more than he loved Jesus his Lord.

The money itself can't hurt us, but a corrupt love of money can kill. **AMEN**

"THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS"

Message for Good Friday
From Pastor Norman Staker

April 18, 2025

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

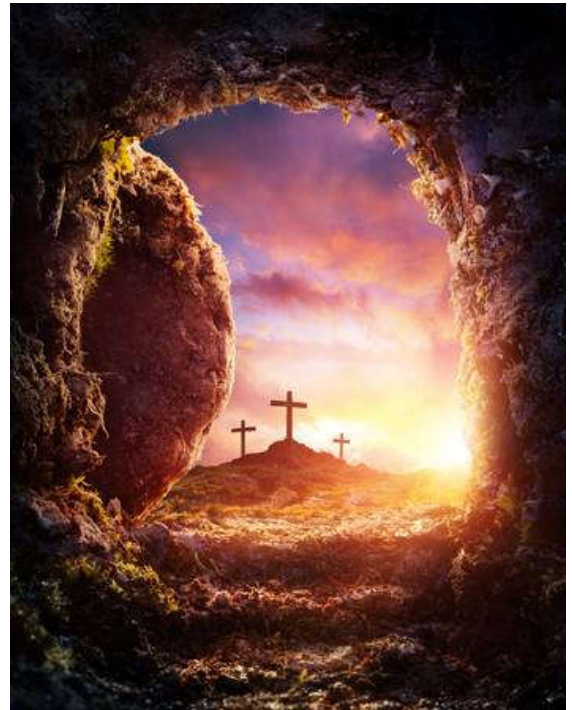
**GRACE. MERCY, AND PEACE FROM
GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR
LORD AND SAVIOR THE CRUCIFIED
JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.
HE IS RISEN!!**

The Roman Cross was a despised object in the day of our Lord, but today, it has become the logo of the Christian faith and our object of greatest joy.

No other device of death and torture has ever been devised to surpass the agony of Roman crucifixion. I must warn you that what you are about to hear is grotesque. In my preparation for this sermon I literally got sick to my stomach at times and tears filled my eyes. My words cannot do it justice.

The cross was a terribly bloody display.

Criminals were crucified on a regular basis - at times as many as a thousand in a day. Crucifixions were the most public and humiliating events known to man. It was so horrible that the Romans would not typically crucify their own citizens, but only outsiders. The Romans once crucified 6,000 people along a 120



mile stretch of road between Rome and Capua. People were traveling for days along a major trade route seeing a different person crucified every 100 feet.

This evening I am not going to focus on crucifixion in general, but the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in particular.

Billy Graham said the last 24 hours in the life of Christ was the darkest period in the history of the entire world. He even said that more people write to him and say they do not understand why Jesus had to die on the cross in order for us to be saved. They do not understand the dark hours of Gethsemane. They do not understand why Jesus voluntarily laid down his life. They do not understand why he endured the shame of the cross. They do not understand all the phrases in the Bible that talk about the blood, phrases like 'the blood of Christ,' 'the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin.' He went on to say that people revolt against that. They don't like it and they wonder why it's even in the Bible. They wonder why so much stress is placed on the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the last 24 hours in the life of Christ were the darkest in history, but the good news, it was the darkness just before the dawn.

The Apostle Paul was radically changed by the power of the Gospel. He went from taking part in the murder of Christians, to becoming one of the greatest preachers of the Christian faith ever to live. Yet if you read his 14 letters in the New Testament, not one time does Paul mention Jesus' birth, miracles, sermons, or transfiguration. Paul was absolutely fascinated with Jesus' death and resurrection.

According to author John MacArthur: The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the climax of redemptive history, the focal point of God's plan of salvation. The death of Jesus Christ was therefore

the supreme revelation of the gracious love of God while also being the ultimate expression of the sinfulness of man.

You know how it feels to sin against God, don't you? The guilt, the shame, the humiliation, when we follow the lust of our own heart and rebel against our maker? It's hard for us to bear our sin.

Imagine what it was like for this the spotless lamb of God to bear the sin of the world. He who never uttered a lie bore the lies of corrupt politicians, unfaithful husbands or wives, little boys or girls who lie to their parents. All of those lies were placed on Jesus.

He who never hurt a soul, bore the murders of serial killers as well as the hate of self righteous people, people who would look within their own family and congregation and wish evil upon a brother or sister.

He was defined by utter purity and holiness, he bore the sins of those who abuse children, rape women, he died for the sins of pornography and lust.

He who had unbroken fellowship with the Heavenly Father died for those who choose to worship the creature rather than the creator.

With that in mind, let's revisit John 19:17-27:

They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between.

To fully comprehend what took place on the cross, it is imperative that you view the cross from 2 different

perspectives, through the lens of Humanity

and second, through the Lens of Divinity.

First let's view the cross through the Lens of Humanity.

Remember that the suffering of Christ began not on the cross, but in the court of Pilate as he was scourged by the Roman guard. A scourging was a grotesque form of punishment in itself, as a whip made of several strips of leather, dipped in tar and shards of broken pottery and nails would be laid over the back of the criminal, in this case the Savior Jesus, then suddenly ripped from the back with such force that it would at times rip skin and muscle from the ribs of the one being punished and it wasn't uncommon for the criminal to lose an eye or both as the scourging would latch onto the eye socket.

Then came the Mocking. Jesus had already been slapped and beaten repeatedly, so his face was no doubt swollen and bleeding. After the scourging, his back would have been a mass of bleeding wounds and quivering muscles.

It was at this point that a robe was placed on his back - mocking his claim to royalty, a crown of thorns was fashioned and placed on his head but not just placed, forced down on the head of the victim, a reed was placed in his hand as a mock scepter. And the foolish soldiers bowed down to say, "Hail King of the Jews."

1 Peter 2:23 tells us: 'And while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.' How many of us would have kept our mouths shut?

At this point Jesus was required to carry his own cross. A Roman cross would have weighed approximately 200lbs - a

heavy load under any circumstance. In fact the weight was so great that Matthew tells us a man named Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. At this point, Jesus was too weak to walk unsupported and Mark tells us He was carried to Golgotha.

Is any of this bothering anyone here because it gets worse; can it get any worse? Then his cross would be laid flat on the ground; his garments would be removed and Jesus would be laid upon the cross. Large nails 6-9 inches long would have been driven into his forearms which would typically shatter the carpal tunnel ligaments, but the wrist would be strong enough to support the weight of the body. A single nail would be driven through both feet. At that point the cross with Jesus upon it would be lifted up in the air and fall suddenly into a hole prepared for it. You can feel the pain and cruelty of the jarring of that cross into the hole as it's dropped in, not just set down in the hole.

The accused would be left there to die a slow, painful death.

In his book "The Life of Christ," Frederick Farrar describes crucifixion as follows:

A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly-dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, shame, publicity of shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of intended wounds-all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness.

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant

anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened [when a victim took several days to die]; the arteries-especially at the head and stomach-became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood, and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst, and all these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which made the prospect of death itself-of death, the unknown enemy, at whose approach man usually shudders most-bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release.

Dr. Truman Davis gives an additional description of Jesus' crucifixion:

At this point another phenomenon occurs. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen. â€

Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber; then another agony begins. A deep crushing pain in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

It is now almost over! The compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues. The

tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, 'I am thirsty' A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth.

That is a brief glimpse at the cross through the lens of humanity - but you must also gaze through the lens of Divinity. Because you see much was taken place that could not be seen by the human eye -

2. The Lens of Divinity

Why did Jesus, the Prince of Heaven have to endure such Hellish treatment?

Paul tells us - He died for our sins according to the scriptures.

Folks, a part of you is right here in the Bible. I am too. No, not your name, not your story, but your sin is there! It's right there.

Your sin, not just sin in general or all kinds of sin. But your sin in particular. From the most common to the most sinister of all your sins, they are there.

Where are they Pastor? They are upon our LORD: He became our sin; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross.

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.

In Isaiah, 'the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.'

Again, imagine what it was like for the spotless Lamb of God to bear the sin of the world.

NEVER, NO, NEVER FORGET! NOT ONLY DID JESUS DIE, JESUS DIED FOR YOUR SINS AND MY SINS!!

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

The death of Jesus on the cross provided the potential of salvation for all, but it is only effectual to those who will believe.

An old preacher once dreamed of standing in line at the judgment seat of God and having every sin he ever committed written and pinned to his robe. Then Jesus came in and took every one of his sins and walked to the front of the line and said, 'I'll pay what he owes.'

In closing, folks, think about this; the cross was a thing to be despised. It was called a scandal among men. Yet God chose that method to confound the wise and save the world. No man will ever be able to stand in heaven and say "I got here by my own ability, by my own works." No, we will have to stand and say, when we get to heaven 'We got here by the Cross. We got here by the death of Christ on the Cross.' And the fact that he was raised again from the dead.

AMEN!!

"HOPELESS ENDING - ENDLESS HOPE"

Message for *Easter Sunday*
From Pastor Norman Staker
April 20, 2025

ACTS 10: 34-43 1 * CORINTHIANS 15: 19-26 * LUKE 24: 1-12



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!! OK, IT'S THE DAY THAT WE CAN SAY THAT WITHOUT FEAR OF BEING ATTACKED, HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!! LET'S DO IT ONE MORE TIME, OR WILL THIS BE THE LAS TIME?

Easter, is it the best good news ever told, or is it the best-kept secret? I think that is an important question for you and me and for everyone. If we take our passages seriously from Psalm 118 and Luke 24; then I suggest to you today that God's way is that of resurrection; he is able to give new life in situations where we human beings seem to see only death. In both our psalm and gospel today, we learn that when God acts to give new life; then we are called upon to go and tell this best good news to others.

In our psalm, which is the last one of the Hallel Psalms, Hallel psalms are psalms that use the word 'Hallelujah' or 'Praise' quite frequently, namely psalms 113-118 and are used at the Jewish pilgrimage festivals—especially for the Passover—the

psalmist remembering both how God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, as well as recalling how God personally delivered the psalmist, says this: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD." Recount the deeds of the LORD, in other words the psalmist wants to tell others the best Good News there is; that where death was knocking at the door; God acted to bring life.

In our gospel, on that first Easter morning, the women came to embalm Jesus' dead body with spices. They were expecting a dead Jesus inside the tomb. Surprise! Surprise! They found an empty tomb, and two men telling them Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he had told them he would when they were in Galilee, before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. So with that message told first before the event by Jesus himself; then retold by the two men at the empty tomb; the women go to the eleven apostles and the other followers of Jesus and retell the message of Jesus' resurrection to them.

Now when you think of your life, how did you come to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? Well, I hazard to guess that your parents or grandparents, or some other relative, friend, neighbor, a pastor or Sunday School teacher, a fellow student or fellow worker told you the best Good News of Jesus' resurrection. You may say: "No, I read it myself in the Bible." True, however someone had to write it down for it to get into the Bible. So another human being was involved. I know I would not be here today to celebrate Easter with you unless someone—namely my parents and grandparents, as well as pastors and Sunday School teachers had told me the best Good News of Jesus' resurrection. So you see without someone telling us in many and various ways, the best Good News would remain the best-kept secret.

Whether we realize it or not, Easter calls each one of us to go and tell the best Good News to others.

There is a long history of such people, starting with the first apostles. Luke tells us in today's gospel that when the women told the eleven apostles the best Good News of the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection they were skeptical: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." However, as we learn later on they did come to believe and then went out and told the best Good News to others. This pattern of moving from skepticism to faith continues to this very day. I was reading some commentaries the other day and I came across this little tidbit. The shortest will in the English language was scratched by a man with a key on the dashboard of his car as he was dying. It consisted of three simple words-'All for mother.' I understand that will hold up in court too.

The scene was far more grotesque at the cross on that hill far, far away. Not only was the execution public, as were most in that era, but it was slow and drawn out. Victims of crucifixion, dying in agony, were nevertheless able, and perhaps even expected, to speak to those close at hand. Did you catch that; even dying in agony, they were expected to talk to the onlookers who were down on the ground! What do you talk about as you hang up there, with nails driven through your wrists, and your ankles, you're in tremendous pain naturally! And yet, you're expected to talk to people on the ground. "do you think it will rain tomorrow? Well, if I'm still here, I'll let you know; Can I make reservations for two at the Olive Garden of Gethsemane for this Friday; will those alterations on my new suit be done by next Monday? What does a person being crucified and dying talk about; is there such a thing as general conversation? And they were allowed to disperse their goods, to write their will in effect, and their words were binding.

Jesus is crucified, dead, and buried. The tomb is sealed. The soldiers stand guard. Caiaphas and his company mocking

report the words spoken from the cross, 'It is finished!' and go their way.

But it's not; it is not finished!! The seal is broken. The tomb is empty. The angels announce to the three women that He is risen. And they charge them to go out and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus walks the earth again, and goes before them into Galilee.

Thousands witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. No one saw Him rise. The proof of the Resurrection rests on the chosen witnesses who saw Him alive, who talked and walked and ate with Him. "To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God."

Today is Easter. He is risen!! He is risen indeed!! But is the resurrection true? If it is, what does that mean for you and me? How does it give hope in my life, your life?

And how do you answer the person who asks, 'Is there a God?' Does he really care about me? If so, why is there suffering? But then Easter comes along, and Easter poses the ultimate question: did Jesus rise from the dead? If the resurrection is true, it changes everything; it transforms our understanding of life, death, and eternity.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our faith. Without it, Christianity collapses. But with it, we have the ultimate assurance of God's power and plan. So, how do we know the resurrection is true? Let's examine the evidence.

When the women came to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty; Jesus' body was gone!

Even Jesus' enemies couldn't deny the empty tomb. Instead, they tried to cover it up, claiming the disciples had stolen the body. If the body of Jesus had been produced, Christianity would have ended on the spot. But no one could—because Jesus was alive.

b. Eyewitness Testimony

In a court of law, an eyewitness is usually the best way to find out the truth. The more eyewitnesses an accused has to testify in his defense, the better his or her chances of being released. The risen Jesus appeared to many people after His resurrection:

Mary Magdalene in the garden; the disciples in the upper room; two disciples on the road to Emmaus; more than 500 people at one time.

These appearances weren't hallucinations or dreams. They were physical encounters with the risen Christ.

Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds; He ate with His disciples.

These eyewitnesses went on to boldly proclaim the resurrection, even at great personal cost. People don't willingly die for something they know is a lie.

More proof is the transformation of the Disciples. Before the resurrection, the disciples were fearful and defeated: we know Peter denied Jesus three times; after the crucifixion, they hid behind locked doors in fear of the authorities.

After encountering the risen Christ, they were completely transformed: Peter preached boldly at Pentecost, leading

thousands to faith; the disciples traveled far and wide to proclaim the gospel, many facing martyrdom.

This radical change is only explainable by their certainty that Jesus had risen.

Easter is God's answer to the world's no.

In the quiet of that first Easter morning, God's hand reached down into the tomb where his son lay, his hand picked him up, breathed life into that body and knocked the stone away.

From that moment, God's yes was heard in our world of no's. God's triumphant yes, to all the no's of hatred, sin, oppression, anger and injustice rose above the dust and ruin that mankind made of this world.

God's yes, God's victory, God's rule on that Easter morning rose above the smell, the cruelty of that Good Friday. God's yes rose above the cruelty of the cross, the selfishness of mankind.

In the Easter event God's place of glory, honor, power, might, and majesty were once again secured. He won; through his son God defeated the forces of sin, death and the power of the devil. God won on Easter. God triumphant mightily.

God came out with the victory. Mankind on the cross tried to defeat God. Mankind tried to be in control of salvation and even God himself. And to all when Jesus died on the cross, when they took his lifeless body down and laid it in that borrowed tomb, to all it looked indeed that God had lost.

Joseph of Arimathea was a very wealthy Pharisee, a member of the council, and a secret follower of Jesus. It was Joseph who went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body after the crucifixion. And it was Joseph who supplied the tomb for Jesus' burial.

Well, it seems that someone pulled him aside and said, "Joseph, that was such a beautiful, costly, hand-hewn tomb. Why on earth did you give it to someone else to be buried in?"

Joseph just smiled. "Why not? He only needed it for the weekend."

On Easter morning, God won. On Easter morning God proved to everyone that he was in charge. On Easter morning God's yes, God's cry of victory could be heard over the faint cries of the world's no's. God had triumphed. He won.

Christianity is the only religion in the world that can point to an empty tomb. Every other world religion has a dead leader. But Christ is alive. He arose! He arose!

Heaven is not empty but the tomb is. God has won and the victory is ours.

"Why do you see the living among the dead?" We do not seek the living among the dead any longer as God said yes to life.

We who live in this imperfect world can marvel at the resurrection. We who have known brokenness, illness, death, grief, loss can appreciate the resurrection even more. For the resurrection says yes to all the world's no's. The resurrection says yes to us who live now with the unfinished creation. The resurrection says yes to us as we deal daily with the unfairness of life.

In this dark world, the resurrection says yes to us. Yes, Christ lives, Yes there is something more beyond the grave. Yes, there is a Savior who now walks with you in this world of brokenness. You are not alone, but Christ is our guide and comfort on the path of life. Yes, He is risen; He is risen indeed!!!

AMEN!!



HE IS RISEN!

“DOES EASTER MAKE A DIFFERENCE?”

Message for the Second Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 27, 2025

ACTS 5: 27-32 * REVELATION 1: 4-8 * JOHN 20: 19-31

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

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’

Let’s back up a minute. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen?” What would you do if you heard this message ‘He is not here but has risen?’ Would you run away in fear? Would you stand there stunned and shocked? Would you have listened and remembered? Would you have gone to friends and family and told them what you had encountered? Or would you just stay quiet?

Well, folks, the good news, no the great news is that Christ is risen; He is risen indeed. Easter is why we exist as a church. Christmas is great but it’s not why we are here. Easter makes us wake up and hear the news that Jesus is not here. He is risen as he promised. This Good News is the Gospel. It means that because of Jesus we have salvation and new life.

A pastor tells the following: "I’ve never seen such a crowd in church, the woman exclaimed’. I didn’t know her, but apparently she was impressed by the number of people here for Easter worship. Then, as she was shaking my hand and moving toward the front door, she added, "Do you suppose it will make any difference?"

I held on to her hand so she couldn’t get away, "What do you mean?" I said "Will what make a difference?"

"Easter," she shot back. "Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday?"

That lady's question is truly a profound question. "Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday? Will Easter make any difference in your life? Has this week been any different for you because of the Easter event last Sunday?"

Did it make any difference for you as you were leaving the sanctuary, as you were driving home, possibly going out to eat, taking it easy that afternoon, or any day this past week? Did Easter make a difference for you? And I'm not asking to see how my really great Easter message had any effect on you but Easter in general?

But maybe now you're thinking, Pastor, I've heard the Easter message for the last 50 60, 70, 80 plus years. What's new about the Easter message?

Easter is truly a religious holiday. Oh, sure we have the Easter bunny and the tradition of buying new clothes, but in the final analysis Easter has not been commercialized; it is truly a religious event and has this religious event made any difference in your life?

I would like to suggest this morning that Easter does, can and will make a difference in our lives in at least 3 areas, one, we now live in the living presence of the living Lord, two, there is now a profound sense of peace in our living because of Easter, and three, life is marked with a purpose because of the Easter experience. I would like to look at these three areas this morning to see how Easter "does make a difference in our lives."

One: Living in the living presence of Jesus through the Easter event does make a difference in our lives.

Living in the living presence of the living Lord, living in the power of the resurrection, living in Christ means we are people who live in hope and victory. Hope that because He lives, we, too, will live. Live in a way which brings hope to the world of brokenness. Hope that lives, people, events, circumstances don't have to be that way, we don't have to live in the brokenness of this world, there is that possibility of change, of renewal, of a new life because Jesus Christ has risen. His living presence through the Holy Spirit in this world means we are not people who live in despair, but people who live in hope. Hope that through His presence, his

power in our lives God can make winners out of us losers. Life doesn't have to go on in the same way, Easter can make a difference.

If we open our eyes, we can see all around us living proof of this hope this renewal, this change in the lives of people. People have felt the forgiving power of Easter, the hope that they don't have to live with guilt, so their lives are changed. People who have sorrow, who have experienced grief have the hope and the promise there is more to death than pain, there is the promise of the resurrection, the promise of new life for their loved one, and the promise that Jesus will heal the pain of death, the sting of death in their lives. People who live with illness have the hope that Christ's presence will either heal them, or give them the courage to live their lives with this brokenness and that somehow in spite of their brokenness, God will use them to minister to the people around them. We could go on and on, but I think you get the point. Easter does make a difference, because the risen Lord is living with us and he does bring hope, change, renewal, courage and strength, into our lives.

Secondly, Easter makes a difference because through that experience, we have a profound sense of peace in our lives. Peace that God through Christ and the Holy Spirit is in control of life. Peace that I can surrender life into his hands and he will more than adequately take care of me. It was a peace that Thomas was looking for which drove him away from the community of believers, a peace he thought he could find through his own conditions and his own demands, but he only found frustration, loneliness, despair and sorrow.

But, when he returned to the community of believers, when he returned, Christ appeared to him and in that appearance, he found peace as he cried, "My Lord and my God ". Thomas gave up his own conditions, his own demands for life and began to live in and through Jesus and when he did, life had a sense of peace, a sense of confidence, a sense of strength, a sense of quiet strength that God through his son and the spirit was indeed in control. Easter makes a difference when we realize that we don't have to control life, we don't have to have our way, we don't have to have our demands or conditions met, but God is the one who is in control in a way which brings peace into our lives. There is peace to the Easter message which says we belong to God regardless of the circumstances in life.

That is the peace, which Christ gives to our lives, the knowledge, the conviction, the comfort, the confidence that we belong to him that no matter what happens in this life on this earth, we belong to God. It is a sense of well being in the middle of disease, brokenness and despair. It is the sense of confidence knowing, believing,

and trusting that somehow God is in control. Even when we have a difficult time seeing his hand, even when we cannot understand all the chaos around us, God is still in control, that is peace~ that is peace, a sense of blessing in our lives.

Easter makes a difference because of this sense of peace, this sense of well-being, the sense of God's blessing in our lives. It is this peace, this well being, which enables a widow to go on living, which enables a person racked with pain and illness to still see joy in life, a young person searching for meaning and purpose to finally find, his/her place in life. A peace which enables a mother and father, husband and wife to overcome the difficulties of family and marriage in the peace, the forgiving power of Jesus Christ. Do you understand? The Easter experience, the Easter resurrection brings to life even in the worse circumstances, a sense that God is in control, that I, we, belong to him, that somehow life can and does go on in and through him. The Easter resurrection does make a difference in that it brings that marvelous peace which does pass all human understanding. It bring that shalom, that sense of God's blessing and wholeness into life, that sense of well-being in spite of all the brokenness in our lives and those around us. Yes, I am convinced that Easter does make a difference in each of our lives because of this sense of peace.

And finally, we come to the third way Easter makes a difference in our lives in that it marks life with a purpose with meaning, with a goal and direction.

The message of the Easter Resurrection, the message of the gospel, the responsibility of living in the commandment of the Lord, the duty of being a holy temple, a living sacrifice to the Lord, is the burden placed on each of us as we became God's children in baptism. But at the same time, I believe all those things are a gift from God to bring meaning and purpose into our lives. They are like the wings for the birds, a burden to carry, but a blessing at the same time for in and through them, life, your life and my life has a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, a sense of calling In and through the Easter resurrection, the power of the risen lord.

Easter makes a difference if, and only if you and I are willing to carry our burden, carry this gift of the gospel with us in our walk down the road of life. But, I think, in this day, many people have absolutely no burdens to carry, no direction for life. They wander, they flow with the tide of life, never staying one place long enough to make their mark in the sands of time. I see this in our young people when I ask what do you want to with your life? They don't know. They go off to college and some come back because they don't know what they want, no goal, no direction.

Maybe, just maybe, if more of us were open to the gospel message, open to God's spirit working with our spirit, maybe if we took this Easter message more seriously, maybe we could find some direction, some purpose, some meaning to life in and through God. Maybe if God's hand were doing the guiding, we would not have so many people wandering aimless along the road, of life. But with God's hand, he would be leading them in a direction he wants for their life, and then life would have meaning and purpose.

Maybe, if we carried our burden of God's grace in our lives in a way that it wasn't seen as a burden, but as a gift which adds not subtracts from life, then, life would take on a meaning, a purpose, a sense of direction as God's grace leads us to his will.

The burden of God's grace is really no burden because it is carried out of love, our love for God and God's love for us.

He is risen; just as he promised. This is the Gospel. It means that because of Jesus we have salvation and new life. So, now what do you do with the Easter message? Are you quiet, saying nothing about your faith? Do you hear it and wonder who you can tell your story to? Do you embrace it with all the gusto that you tell a friend about your vacation plans? The Gospel is to be shared and invited into. We are the tellers of the news just like the angels at the tomb; just like the women who left the tomb and told the disciples. People of God, we cannot keep quiet about Jesus. We have been called out of baptism to tell the good news of 'Jesus is Risen,' 'God loves you,' and you are saved by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Easter is here; live like it!!!

AMEN!!

“WHAT IF JESUS CAME TO YOUR HOUSE?”

Message for the Third Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 4, 2025

ACTS 9: 1-6 (7-20) * REVELATION 5: 11-14 * JOHN 21: 1-19

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

After hearing the drama-filled story of Easter Sunday, which we heard a couple of weeks ago, and after listening to Thomas’ doubt-shattering encounter with the risen Christ last Sunday, today we are treated to what sounds like a common fishing story.

Gathered together for this occasion were Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, brothers James and John, and two other disciples who weren’t named by the narrator, seven of Jesus’ faithful followers together. They’re no longer in Jerusalem but they’re near the beautiful fresh water lake known as Tiberias or what we know Galilee, about two days walk from the capital city. Maybe they needed to get away from all the stress of the previous months. Maybe they wanted to do something relaxing while they tried to make sense of all that had happened. Peter, their leader, said, ‘I’m going fishing.’ Naturally, you can imagine the response of the other six, to go back to something they could understand and control, boats, nets, and fish, instead of crowds, chaos, and a crucifixion. ‘We’re with you, Peter!’ they shouted back.

But as in many fishing adventures, the initial enthusiasm of the determined fishermen waned as they cast their nets over and over with nothing to show for their efforts. What sounded like such a good idea led to nothing but weariness and disappointment. Most were asleep when Jesus appeared on the beach close enough to call out to them. But they didn’t know it was Jesus. ‘Any luck?’ he asked. Now if you’ve ever gone fishing and other people are around, the natural question is something similar, like ‘did you catch anything?’ ‘Nothing,’ they grumbled back to him. “Try the other side of the boat,” he said.

Imagine that you're in that boat. You've fished all your life; you've been on the water for hours this time. You're tired; you're hungry. Your back and shoulders are stiff and sore from throwing out the net. But, you haven't caught a single fish and this guy on the beach knows just what you should do. Being hardened fishermen, they muttered some off-color words and said, 'Why not;' and they do it; they did what he said! And the net is so full, they weren't able to pull it in.

Peter knew right away. It's Jesus! Impulsive, brash Peter jumps into the water to swim toward Jesus on the beach. The others came to shore in the boat, pulling the very full net and Jesus is reunited with these seven friends. The rest of the story, however, includes no description of the men's great joy in their reunion. Instead, it's an understated story of a huge quantity of fish, 153 to be exact, and an invitation to breakfast. There's fish and bread and Jesus acts as the host taking the food and giving it to his friends. And there's a bit of hushed silence as John tells the story saying, "None of the disciples dared to ask him, Who are you? Because they knew it was the Lord."

A wealthy old man had just recently married a lovely young lady and was beginning to wonder whether she might have married him just for his money. He asked her, "If I lost all my money, would you still love me?" She said reassuringly, "Oh honey, don't be silly. Of course I would still love you. And I would miss you terribly."

This somewhat humorous story reveals the reality of conditions some of us place on human love. Did you know we place conditions on our giving of love but not the receiving? We love to be loved but to love; that's another story. Today, we hear about the unconditional love of Jesus. That love, the love that Jesus gives to us is absolutely without condition; there is nothing we can do to lose His love and nothing that we can do to gain more of His love.

Jesus asks a pointed question near the end of our gospel from John this morning: "Do you love me?" And he asks it not once, not twice, but three times! That being said, what would you do if Jesus was coming over to your house today? Let's go one step further; what would you do differently, differently, if Jesus came to your house today? If it was a Sunday, a lot of folks wouldn't even think about going to church; they'd stay home and make sure everything was in place, no dust on the Bible, everything clean and shiny.

There's a knock on the door. You open the door and it's Jesus; not some wise guy pretending to be the Christ but Jesus himself. You invite Him in and offer Him a seat on your La-Z-Boy cause you know he's used to reclining! So now he's in your house; what do you think the first question he might ask you would be? Can I have a glass of wine? I've been around wine my whole life. You don't have any; so do you have any water? I'm pretty good at changing that to wine if you'd like. But no, he asks you, 'Are you a believer, that is, a believer in me? What's been happening in your life? Why didn't you take the trash out when you were asked?'

What would he ask? As I look at the Scriptures, I believe the first thing he would probably ask us is "Do you love me?" It is what he asked Peter in our text today after his resurrection. I believe it is the question that he asks us today. Sadly to say, I don't think a great number can answer the question with an unconditional yes. And I'm talking about people who attend church every week, who make confession of faith as believers, yet when it comes down to the final analysis of their belief, they could not answer 'Yes' when the Savior asks 'do you love me?' You see, you can't fake it when you have God asking the questions. He has the ability to cut through the shucking and jiving to get right down to the real truth. He is omniscient; he knows everything, even before you answer, he knows what you're going to say.

There is a test of truth in answering the question. Jesus gave the test to Peter and history shows us he passed the test. Jesus has given the test to you. Can you pass? The test is not in a blanket answer: Do you love me; Yes Lord I love you. No, actions speak louder than words, and Jesus applied this in his comments to Peter. 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Tend my sheep.' A third time Jesus asked 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him a third time, 'Do you love me?' 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

There is a lesson being taught in this passage that is deep. The love of the Savior, the devotion for Jesus Christ needs to be followed up with the action of ministry. When you love, you will do something for the person you love. You will work to show your love.

I like the instruction Paul gives to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

But I am getting ahead of myself, because we cannot be a workman until we can honestly say yes to the question, 'Do you love me?' that Jesus has posed. Unless our service is motivated by an intense love for Jesus Christ, even if we do work, and so many do work, and so many do not, but if our work, our service, is not motivated out of that intense devotion to Jesus, it becomes a duty, it becomes something that we do because we think we are suppose to do it but it is not something of devotion, it is not something of passion in our lives.

Jesus introduced us to this type of love; agape. What are the results of Agape love, the implications of Agape love? Agape is not merely emotional but it is a matter of mind, heart and will. Agape is the love of God and it comes from Him. Agape is a seed that is planted in the hearts of believers and it produces fruit over time. Agape is perfectly expressed in the sacrifice of Christ for us. Agape is the glue that holds the church together. Agape is the love we are to have for every person, not just close family or friends but every person; there's a tough one. Agape is proven by our obedience to Jesus. Lastly, Agape makes us more like Christ and who doesn't want to be like Christ?

Love. It is where the rubber meets the road. It is what separates the truth from the half- truths. It is what leads one to an intensity that moves beyond just knowledge; it takes one to the very heart of passion for whatever the focus of that love concerns.

Let me put this another way. What do you do when you have allowed something other than Jesus to take center stage in your life? When you cannot answer the question, 'Do you love me?' in the affirmative. When you have gotten off-track, folks, I want you to know, the game is not over.

The greatest commandment given by God is found in Matthew 22:37, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

The primary thing that God is looking for our lives is our love toward him. Love comes before our working for Him, for if we work without a holy passion, we labor in vain.

How do I know. Jesus said it was so.

There is a disturbing trend in the church today. Christians, doesn't matter what denomination, Christians who can come week after week, month after month, year after year and make no progress in their spiritual growth. They still commit the same sins in the same way; they still refuse to think biblically, to relate to God as he demands. But they are in the same seat on Sunday morning, faithfully. In fact, no one else had better take their seat! Many of us want to give God everything but what God requires. We want to offer him a little of this and a little of that but we are not giving what God requires: a committed life, using the time we have for spiritual development.

Today's story contains equal amounts of mystery and simplicity, enough of each to catch our attention, no pun intended. There is the mystery in the presence of the risen Christ appearing to his friends from the shore unrecognized. The mystery deepens when his suggestions to put their nets on the other side of the boat results in an enormous success. Then the mystery is honored when his friends realize it is their Lord in their midst, but they remain silent, evidently so stunned by his presence they hardly dare to speak. His holy presence evokes a reverence expressing itself in muted voices.

It's a mystery that is perceivable but the story is told simply. It's a meeting with their crucified Lord, the risen Christ, but he appears as just another fisherman, offering good advice resulting in a fine catch, and they recognize him during breakfast on the beach. Shouldn't there be more drama in this meeting? Shouldn't this reunion be more glorious? The dialog is meager at best: 'Let's go fishing; any luck; try the other side; bring me some fish; let's have breakfast.' The rest of our text includes the more drama-filled meeting of Jesus and Peter when Jesus breaks Peter's heart with his question, asked three times, "Do you love me?"

It's a story that is the perfect antidote for those who seek signs of God only in church, only in the religious, or only in that which is spiritual, dramatic, or glorious. So much of the surprise revealed in Jesus is how God comes to us in the common, God has come down to earth, to where we live, and God meets us in that which is common.

Look for God's presence in the common. Jesus came to earth not in the form of royalty, but as a baby. The church celebrates Jesus' presence in baptismal water, in the bread and wine of communion, simple events, a bath and a meal. He told us to become like a child in matters of faith. He is present where two or three are gathered. We are judged on the basis of how we treat 'the least of these.' He spoke

in the daily jargon of farmers and fishing people, not in the refined vocabulary of scholars.

Jesus revealed God in a net full of fish, a breakfast on the beach, and maybe we don't need to be surprised. It is God's nature to come down to us.

Amen.

“A LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS”

Message for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 11, 2025

ACTS 9: 36-43 * REVELATION 7: 9-17 * JOHN 10: 22-30

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

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal they lay down for the night, and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. “Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

Watson replied, “I see millions and millions of stars.”

Holmes asked, “What does that tell you?”

Watson pondered for a minute. “Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is omnipotent and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

“What does it tell you?”

Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke. “Watson, you meathead. Someone has stolen our tent.”

Happy Mother’s Day! On this Mother’s day, the Church, the community of believers rejoices in the knowledge that the Savior’s tomb is empty. The empty tomb is God’s commitment to save us. His love is absolute and His care for us is uncompromising.

I've titled this message "A Love Without Limits." That title is so fitting because it explains not only Jesus' love for us but our mothers love, "A Love Without Limits."

In a familiar Bible story a baby was placed in a papyrus basket. You know him; his name was Moses. To avoid having her baby killed by Pharaoh's death squads, his mother, Jochebed, hid her baby as long as she could and then she placed him in the basket. She didn't just send the basket down the river; she had a plan. She placed the basket in the bulrushes near where Pharaoh's daughter bathed and then she had the older sister watch the basket, hoping there just might be a chance that Pharaoh's daughter would fall in love with the beautiful baby. It was a high risk plan. But a mother's love was willing to risk losing her child, in order to save the child's life.

Mothers have a powerful influence on the lives of their children. There is the story of 2 women who argued over a child in front of King Solomon. One mother said the child was hers; the other insisted it was hers. When Solomon ordered that the baby be cut in two and half given to each woman, the false mother was delighted but the real mother was willing to surrender her child rather than have him killed.

Mothers have a powerful influence on their children and it is reflected in the amount of attention Mothers get that Father's don't. Hallmark says that more cards are sent on Mother's Day than Father's day. There are more phone calls made to moms on Mother's Day than there are to fathers on Father's Day.

One man complained about this discrepancy, noting that he literally poured himself into his son's life. He taught him to play baseball, football, basketball, took him hunting, fishing, taught him how to drive. And then, when the boy went off to college and played ball for the college team, the network TV cameras focused on his son and guess what he said? "Hi, Mom."

Mother's Day is a special day. Whether we can claim the title of 'mother,' we all have a mother; otherwise we would not be here. I hope and pray that your mother demonstrated selfless, "agape" love just as Moses's mother did. I hope she pointed you to Jesus but in fairness, and since we'll celebrate it next month, I hope your father did too. As a mother or grandmother may your life, your behavior, enable the next generation to see Jesus.

A mother's love is a great blessing. They help shape us and mold us. They serve as cook and counsel, barber, and budget director. Their love covers our shortcomings.

Their faith overlooks our failures and encourages us that tomorrow would be a new day... and they believed in us.

Love is a big concept. Really too big for this short message. We remember what the apostle Paul wrote in Corinthians 1 Corinthians 13, often called the "Love chapter." Love has meaning when we practice patience, kindness, when our words are not rude, when we do not keep a record of wrongs. Today I will only talk about a single component of God's love and the love of a Christian mother.

This component is not on the list of attributes that theologians ascribe to God; like omniscience, all knowing; omnipotence, all powerful, holiness, justice or grace. The one that is used to describe God but might come really close to describe mothers is omnipresent, present everywhere, moms seem to be wherever they're needed. But there's another word that is not popular in our world and is often disregarded. The word is "commitment."

In a world where love almost always seems to be conditional and contractual, commitment is a rare thing. In an age when you are supposed to be self-fulfilled, self-actualized, self-starting- the word commitment is unpopular. Which is why a mother's love is so special and stands out like a lighthouse on a storm-swept shore. A mother's love is not dependent on what her child does, or doesn't do, or worldly success. Mothers are committed to loving their children. And so is God.

God's love is a committed love. God is omni-committed. That's a new word to describe God, omni-committed. His love is not rationed, regulated or restricted. God loves us. He calls us his children. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God went looking for them. He was committed to saving them. He promised to send a savior. It was a promise He was committed to keeping.

God did the same in Jesus. If we celebrate the love of our mothers, how much more should we celebrate the love of our God? Who else but Jesus would come to seek and save the lost souls who were hiding? Who else would remain committed to showing a doubting world that God has been faithful in his commitment to rescue us from ourselves, to save us from sin and Satan? It is he who taught us to pray, 'deliver us from the evil one.'

Jesus was born so that you and I might be saved. He lived, suffered and died so that his blood would cover our sins. He did what even the most compassionate and caring mother can not do: He rose from the dead. The empty tomb secures God's commitment ...that all who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. Jesus said: "I

tell you the truth; whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and will not be condemned.” “...for everyone who looks to the Son (of God) and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day.”

I would like to add a special thank you to Christian mothers. Like all moms, they carry picture albums packed with their children's photos; they know more about Harry Potter and Dora than they do the President. They know all the Sesame Street songs. Christian mothers are special because they know they are the human window through which their children will see Jesus.

A strong grip. Today we hear Jesus proclaim that no one can snatch his believers from his hand. In John chapter 10, Jesus uses the image of a shepherd with his sheep. A hired herder will flee when danger comes. When the wolf lurks around the flock, the hired hand runs away because he doesn't value the sheep. But the good shepherd cares for the sheep; he will risk his own life for the sake of his flock. No one will wrest even one little lamb from his flock. He will fight to the death for his sheep, and prevail.

Now the leadership of the Jewish hierarchy have circled around Jesus like a pack of ravenous wolves. They've cornered him in the temple area. Is Jesus the hired hand or the good shepherd? Will he flee and save himself, or will he protect his flock, even to his own death?

Well, we know how that turns out, don't we? Jesus is the good shepherd! He gives his own life to preserve his beloved sheep! Jesus will go all the way to the cross and offer his own life blood. And even then, his strong grip will prevail. Three days later, Jesus will rise victorious over even death!

Folks, no one shall snatch us from the hand of our Savior. Not sin, not death; especially not sin, and especially not death!!

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.” Keep your ears attuned to the voice of our Savior. He has proven his loving intentions and his strength through his works. In his resurrection he showed us that nothing can snatch us out of his hand, not even death. He has claimed you as his own beloved.

You were adopted into his holy family at your baptism. On that day, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, you became a sheep of God's beloved flock. Keep your ears tuned to his voice and dwell in the love that flows

from his divine heart, the source of all love and life and truth. It is a 'Love Without Limits.' The love of God; the love of a godly mother.

As we celebrate this special day that we honor all mothers, remember this; the legacy of a godly mother is not found in the mountains of dirty diapers, the convoys to the kitchen for midnight feedings, or the myriad of messes picked up. And the child who becomes CEO of a successful business or a famous artist does not measure a mother's greatness. Those are things the world would claim to be great and worthy to be printed on Hallmark stationary.

The true greatness of motherhood is measured by the hours a mom spends at the foot of her Savior's cross, the patient discipline she administers in his Name, the fervent prayers she offers in faith, the devotion to God's Word displayed. In short, the greatness of motherhood is found in the Savior who gives moms the certainty of something truly worth sharing with their children – eternal joys in Christ. Thank God for a mom who cares about the end result – eternal joys in heaven; first for herself and for her family. And thank God for all He's done and continues to do to make such things possible in your life. Once again, I wish a Happy Mother's Day to all of our mothers, yes, but especially to all the mothers who made each one of you possible.

AMEN!!

“SO YOU CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN!”

Message for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 18, 2025

ACTS 11: 1-18 ** REVELATION 21: 1-6 ** JOHN 13: 31-35

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

The season of Easter shows us that love's redeeming work is done,, love shown to us in Christ, love that triumphs over death. This love is not cheap, but comes at a cost; the cost of spending 40 days in the wilderness, of being tempted by Satan; the cost of setting his face to go to Jerusalem, waiting to be killed, the cost of losing his life, in order to find new life, resurrection life. While you're thinking about that, are you trying your hardest to capture the attention of the world or, or to make God take notice of you through your righteous achievements? A word of caution, the glory of man does not endure; it pales in comparison to the glory of Christ.

In Greek literature, Virgil wrote about the plight of humanity and how something new needed to be done to help man out of his predicament. In Greek thought, God was removed, a mere spectator, like someone observing a play in an amphitheater or a stadium—sometimes intervening in a helpful way while at other times getting involved in ways that were harmful.

Many different perceptions about God have been expressed through literature. Shakespeare, for example in King Lear, expressed the idea of an angry vengeful god when he cried out, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.”

The Bible reveals the truth about God in a very different way. God was not just an uninvolved spectator, nor was He a disenfranchised director who would maneuver good or evil within the lives of the actors. God became an actor on the stage in the

person of the God-man Jesus, and then took center stage on a rugged hillside outside of Jerusalem. It was there that God provided the help mankind needed. It was there that the spotlight of God's glory was displayed through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.

Over 2,000 years have come and gone since that deciding scene in human history. Countless other actors in the play of life have tried to steal the show seeking to stand in the spotlight, but all have failed. The spotlight of God's glory remains fixed upon the cross of Calvary. From there the light of God's glory permeates the world as it is reflected in the lives of those who have trusted Christ as their Savior.

Who is in the spotlight? Do you see the glory of Christ, or are you blinded by the stage lights of the world being held captive by its illusion? Who is in the spotlight? The Bible brings Jesus clearly into view. Let's look again at John 13 and discover why God's glory is revealed in Him and how we can reflect His glory to others.

John opens this thirteenth chapter saying, "having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of His love." Jesus then took the place of the servant washing His disciple's feet; the greatest among them became the least. Afterwards Jesus told them that they should follow his example; they too must humble themselves putting the needs of others first with a servant's heart.

Within this intimate setting Jesus then informs the twelve that one of them will betray Him. Each of the disciples are bewildered and wonder who it might be. When Judas is identified as the one who had entered into a conspiracy, he leaves the group to betray Jesus into the hands of His enemies. Even though Jesus has told them plainly, the other disciples do not understand what is about to happen.

Enter our Gospel text for today: "When he had gone out, Who is the 'he' that is referred to here? When he had gone out, it's of course Judas, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews, so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Why do we love one another so; even more, why does God love us so much, when a consequence of the disobedience of our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, is that

every last one of us will die? Remember last week's conversation between Jesus and Peter: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' A third time Jesus asked 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him a third time, 'Do you love me?' "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

There was and still is a lesson being taught in that passage that is deep. The love of the Savior, the devotion for Jesus, needs to be followed up with the action of ministry. When you love, you will do something for the person you love. You will work to show your love.

Peter was instructed to feed and tend the sheep and lambs.

Today, it's a follow-up almost, if you've been listening. Today Jesus says, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

This is the moment that Jesus will be fully glorified as the Son of God. Jesus said, "NOW is the Son of Man glorified." What does it mean for Jesus to be glorified? Put simply, Jesus is shown to be God.

Glory refers to the honor, and majesty together with the brightness and radiance of God united with God's infinite perfections and moral attributes. Now that's a mouthful!

Jesus tells his disciples, "NOW glory will be seen in me." God's glory had been made known through Jesus in the past:

- Born of a virgin in one of Bethlehem's stables, Jesus birth, foretold through prophecy, was then announced by angels. God's glory was all around!
- Jesus' teaching was with an authority that the priests and Pharisees did not have. Why? When Jesus taught, the glory of God was being revealed.
- Jesus had healed the blind, the deaf and mute. Because of Jesus, the lame could walk and the leper was cleansed. Those bound by demons had been set free; even the dead had been brought back to life! God's glory was being revealed through what Jesus did.

- Peter, James and John were with Jesus when He was transfigured; He became radiant. The three watched in awe as Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah. God's glory was all around them.

In the past the glory of God had been revealed around and through Jesus, but NOW, now God's glory would be fully revealed IN JESUS. The glory of God displayed in Jesus at the cross and His resurrection proves that He is God of very God.

What is the NOW Jesus is talking about? NOW is the time of His crucifixion. The time was now at hand for Jesus to be turned over to evil men, falsely accused, mocked, condemned, beaten, and cruelly executed. Jesus lets His disciples know that in the midst of this most difficult moment in time, God is going to turn the spotlight on. The glory of God would be seen in Jesus as He endured the suffering before Him. How is that possible? The brightness of the light, the glory of God, can best be seen in contrast to the darkness of evil and sin.

We believe that Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God to man; apart from Jesus, it is impossible to know God. What is it about Jesus that makes God known to us?

- Is it the Old Testament prophecies which His life fulfilled?
- Is it His virgin birth?
- Is it the many miracles which He performed?
- Is it the way Jesus had authority over demons?
- Is it the things that Jesus taught us about God?
- Is it the fact that Jesus practiced what He preached that He led a pure and sinless life?

Yes, it is all of those things, but none of them could stand apart from the fact that Jesus died and rose from the dead. His crucifixion and resurrection validate everything He said and did. Jesus is the complete revelation of God to man because He is the God-man crucified, buried and risen again. Either Jesus Christ

actually is God or He isn't (and if He's not, then it is impossible for man to know God).

Just as Jesus told His disciples, the time had come for God's glory to be revealed in Him. We can know the glory of God in Christ because He willingly suffered and died. God's glory wasn't revealed in the way any of Jesus' disciples expected or how any of us would have expected.

Now don't miss this point; it has direct application to our lives. Glory does not always come as we expect it to. That's worth repeating: God will make His glory known in unexpected ways: Isaiah 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

The Glory of God Will be Reflected by Jesus' followers; how so?

None of us are a light in and of ourselves. Without the light of Christ being reflected through our lives there is only darkness. In the same way that the moon reflects the light of the sun bringing light to the night, so we reflect the light of Christ to a sin darkened world. Jesus calls His followers, "the light of the world" and encourages us to let our lights shine bringing praise to God.

So how is the glory of God and the light of Christ reflected in our lives? Good questions deserve a good answer. Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The world is looking for proof—is Jesus who He claims to be or not? The only way the world will ever know is by looking at us, by examining how those who claim to follow Jesus live their lives.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another."

As we discern the complicated issues before us, we're given the lens of Christ's love to guide us. Let his love be our simple and only guide. This is what unites us; his love is the foundation of the Christian faith. We are one in Christ, one in his love, one in his Spirit. In his love, let us love one another. And by this love, the world will know we are Christians!

AMEN!!!

“DO YOU LOVE JESUS?”

Message for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 25, 2025

ACTS 16: 9-15 ** REVELATION 21: 10, 22-22.5 ** JOHN 14: 23-29

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

Jesus is in the midst of his farewell address to his disciples. The overriding theme at this point is his departure from them and his sending the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to take his place.

The Synoptics, just to refresh your memories, the Synoptics are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, those three gospels, tell us that Jesus spoke to his disciples at their final meal together, but John has the discourse spanning five chapters. He presents Jesus as delivering one final packaged message that, in fact, contains material the Synoptics have scattered throughout his public ministry. Put in the form of a “farewell message” the material has a timeless value, so it speaks to all Christians of all ages and conditions.

The disciples find themselves in a similar situation; they are about to be sent out on their own journey, away from their teacher who is leaving them. But Jesus is not as open-minded with them as most of us are with our children. There are no words of unconditional acceptance, ‘we love you just the way you are.’ No words of self-development, ‘Go discover who you are in the world.’ No words of intellectual self-realization ‘seek truth and pursue it.’ Not from Jesus. “If you love me,” he says, “you will keep my commandments.”

Or “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love that person, and we will come to that person and make our dwelling with that person.” Jesus even takes it one step further, “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.”

The disciples aren't given a bunch of choices; they are commanded to keep the word of Jesus; to show their love by obedience to Jesus' command even after he is gone. Honestly, I prefer the invitational Jesus, the come and see Jesus, the Jesus who sits at table with everyone, the Jesus who resists harsh and unforgiving politics from state or religion. This is the Jesus we have come to know in our community. This is the Jesus we have tried to give our children as they grow into adulthood. But here Jesus is, with his expectations as clear as day, telling his disciples that if they really love him, then they will keep his word.

Jesus answered Judas, not Iscariot, notice how the writer is quick to add that part, not Iscariot, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them."

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. You heard me say, "I am going away and I am coming back to you. If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I."

Two weeks ago, we celebrated Mother's Day. To be honest with you, I really don't look forward to these days. They remind me of going on a first date, you have to try and do that little something extra- put on a little more cologne, be a little more pleasant and talkative, but talk about your date, in a good way of course! Just because someone (probably the florists and the card people) call a day Mother's Day, and we know that's not how it started, Anna Jarvis pushed for the special day, but on this one day children and husbands are pressured to do something beyond just saying "thanks." They're supposed to buy some flowers, take them out to eat, or make them a card. I don't like it when someone says I have to show someone love on a certain day. I'd rather do it when and how I want – not when someone tells me to. I also wonder how often these days just end up getting people more angry at one another because they don't get treated the way they feel they deserve. Instead of promoting love, I think they more often than not end up in disappointment.

What about Jesus; do you love Jesus? If you do, how do you show it? You can't buy him flowers. You can't take him out to eat. Neither Hallmark nor American Greeting cards have a special card for Jesus so you can't give him a Happy Jesus' Day card. But there are some other things you can do. In today's text Jesus mentions two things you can do if you love him. Now, I want you to understand that this isn't like the Mother's Day celebration. Jesus isn't drawing a line in the church and saying, "if you really love me, then do this." He's more stating a fact of

what those who love Him will do. A better translation of this would be – “whenever anyone loves me – he will.” So I don’t want you to look at what Jesus tells us to do as something we have to do – but something we just naturally will do out of love for Jesus. Ever since our baptisms – this is just a natural thing. It’s like telling a kid to watch TV or play video games – it’s just something God makes us do by His grace.

What does Jesus say we will do as loving Christians? Jesus literally says, “whenever anyone loves me, he will keep my Word.”

Jesus gave us His Word – and told us to keep it. In the Third Commandment we say how we “keep it” - by regarding it as holy and gladly hearing and learning it. This explanation is taken from God’s Word – which tells us what it means to keep His Word. Isaiah 66:2 says, “this is the one whom I esteem – he who trembles at my Word.” Think about what the Bible actually is. It is God’s Word. God chose to tear down the barriers – come down from the heavens – and communicate with us. We now have an inspired Bible – written by direction of the Holy Spirit. Think about how much more precious this Word is. If God appeared to you tonight in a vision and had some things to say to you – and wrote them down for you – how would you treat that book? You would keep it – be very careful in how you treated that book – and you would also read it very carefully. He wants you to read all about what He did for you. He wants you to have a firm confidence in the way to salvation by His grace. He wants you to know how to live your life. In other words – keeping His Word is more than putting it on a shelf.

In today’s gospel, Jesus speaks of a home; a different kind of home than most people would think of.

He tells his disciples and all would-be followers of his that: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” These words give all faithful followers of Jesus a wonderful promise. This special home that Jesus is referring to here, provides us with everything we need in life—everything necessary to live our lives abundantly, to fulfill God’s will and purpose.

What is home? For some, it’s a place of sorrow, insecurity, hurt, pain and abuse. For others, it’s a place of joy, security, comfort and love. The Gospel of John often has a strange way of speaking, which is foreign to the other three Gospels.

The culture of Palestine during this period of history placed a great deal of importance on the home and hospitality. The home was a place of nurture, rest, retreat, growth and fellowship. God wants to make a home within us and offer us a marvelous hospitality, a life of health, wholeness, peace and love. A home that makes it possible to keep God's word by getting involved and putting our Christian faith into practice in response to what God in Christ has done for us.

Keeping our faith, loving each other, things that make this Memorial Day, tomorrow, a special day. It's a day we remember the fallen heroes, and honoring their sacrifices on our behalf.

Every conflict we've ever been involved in has had its share of casualties of both sons and daughters lost, of mothers and fathers lost, brothers and sisters lost, all which can break a home apart if God is not present there, if the love of Jesus is not there, if faith in the Triune God is not there, all of that and more can wreck a home very easily. These casualties showed unusual bravery in the midst of combat.

There are many, many more such stories, but the picture is clear. Many men and women have put their lives in extreme danger for their comrades in arms, and, in some cases gave their lives, in order that the others might live. It seems in every war, in every battle, almost without exception, such heroic actions occur, sometimes from individuals you would least expect. I have no doubt that each time, in the days and weeks that followed, the recipients of such unselfishness were inspired to fight for their wounded or fallen comrades, perhaps with a greater zeal than ever before.

In a small, Middle Eastern country nearly 2,000 years ago, that's exactly what happened. A closer look at this hero reveals some strong similarities to the heroes I just described, but also some significant differences.

His name was Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter. Raised in Nazareth, the scriptures give us little or nothing to go on about his early life, other than the familiar Christmas story, the visit of the magi, and the time when he stayed behind at the temple and his parents came to find him. After that, there is a significant jump ahead in time to his adult life and his ministry among both His people the Jews, and many Gentiles as well.

But really – who would have expected such heroic action from this man? The prophet Isaiah tells us there was nothing about him physically which would have

hinted at the possibility of any heroics, not like we would like to picture our heroes. Like so many heroes of our present day, he, too, gave of Himself.

To begin with, Jesus put himself in harms way, he endured pain and suffering for the benefit of others. In Isaiah 53 this was foretold far in advance. We read: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

And He did it willingly, as Isaiah continues: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Matthew records in his gospel, not once, but twice, Jesus responded to the pain and suffering He was about to endure with the words, “Not my will, Father, but Yours be done.”

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!” and in Romans chapter 5: “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

It’s at this point, however, where our comparison falls short. The men and women of the military put their lives in danger for the sake of their fellow soldiers against other human beings. The battle Christ waged was against something far more powerful and devastating. The ultimate victory was not simply the taking of some important hilltop or body of water, or even one country over another, but one which secured our very souls—the victory over the power of the devil and of sin in our lives, and ultimately, the victory over death.

As we leave here today, let me encourage you to remember those who have served and made the sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy today. At the same time, give thanks to God, also, for Jesus Christ, and HIS willingness to serve, His commitment to our spiritual freedom and our eternal salvation. And then, be confident in your daily “faith battles,” knowing that you are equipped by God to be that faithful warrior that makes a difference in the world around you.

The need for a military force will more than likely never disappear. We will need a protectorate from the forces around the globe to guarantee the rights and privileges we can express today. It is through our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines that

we have the luxury of unprecedented freedoms on Earth. But, only Christ can grant the freedom from sin that His sacrifice has granted us.

AMEN!!!

“ONE PLUS ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS ONE”

Message for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

June 1, 2025

ACTS 16: 16-34 ✠ REVELATION 22: 12-14, 16-16, 20-21 ✠ john 17: 20-26

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

We have a wonderful mystery to contemplate this morning, and it is summarized in a strange formula. It's not really all that complicated, but it is worthy of reflection for it has implications for our lives together. Here is the formula, an equation, really: $1 + 1 + 1 = \text{One}$.

Rather strange math, isn't it? Well, it's God's math, so let's see how it works. It works because as Jesus states in our Gospel lesson this morning, we are one in Christ and one with the Father.

He says in john 17: 21 "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that you sent me."

Jesus and the Father are one and the disciples and those who may believe may be one in us. Jesus plus the Father plus those who believe equal one. One!! We are all one in the body of Christ.

Just think, we are all one today in the body of Christ. One. One leader, one person in charge, Jesus Christ. Jesus knew something that we sometimes forget. We need someone in charge. We need to have someone that everyone can turn to.

One Sunday a minister was giving a children's sermon to all the kids in church. A bright-eyed three-year-old girl was listening intently as he explained that God wanted them all to get along and to love one another. She was tracking with her pastor until he said, "God wants us all to be one." To which the little girl replied, "But I don't want to be one; I want to be four!"

This girl was on to something. Many of us don't want to be one either. It's much easier for us to splinter into four groups, or forty groups, or even four hundred different groups. While it's difficult to get an exact count because the number keeps going up, there are thousands of denominations and religious groups in the United States alone.

Many of us are quick to divide over just about anything. As someone has said, "to live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that's another story." The Bible is filled with a focus on family togetherness. God's people are designed to fit as pieces of a puzzle in order to form a united picture of divine love. When we are unified, we display the personality, purposes, and power of God.

Here's a brief survey of some Scripture passages that lift up the spiritual standard of a cohesive community of faith.

Judges 20:11: "So all the men of Israel got together and united as one man against the city."

2 Chronicles 30:12: "...The hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD."

Psalms 133:1: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

Jeremiah 32:38-39: "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them."

John 10:16: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

Acts 4:32: "All the believers were one in heart and mind..."

Romans 15:5-6: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:10-11: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

How are we doing in our quest for unity within the community of faith? Are we united as one person? Are we living together with singleness of heart this morning? Are we one in mind so that we’re in agreement with fellow Christ followers? These are tough questions to answer, aren’t they? Left to ourselves, we don’t automatically drift toward unity. In fact, our default setting is disunity. History is littered with a lack of harmony among humans.

The good news is that we’re not the first group of believers to display disagreement. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, demonstrated more discord than accord. James and John caused envy and jealousy when they wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom. Matthew was a tax collector who had sold out to Rome and Simon the Zealot hated IRS agents. On the night before Jesus selflessly gave His life, an argument arose among those who should have known better.

In the final moments before His arrest, Jesus could have prayed for His own strength. He could have requested that the eleven would support Him. His intercession to the Father could have been filled with a desire to make the disciples better teachers or servants or givers or leaders or administrators. Instead, His prayer was dominated by a single thought the unity of his followers.

In John chapter 13, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet as a demonstration of servanthood and then challenged them with a new command in verse 34: “...Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” In chapter 14, He comforts the disciples by telling them that even though He’s about to leave, they can join Him in heaven if they put their faith in Him. In the meantime, Jesus is going to send the Holy Spirit so that they will not be orphaned. As He’s walking through a vineyard in chapter 15, He reminds them that apart from Him they can do nothing. In chapter 16, He teaches them more about the Holy Spirit and the peace that He will bring to their lives.

Then, on the eve of His excruciating death, He utters an appeal for unity. John 17:1 begins, “After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed...”

This is the true “Lord’s Prayer.” The other prayer that we commonly refer to as the “Lord’s Prayer” is actually a model for us to follow, or we could call it the disciple’s prayer.

This is the longest prayer of Jesus. This prayer is long in two ways it’s Jesus’ most protracted prayer recorded in Scripture and it’s the longest in the scope of time it covers because it extends all the way to today. Look at verse 20: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” That’s you and me.

This prayer is saturated with urgency. You can almost hear the agonized intensity as Jesus pleads with His Father to make His followers one. In fact, He asks for our unity four different times! This chapter has been called the “Holy of Holies” of the New Testament because we’re allowed a glimpse into what motivated the Master.

This prayer was prayed aloud for the disciples’ benefit. His followers couldn’t help but be moved and convicted about their disregard for unity as they heard Jesus pour out His heart to the Father. Because it was prayed out loud, the Apostle John was able to record it so that we can read it today.

We need supernatural strength to be united with fellow followers. If the early Christians struggled to maintain unity, and we do as well, it’s obvious that we need God’s help in this area. The very fact that Jesus prayed for unity indicates that we can’t accomplish this on our own. The last hours that Jesus had with his disciples ended in a prayer meeting.

We could summarize this prayer by saying that Jesus is committed to His church presenting a witness of oneness to the world. Jesus prays essentially about three matters:

Verses 1-5 For Himself...that He may be glorified.

Verses 6-19 For the disciples...to be protected and sanctified.

Verses 20-26 For the church...to be unified.

Let’s look first at verse 11 as Jesus prays for His disciples: “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-the name you gave me-so that they may be one as we are one.” Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers

behind in a very tough world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they are going to face. He knows how the Deceiver will work to divide His disciples and so He prays for their protection by appealing to the power of God's name.

Notice that He refers to God as "Holy Father," indicating that the Father is far above the wickedness of the world. His "name" stands for all of God's resources, power and abilities.

Satan works hard to sever relationships among Christians. His number one mission is to divide us because he knows that a "house divided cannot stand."

This protection that Jesus prays has a purpose in mind: "so that they may be one as we are one."

We need more than a committee. Jesus knew that the 12 disciples needed someone to be in charge. Someone had to be the leader. And that leader was Him.

There could not be one chosen successor to Jesus. His message had to go forth. It had to go forth as a light in the darkness. As a gift in a world sorely lacking in love. But it was the message OF Jesus, told in his words, in the story of his life. A single successor might be deified, might become the focal point for all the love and faith people had for Jesus. And so, 12 disciples, 12 teachers, 12 messengers, 12 men who after this evening and Friday would be cowering, hiding behind locked doors, fearing for their lives, silenced.

Not only does Jesus say that he and the father are one, but he tells the disciples that they and he are one. There is a togetherness, a unity, a harmony, a common cause between him and the disciples. There is a bond that links Jesus with his disciples, just as the bond of love links Jesus and his Father in heaven.

It is the dream of every pastor to have a congregation filled with people who are that determined to be in worship every Sunday. I need not even say to you that there are church members who are much more dedicated to their favorite sports team than they are to God. They give more money to their team. They know more about the players on the roster than they ever will about the heroes of the Bible. And I will not live to see the days when people in the average congregation will sit in a cold, miserable rain to worship God like many will do to cheer on their favorite team. Perhaps that's because we don't understand the essential nature of

the church. I believe if we could see the church as Christ sees the church, we would not take attendance as casually as we do.

Yes, that gospel message that we are called upon to proclaim has been briefly outlined for us by Jesus. He reminds us he and God are you, and He tells us that we and him are one. He is at our side, he is at our elbow giving us the power to live life, and giving us the guidance as we journey through the mists of life. As we live and wait for the Pentecost experience coming next week, let us focus on that gospel message so that we might, when filled with the spirit's power, proclaim that message not only in words, but in our actions, in our lifestyle, in the power of the risen Lord in our lives.

One plus one plus one equals one in God's math. Jesus and God are one, and we and Jesus are one.

Amen