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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Keep My Word”

Text: John 14:23-29 (Rev 21:10-14, 22-23)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I lived in New York, there was a lady named Helen in my congregation. She was like many of the older ladies in the church – kind of shy and quiet and reserved. She was a widow, lived by herself, and had her share of health problems. But Helen would faithfully come to church and attend Bible classes as often as she could, and over the course of time, I realized that Helen had memorized a good amount of Bible passages. In fact, we gave her the nickname “the living Bible” because she had so much memorized. And I still remember that one of her favorite chapters was John 14. She would recite it often, and she always had joy in her eyes when she did. These words meant a lot to her, and comforted her, and were a part of her.

On the other hand, I remember being told the story of a young lady who wanted to be confirmed into a congregation. Her parents had become members of that congregation a few years before, but were sporadic attenders – a couple of times a year, at best. But since their daughter was now in Junior High, they wanted her confirmed. So when the confirmation class started in the fall, she came to the first meeting and found out what the pastor expected: regular attendance at church, assignments done each week for class, and memory work. Well, the young lady didn’t want to do that much work, *especially that much memory work*. The mother also didn’t understand why so much work was required, especially since all she had been required to do was go to a few classes after church for a few weeks, and she was made a member. So after asking the pastor to change, but getting nowhere, finally the mother told her daughter, “*Just wait a few years until you can get into the adult class; it’ll be easier then.*” And they went back to attending church only a couple of times a year.

Today in the Holy Gospel we heard Jesus say, “***If anyone loves me, he will keep my word.***” The question for you and me today is then: **are we keeping His Word? And why is it important to do so?** . . . For what is your story? What is your reaction to hearing and learning the Word of God? And not just on Sunday, but everyday. And be honest – are you closer to Helen? Or closer to that mother and daughter?

Well, to answer those questions we must first know what it means to **“keep God’s Word.”** For most people, when they hear that phrase, immediately think it means *to obey*. Some translations of the Bible, in fact, translate it that way. But thinking that way, when you read or hear this verse, there is then an immediate sense of **burden**. If I want to be a Christian, if I want God to be with me, this is the burden I must bear. I have to obey. I have to keep the commandments. I can’t do all that I want to do. *It is the attitude of that mother and daughter. . . .* But isn’t life busy enough? Isn’t it hard enough just trying to get by? Why be a Christian if God is just going to impose more burdens, more obligations, more requirements, on me? If I’m going to have to live my life worrying about whether I’m doing things right, or good enough. It’s not worth it. I’d rather not.

But that’s not what Jesus means with those words! The Word of God is *much more* than simply law and commandments. Oh, to be sure, His law and commandments are in His Word, and they are important! In fact, Jesus speaks of His commandments just a few verses before this. But to **keep God’s Word** means *much more* than that. To keep God’s Word means to keep it not as a burden of obedience, but to keep it as you would keep something that is very precious or valuable to you. To guard it; to protect it; to treasure it. It means to regard it like a soldier in battle receiving a letter from his finance. He would not just read that letter once and then throw it away – he would keep those words. He would keep them close to his heart. He would put that letter where he could take it out easily and often, and read and re-read those words. So that, in the middle of battle, when he is tired and weary, those words would keep him going. They would remind him of what he is fighting for. They would remind him of what is waiting for him. *Like Helen*, they would fill him with joy and hope.

And it is in that way that Jesus speaks these words: **“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word.”** For as He speaks these words, Jesus is about to leave His disciples. He is about to be arrested and crucified, and enter into the final battle against Satan. And so He is not telling His disciples (and us!) to be good little boys and girls, to make sure we remember and follow the rules! He is telling us to remember His Word. *All of it*. All that He has told us, about Himself, and about God. All that He revealed to us. All the Word that He had fulfilled, and was now about to fulfill. Keep my Word, Jesus says, for you will need it. You will need it when Satan attacks you. You will need it when you grow tired and weary in the fight. You will need it to remind you of what is waiting for you. **“Keep my word.”**

And why is that important? Because *by keeping the Word of God, the Word of God will actually keep us*. For the Word of God is *much more* than a letter in the pocket of a soldier. It is *much more* than something that simply causes us to remember, or helps us to buck ourselves up. It is *much more* than memories, encouragement, or instruction. **The**

**Word of God is a word that is alive.** It is the very way that God uses to come to us. His way of actually and truly and really being present with us today. And this is what Jesus said in the rest of the verse that we are considering: ***“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”*** With those words, Jesus shows that His Word and His presence are bound to each other.

And so by keeping the Word of Jesus we receive Jesus Himself. And if we receive Jesus, then we receive also the Father, and as we heard later in the Holy Gospel, also the Spirit. Through the Word, we do not receive just a part of God, but all of God. He comes to us and makes His home with us.

And that is significant. The Lord, the King of the Universe, the Creator of all things, the Author and giver of life, is at home with us. Often times, when we go to someone’s home or they come to ours, we *tell* them to make themselves at home. But we don’t! We can’t, can we? We act differently. We know this home is not ours. But according to this verse, that is not how we are with God, or God with us. Through His Word ***“He comes to us and makes His home with us.”***

The first time that happened was the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were at home with God and God with them. Sin broke that home, but not God’s desire to make His home with us. So God established the Tabernacle and the Temple in the Old Testament, and dwelled with His people. But still it was a broken home; broken by sin; requiring many sacrifices for sin. Until God then came in the person of His Son, and in Jesus, both God and man made their home. God with us. And in that home, although there was no sin, Jesus took our sin – all of it – that in breaking His home, His life, on the cross, He would provide a new home, a new life for us. And on Easter, that is what He did. The broken home of Good Friday became the new and risen home of Easter. The sin and death of Good Friday became the forgiveness and life of Easter. The separation and forsakenness of Good Friday became the unity and peace of Easter. And this Easter home cannot be broken. We are again at one with God. In Jesus, God comes and makes His home with us.

And the living and active Word of God makes this home our home. *By keeping the Word of God, the Word of God actually keeps us.* And so in the Word of God that we hear read and preached and that we read, the Word of God joined to the water of Holy Baptism, the Word of God joined to the bread and wine of Holy Communion – in this Word, in all these ways, God comes to us and makes His home with us. And in this home and Word, we live. In this home and Word, we are being fed and washed, strengthened and forgiven. In this home and Word, we are being lifted up and comforted, protected and

preserved. And we need it! For there is still a battle going on in our world, and Satan is still attacking.

***“Keep my word,”*** Jesus says. . . . A scuba diver will carefully guard and preserve his oxygen tube, because he knows that this is the way life-giving air gets delivered to his lungs. An astronaut on a space walk will pay close attention to his tether, because he knows that this lifeline will both keep him from floating helplessly into space and will also lead him back again to the safety of the shuttle. (Thanks to the Rev. Erik Rottman for these examples.) And in the same way, those who love Jesus will keep, guard, preserve, store up and take careful heed to His Word. Those who love Jesus will stay connected to His Word in His life-giving Sacraments. For these are our lifelines. These give us all that we need. These give us the peace that the world cannot give.

Until the scene pictured in the reading from Revelation comes, when the light of God’s Word here on earth is replaced with the light of the Word made flesh, the shining glory of the Lamb of God. Then our lifelines will no longer be needed. For we will be at home, forever, in Paradise.

Until then, Jesus says, keep my Word. For by my Word, I am keeping you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.