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Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“His Truth: Your Way to Life”
Text: Acts 17:1-15; 2 Peter 2:4-10; John 14:1-12

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

When Paul spoke in the synagogues in Thessalonica and Berea, you can be sure he did not say: *we all worship the same God*. He didn't say: *you know God your way, and we know Him our way*. And he didn't say: *our religions are equal; just different paths up the same mountain to Heaven*. You can be sure he didn't say any of those things that we so commonly hear today. Because if he had, there wouldn't have been such violent opposition against him! And there also wouldn't have been any who believed in Jesus. For there wouldn't have been any need to, if Paul was just presenting a different spiritual option. For then, why change?

But Paul's message was threatening, because he didn't say any of those things. Any of those deceptions and lies of Satan. Instead, he said that there was only one truth, one path to life, and one way to Heaven. He said that if you claim to know the Father apart from His Son, then you do not really know the Father at all. And he said that if you want to be saved, there is only one way: through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For **only He** is the way, the truth, and the life. **Only He** is the Son of God who shows us the Father. **Only He** is the One who conquered death in His resurrection, and can lead to Heaven through His ascension. There is no other way. No other religion. No other truth. It is as Jesus said: ***No one comes to the Father except through Me.***

And that, my friends, is a message that at first seems threatening. Because it is exclusive. Because it presents no options, no loopholes, no wiggle room. You can only either receive it or reject it. You can either continue on your own way, or go His way. *So what's it gonna be? . . .* And in response to that message, both of those things happened. Some believed in Jesus, and others killed Him. Some believed Paul and the other apostles, and others persecuted them and killed them. And today it is the same. Some will believe, and others will reject, and ridicule, and seek to kill and silence the Christian Church and all who believe this message.

But do not think this is bad news! (Because I know that's what you were thinking!)

We all do! Because none of us want to suffer! None of us wants to be rejected. None of us wants people to think we are intolerant, or narrow-minded, or prejudiced against others. I'm sure Paul would rather not have been chased throughout Asia Minor! We want to be liked, and we want the Church to be liked and to grow, and we want people to join us and be saved. The problem is that we sometimes think that we can achieve those goals by *softening* this threatening message. By not being so doctrinaire. By being more open-minded. By not insisting on Jesus, and His truth, but slowly and silently changing our ways, and our thinking, and then our teaching. . . . And so today it has become fashionable to acknowledge that perhaps there is something to other religions. That they're not so wrong. That they all have a kernel of truth that can perhaps save. *But still join us!* For though we may not be the *only* way, we have a *better* way . . .

What would Paul think of that? . . . I think he would say that a message like that is the *real* bad news, because it certainly isn't the Good News! It is bad news because such a kindler, gentler message will not and cannot save anyone, though it does appeal to the comparison-shopping consumer in each of us! But in reality, all it does is simply confirm us where we are. It confirms us in our unbelief, or our disbelief, or our belief in ourselves. The synagogues that Paul went to would have, in fact, welcomed such a message. As does the world today.

But Paul did not preach what they *wanted* to hear. And the Church today dare not preach what the world – or what we – *want* to hear! Because it will do no good. Because **if the message is not first threatening, then it cannot be saving.** *Because as Jesus taught, and as He showed, there must be death before there is resurrection. In order for there to be a new man, the old man in us must be killed.* Because the old, sinful man in each of us cannot be rehabilitated. He cannot be reformed, or improved, or worked into better shape. He does not want to change his stripes, or change his ways. *He wants his own way, and doesn't like to be told he can't have it!* And you know this! You know it because the old, sinful man in you wants his own way, and keeps trying to take control, and to do those things we know we shouldn't do, and not do those things we know we should do. . . . *But even more than that, that old man in each of us wants to be told he is good.* He wants approval. We want to hear that our sin isn't so bad, that our inclinations are right, that we can believe what we want, and that God likes us just the way we are. We want to hear that *I'm okay.*

The thing is, **that's exactly what God wants to tell you too!** He *wants* to tell you that you're okay, and that you have His approval, but in order to do that, He must first show you that on your own, the way you are, you're not okay! He must first show you your sin, your shortcomings, your failures. That you do not live up to His standards, and that by nature, you are not good. *And that's threatening, isn't it?* That's uncomfortable.

Those are hard words to hear. And therefore some, perhaps many, will reject them. But God loves you too much to soften that message, for when He thus kills our reliance on ourselves, and our abilities, and any goodness we think we might have, **He then raises us to a new life.** A new life built not on the cornerstone of our own efforts, or merits, or good deeds, but on the *right* cornerstone. The *true* cornerstone, which is Christ crucified. For as Paul said, ***it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead.*** Necessary not for Him, but for us. To save us. To take away the sin that separates us from God. ***And this Jesus,*** Paul said, ***whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.*** The Christ crucified for our sins, and raised for our justification. The Christ crucified, that through His death and resurrection back to life, we too might die and rise with Him to a new life. The Christ crucified, who said from the cross, ***Father forgive them*** (Lk 23:34), that with that forgiveness of our sins, we would have the approval we so need and desire. God's approval. And know that in this Christ, He declares us good and right in His sight.

That is the message Paul preached, and that Jesus spoke in the Holy Gospel that we heard, when He said, ***I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*** And we see that this "threatening" message is, in fact, a good message. For Jesus came not just to show us the way, but to be the way for us. He came not to tell us what we want to hear, but to tell us the truth. And He came not so that we could live life comfortably now, but so that we might live forever. That despite the sin and suffering and difficulties and struggles of this world, ***our hearts might not be troubled.*** For when our hearts are troubled and condemn us, when the world seems to be winning, when we feel rejected and alone – there is a greater Word on which we can rely. The Word of truth. The Word of our Father's forgiveness. His Word – that even though we in no way deserve it – declares us good. That Word of forgiveness and life that we hear in Holy Baptism. That Word of forgiveness and life that we hear in the Absolution. That Word of forgiveness and life that we hear at our Lord's Supper. That Word that we can never hear enough, and so which is here for us every week, every day. That Word which says that though we deserve death, our death has been taken care of by Christ. And now there is for us life. Life now, and life eternal.

That life cannot be found anywhere else, but only in the Word of God. The Word made flesh, and the Word now preached to us. The Word that threatens and kills, but which also raises to life again. The Word which is calling to you. To come and repent and receive His forgiveness. To come and eat and drink and receive His life. To come and live, for ***He is the way, the truth, and the life.*** For by His truth, He is your way, to everlasting life.

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.