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Easter 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Going On”

Text: John 21:1-19 (Acts 9:1-22; Revelation 4:1-14)

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

How do we go on? Many parents and students, families and friends were asking themselves that question this week after the shootings at Virginia Tech. Peace and security were once again shattered with the intrusion of destruction and death. There would be no chance to say good-bye to loved ones taken by the cold, cruel hand of the murderer. *It should not be this way*, we were told all week.

If only they knew how true that statement really is.

How do we go on? It doesn't take a Virginia Tech to make you ask that question. Just look at the prayer sheet in our bulletin, and the pain, the heartache, the uncertainty, the intrusion of sin and death that is spelled out on that page every week. Look around at our world at the thousands, maybe millions, who were taken down this past week by disease, famine, natural disaster, war, and terrorism. And then there is the pain and grief and doubts in your own heart that perhaps no one else knows about, that is bringing you down and robbing you of life. And we think: *it should not be this way*.

How do we go on? Perhaps that was also the question of the disciples, after the whirlwind of events that had just happened. They had seen their Lord taken from them and brutally crucified. While they were gathered together in stunned silence after that attack, Jesus appeared to them, alive! But did not stay with them. He was not dead, they now knew – but neither were the Jews. They were still like lambs in the midst of wolves. Maybe even moreso now. *How do we go on?*

So they go to Galilee. Perhaps because it was home; perhaps to get away from

Jerusalem for safety; perhaps because of the message of the angels to the women at the tomb that Jesus was going before them to Galilee and they would see Him there. (Mk 16:7) And when they get there, they do what they know. They go fishing. And in an episode filled with *déjà vu*, they caught nothing. Great. Nothing's going right!

Like the disciples, many will respond to the tragedy of last week, and to the many other tragedies in our world, by doing what they know to do. It should not be this way, and so we will make it better! *We have* to make it better! We will counter our problems with power and wisdom and overcome them with our own strength. And so lawmakers will make more laws, and security people will make us more secure, and counselors will counsel more tolerance, and relief workers will give more relief, and peacemakers will strive to make more peace – **and while all of that is good, none of it is the answer.** Because no matter what we do – *even though it should not be this way* – it's going to happen again. Because the dike of sin that was breached by our first parents we are not able to stop. For even if we somehow manage to plug one hole, sin will simply spring forth from two more. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh simply will not take no for an answer!

But there is one more thing also many will do which also will not work – **and that is rely on their faith.** The faith in my heart. . . . Now that sounds good and right, doesn't it? But if I have faith in my faith, then it is really simply another way of turning to a strength I think I have within myself to get me through. And like all the rest, it doesn't work. I've tried it before, you've tried it before! Resolving to believe more, pray more, trust more, read more, learn more, follow more . . . and yet how long before we find ourselves in the same place as the disciples: out in the boat in the middle of the lake, with empty nets, empty hands, empty hearts. Great.

Yes, great! For finally our Lord has us right where He wants us! Helpless, alone, weak, with nothing to hang onto in this world. For as long as we have something to hang onto in this world, you can be sure that we will! But stripped of our delusions of the goodness of our world, and with our idols of strength and glory brought low, our Lord comes to us. In the midst of the sorrow, the uncertainty, the tragedy. *You don't have any fish, do you?* And what we wouldn't do for a fish right then, to prove Him wrong! To show Him that I can! That I can do it, even if just a little . . . pathetically little.

But no. We don't even have that. And so our Lord provides: **fish, food, forgiveness, and faith.** All that we need both for this life and the next. *That we cling to Him alone.* For when sin, satan, death, and hell all arose in this world and smacked us in the face, *our Lord took it personally.* An attack on His creatures was an attack on Him! And so He came, and took it *personally.* In the person of Jesus Christ. Taking all that sin, satan, death, and hell could hurl at Him. All the tragedy, all the pain, all the death, all the mocking and taunting, all the devastation of sin. He took it all on the cross, to free us from it all.

But it was not only the sin and rebellion in the world that He came and took, but the sin and rebellion even from the hands and feet and mouths and hearts of *His own creatures*, who turned against Him. **You and me.** For our idolatry and misplaced faith. For our lashing out in anger and hurt. For our pride and self-centeredness. For our doubting His goodness and love. He took that all too, on the cross, to free us from its grip.

For it should not be that way.

And the death and resurrection of our Saviour shows that it is no longer that way! For our God, who came in the person of Jesus Christ, Himself broke the grip of sin upon us and set us free. His empty tomb is proof. Proof that our sin is forgiven and our death is defeated, and so our future is not the grave, but life eternal. Life eternal not just in Heaven, but life eternal that starts even now. Life that even the tragedies and troubles of this world cannot take away from us.

Because it is not up to us. It is all from the grace, compassion, and undeserved love of our God and Father, and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and given to us by the Spirit, who **directs** us and **connects** us to our Saviour and keeps us strong in Him. Who maybe, just maybe, uses the tragedies and troubles of this world to loose our grip on the momentary treasures and pleasures of this life, and keep us safely in His grip. Who maybe, just maybe, sends persecutions and persecutors (like Saul!) to His Church and to us to strengthen us. And when we doubt (like Ananias), to teach us; that *don't we think He knows what He's doing?*

For though there is much in this world that is strange and surprising to us, there is nothing strange *or* surprising to our Lord. He has been leading His Church through

these things for a very long time. And coming always with exactly what we need. That day in Galilee it was with fish, food, forgiveness, and faith. Here it is with Holy Baptism, Holy Gospel, and Holy Communion, giving us the food that we need, the forgiveness that we need, the faith that we need.

And He comes not just once. We heard from John that *this was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead*. For as long as we live in this world, we never graduate from discipleship. It is never “one and done” – but a continual dying and rising with Christ. A continual repentance and receiving His gifts. Returning to our baptismal life. Returning to our Lord’s altar. Returning to the shore where our Lord comes to us with all that He is and all that He has. Here where He will always be for us, for it is where He has promised to be for us. His dwelling place is our worship place.

And so we go on. From here. Facing sin, facing tragedy, facing death – for that’s all still here. But when we go on from here, though *it* has not changed, *we* have changed. For we have come into the presence of *the Lamb who was slain* – who was slain, but now lives and reigns! The Lamb who has given us His victory, His forgiveness, His life, so that it can also be said (as we heard) that *we will reign on the earth*.

For if His reign has begun, then so also has ours! And indeed, it has . . . even if now, for a while, it doesn’t look that way. Even with our world filled with tragedies and sorrows like Virginia Tech, like what we see happening in our world around us, and what is happening in your life. Those things are tough, but they cannot defeat you. For we stand already with those disciples, with Paul and Ananias, and with the whole company of Heaven around the throne of our victorious Lamb. They are simply on the side of this altar that we cannot see. And when the time comes for us to leave this world of sorrow and tears, whether it is by a crazed gunman’s bullet, a terrorist’s bomb, a festering disease, or the wearing down of old age – we will simply pass from this side to the next. From victory to victory. And see our Saviour . . . who was with us all along.

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.