

20 April 2008
Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Knowing God on the Cross”

Text: John 14:1-14 (Acts 6-7; 1 Peter 2:2-10)

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

Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

When someone is coming over to your house, you usually prepare. You clean, straighten things up, pick up the toys, dust and vacuum. Maybe you buy some special food and drink. You want to make sure things are just right for your guests.

And so when you heard the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel – about His *going to prepare a place for us* – perhaps that is what you thought of: Jesus going to Heaven and preparing for our arrival, so that everything will be ready for the Last Day, when Jesus comes again to – as He said – *take us to be with Him where He is*.

But that begs the question: what exactly needs to be done in Heaven? And what’s taking so long? If God could create the universe and everything that exists in just six days, simply by the speaking of His Word, why does Heaven now need to be prepared? *What is Jesus talking about here?* No wonder Thomas was confused and said, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going.*” Thinking about this, *like this*, didn’t make much sense to him either.

But Thomas did know where Jesus was going – or at least, he should have! – because Jesus had told them a number of times. **He was going to the cross.** He was going to lay down His life for the sin of the world. He was going just as it had been written of Him in the Old Testament. That He would be the Suffering Servant (Is 53). That He would be lifted up from the earth on the cross (Num 21). That He would be the sacrificial Lamb provided by the Father (Gen 22:8). *This* is how Jesus was going to prepare a place for us. It wasn’t that *Heaven* was lacking anything and needed His fixing up – it’s that *we* did. And so Jesus was now going to do what was necessary to *provide a place for us* in Heaven, through the forgiveness of our sins. This is why He

came . . . and so this is where He was now going.

So Thomas, Peter, John, Philip, and all the rest – “*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.*” Believe that what you are about to see Me do is the good and gracious will of God. **Believe** when you see Me arrested. **Believe** when you see Me whipped and beaten and scorned. **Believe** when you see Me hanging on the cross, and laid in the tomb. **Believe** the Word of God, that I am doing all this for you. To prepare a place for you, with Me, in Heaven.

But Jesus isn’t just going to *prepare* a place for us – when *it is finished* (John 19:30), He says, *I will come again*. And that’s what we are celebrating these fifty days of Easter! That’s not just a reference to Jesus’ coming again on the Last Day and the end of time – Jesus isn’t waiting that long to come again for us. No, He came again already on the third day in His resurrection, to give His disciples the peace and forgiveness won by Him on the cross. To give them the joy and consolation they needed. To give them life and hope. Starting then, and continuing until the end.

And so it is also for us – Jesus’ coming is a promise not just for the future, but a promise for now. For He is coming now for us too, and giving us His forgiveness and peace, His joy and consolation, His life and hope. . . . We witnessed His coming the past two Sundays in Holy Baptism, to little Jocelyn and Eli, and as we recognized today for little Ryan. And we remembered when He came to each of us in those waters also, and made us His own, as we were raised to a new life in Him. And that as the grave could not hold Him, so it will not hold us. . . . And He proclaims and promises the same to us each Sunday as we hear His Word of Absolution, that our sin is forgiven. There is no sin too great nor too small, that He has not taken it upon Himself and shed His blood for it on the cross. And so it is all forgiven. It is all atoned for. It can no longer separate us from the Father.

But there’s even more to it than that. For not only are we no longer separated from the Father in Jesus, but Jesus goes on to say that **if we know Him, we know the Father; if we see Him, we see the Father**. Or in other words, it is through the cross that we most know God. It is not through creation, not through miracles, not through rapturous and transcendent feelings or experiences – but on the cross, *there* we see and know God. We see and know His love, His mercy and compassion, His wrath against sin, and His forgiveness for us. You cannot see Him more, or know Him more, than there. *Believe in God; believe also in me*, Jesus says. Believe when you see Me on the cross, that this is God for you.

The problem is, we don't expect to see God that way; we don't expect Him to be working that way. It seems wrong and exactly the opposite of the way things should be. And so it is Philip who speaks for us and asks Jesus *for more*. "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Or in other words: Lord, *show us more*. Show us the majesty; show us the power; show us some awesome show of goodness; show us the glory. **Show us . . .** and then with his wonderful understatement: *and that will be enough for us!*

Philip wants what we want: **to see**. The visible evidence. If our Church teaches what is right, show us by packing the pews. If I am true believer, show me by answering my prayers. If you love me, show me by giving me success and peace and health and happiness. *Show me, and that will be enough for me! . . .* But will it? Or will there always be something else? Something more? Something greater? New needs, new wants, new desires, new demands. And then God is no longer God . . . *I am*. Asking in *my* name, according to *my* will, and to fulfill *my* desires.

And so no - if we want to see God, it must be as He wants to be seen: in the strength and glory of the cross. For this is the work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - the reconciliation of a sinful world to Himself. Providing forgiveness for the sin of the world with His own death. The Creator coming to serve His creatures, that by His service we might then serve Him too, in love and gratitude. Serving, loving, and forgiving others as God has done for us. And laying down our life. For that is to be glorious with the glory of God. Not to be put on the pedestal, not to be glorified by others, but to be merciful and compassionate, patient and forgiving. For this is the work of God.

And so it is only through Christ crucified that we see God and know Him rightly. This, as Peter said, is the *cornerstone* of our faith and the Church, upon which we are built. This is *the stone that is rejected by so many, and upon which so many stumble*. For many, that God would become man in Jesus - that's okay. But that God would die on the cross for you and me, not demanding restitution for our sins from us, but taking them upon Himself and serving us and saving us - *that's not*. And to believe that - well, could wind up getting you stoned, like Stephen. And many Christians today are being persecuted and killed for this very proclamation - that we cannot earn our way to Heaven; that there's nothing we can do. That Jesus is *the way, and the truth, and the life*. That *no one comes to the Father except through His death and resurrection*. That only when our sin is forgiven is the door to Heaven open. That

when He saves us are we saved.

But that doesn't mean there nothing for us to do. That means there's nothing for us to do for our salvation, for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God. That's true! That's all been done for us by Christ and is the glory of God for us! . . . But do not overlook what Jesus said at the end of our reading today: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.*" If we see Jesus' work as glory-grabbing miracles and wonders, well, I haven't done any of those lately! Have you? But if we understand Jesus' work as the serving and laying down of His life – yes, that is what we are called to do. And now can do, because He has gone to the Father and sent His Holy Spirit to us, to live in us and work in us and conform us to Jesus' image (Rom 8:29). And what honor Jesus has given to our service, **calling this work even greater than His own!** And promising that whatever we ask Him for this service, He will do.

So let us ask! For the faith to believe, for the courage to act, for the love to serve, for the mercy to forgive, and for the strength to lay down our lives for others. And let us come and receive the faith, love, and forgiveness our Lord has come to us to provide this day in His Supper. That by eating His body and drinking His blood, **we grow up in our salvation.** That (as we prayed earlier) *we may love what He has commanded and desire what He has promised. That our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found.* That our **hearts not be troubled** by the changes and chances, the crosses and the challenges of this world and life, but that we **believe in God, and believe also in Christ, our Saviour.**

For Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

And only in His death and resurrection is the victory and life we need.

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.