

19 April 2009  
The Second Sunday of Easter  
Commemoration of Ten Years of St. Athanasius

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Rejoice, Reflect, Repent”

Text: John 20:19-31 (1 John 1:1-2:2; Acts 4:32-35)

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

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

Alleluia is not what the disciples were saying that first Easter night. For praise cannot come from lips when hearts are filled with fear. And great fear was gripping them. And so voices were hushed, doors were locked, and the conversation was about “What now?” Things had not worked out as they hoped or planned. In fact, quite the opposite. Their Lord was dead, their hopes were dashed, and the future was uncertain. The events of that morning only added to the confusion. Peter and John had seen the empty tomb, the women were blathering about Jesus being alive, but if He was, where was He? The confusion in their minds only added to the fear in their hearts. Those first few nights must have seemed like an eternity.

*Until eternity broke in!* Jesus, the Lord of life, risen from death, comes to those eleven frightened and confused men, and gives them exactly what they need: *life and hope in the forgiveness of their sins*. It’s the first word out of His mouth. Not: where were you? Not: why did you run away? But: **Peace be with you**. Peace in your troubled hearts. Peace in your confused minds. Peace, because the death and resurrection of Jesus means there is peace with God again. The dark night of sin is over. Their sins have been atoned for by His blood. They have been reconciled with the Father. And the proof is standing before them. See and feel the hands and side of the One that neither sin nor sealed tombs nor locked doors can contain. The One who has conquered all our enemies that seek to oppress us and rob us of life - and has set us free. Things may not have worked out as the disciples had hoped or imagined, but they had worked out *exactly* as God had planned. That those eleven, and all the world, have peace and forgiveness.

Ten years ago, another small group of disciples met - this time not behind locked doors, but in an elementary school. Things had not worked out as they had hoped or intended. They were scared, hurt, tired, fearful, and uncertain. And undoubtedly, much of the conversation that day also was not “Alleluia”, but “What now?” Like the eleven that first Easter night, those gathered that day weren’t sure what the

future held. Like the eleven that first Easter night, they needed peace and forgiveness.

And like that first Easter night, to them as well, in that place, Jesus came. **“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”** (Matt 18:20) The *same* resurrected Lord, with His *same* resurrected body, and with His *same* words of peace and forgiveness. That there be hope. Hope in the midst of this world of sin. Hope in the midst of trials and troubles. Hope that there is One greater than our fears and failures, who will not let us down. One who can bring life from death. For that is what our Lord is all about - both then and now: giving life to those who are dead in trespasses, sins, unbelief, doubt, and fear, that we may live a new life.

So today - as we remember Ten Years of Saint Athanasius - is a day to **rejoice**. But to rejoice not in ourselves, but the goodness of God and His forgiveness. That He has blessed and sustained us these ten years - because we certainly do not deserve it. Perhaps some wonder why we haven't grown more in ten years, or why we do not yet have our own place. But the wonder is not in that, but in the fact that we are still here at all! It is not because of us, but in spite of us. It is only because our good and gracious Father has graciously brought us from death to life, and continues to give us His life in His Word and Sacraments. And so after ten years, there is no room for pride, only praise, to the One who raises us unworthy sinners in His Son, and gives us much more than we either desire or deserve.

But today is not only a day to rejoice, but also a day for sober **reflection**. For the beginning of our congregation came from unfortunate - and sinful - happenings. Like divorce, it is always a sad and hurtful thing when a church divides. When Satan so digs his claws into the children of God that forgiveness and love seem not enough; when hurt conquers compassion, humility is trampled by pride, and our unity in Christ is trumped by self-interest and stubborn self-righteousness. And with those words, please understand - I am not faulting any person, time, or group, I am faulting us all. The long and sticky tentacles of sin leave no one untouched or unaffected. Especially in places where our risen Lord comes to give life and forgiveness, and His **“Peace be with you”** is answered by hurtful words and accusations. For it is especially where the life and forgiveness of Jesus is given that you can be sure Satan will attack the hardest and strongest.

*The good news is that God is able to bless even in our messiness.* And division in the church has been around ever since the beginning, when the even great missionary team of Paul and Barnabas parted ways. Why? In a theological dispute? No! But in a dispute over whether or not to bring Mark along with them. The result? God blessed them - and His Church - doubly! And in the same way, He has richly blessed both us and many through this church born of a most unhappy situation.

Our Saviour has provided forgiveness, comfort, healing, relief, peace, life, strength, and hope to us and to many through His Word proclaimed and Sacraments given.

And there have been many! Over the years, some of the original group that met that day have left, some have stayed. New folks have come. Some folks have both come and gone. And by God's grace, others are still coming. Not to be with us - but even better - to be with our Lord, who has promised to be here. And is here. For He always keeps His promises. Even when it means rising from the dead.

Which brings us to we today who are gathered in this place - again, a small group of disciples with all kinds of troubles, doubts, fears, struggles, and uncertainties. Disciples who are hurt and tired, beat up and cast down. Disciples who continue to be under the attack of satan, and who have wounded others with our own failures and sins. Disciples who are not sure what the future holds, and may be wondering "What now?" We are gathered here today in this place for one reason only: because we still need the life and forgiveness of Jesus.

And like that first Easter night, and like that first morning ten years ago, our Saviour comes to us here in this place and says "**Peace be with you!**" And His Word of Absolution gives peace to hearts troubled by sin - whoever you are, whatever you have done, you are forgiven. No sin greater than His blood. And He bids us not only touch, but taste, His body and blood once crucified - but now risen - for us. *Take eat, take drink*, He says. And eating and drinking in faith, we receive that which we most desperately need - His forgiveness, life, and salvation. We are reconciled to the Father, children of God, and given the gift of eternal life. And so have peace - peace with God, peace in our hearts, and peace with one another.

So what now? Where do we go from here? To ask that question is to ask: how do we begin to live the eternal life we've been given here and now? Well, the Word of God that we heard today gives us two answers to that question.

**First, repent.** For coming before our Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit in repentance and faith is how we continue to receive and remain in His life and forgiveness. As often as satan attacks, so we need His life and strength. As often as we sin, so we need His forgiveness. And repentance keeps the focus where it belongs: not on us! But squarely on Christ and His work for us. That is why the great 20th century theologian Herman Sasse said: "*all great revivals in the church begin with repentance.*"

So as we both **rejoice** and **reflect** this day, let us also **repent**. Let us repent and seek forgiveness. Let us forgive and seek repentance. Let us **not say we have so sin, and so the truth be not in us**. Let us **walk in the light**, seeking truth and unity.

Which is the second way we live out the eternal life we've been given here and now - to as much as is in our power, to live in truth and unity. That just as we not absolve ourselves of blame, so also we not absolve ourselves of responsibility for our brothers and sisters in this world, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. For yes, ***we are our brother's keeper*** (Genesis 4:9) . . . even if our brother be estranged.

We heard of that unity in the reading from Acts, where ***"those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. . . . [A]s many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."***

Did you ever wonder how they could do that? Sell and share like that? It seems remarkable. But they could, *because they were living out the eternal life they had been given here and now*. Because the resurrection of Jesus from the dead had shown them that their home is not here, but in heaven. And so the resurrection of Jesus enables us to regard the things of this world as what they really are - *the things of this world*. Things that our Father in heaven has graciously given to us and that are good and what we need, but that we not cling to so tightly that they become idols. So we cling not to things, or even pride, honor, rights, or any such thing, but lay them down in love. For we know that these are not what matters most. And in Christ, we rejoice to do so.

And so we have come full circle. For in rejoicing, we reflect; and reflecting, we repent; and repenting, we rejoice. And all of these around the cross of Christ. Which is where we belong. Our journey for these ten years is but a blip in the long history of God's people - but that makes it not unimportant. On the contrary, what happens here is *very* important - a matter of life and death. Eternal life and death. For the Eternal One is here with His death-abolishing life and forgiveness - to give it to you. It may not look very impressive, and we may not be able to see great and impressive results in the future. That's okay. ***We live by faith, not by sight.*** (2 Cor 5:7) For as Jesus told us this day: ***"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."***

Lord, we believe. And so we are here at Your altar. For here we **rejoice, reflect, and repent**. For in the Lord's Supper, we **rejoice** as we celebrate His goodness and gift; we **reflect**, as we do this in remembrance of Him; and we **repent**, to receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation that He has promised us here, and that we so need.

So, it seems to me, there is no better place to celebrate an anniversary than here on our knees. To receive what we do not deserve, but which our Saviour comes to give. This is why He came. This is why He died. And this is why Christ is risen! [He

is risen indeed!] And is here, with us. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

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.