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Pentecost 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Desolate Places Turned Green Pastures”
Text: Mark 6:30-44

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

Three times today we are told that Jesus and His disciples were in **a desolate place**. *Three times*. Mark wants to make sure we know that. And that Jesus is there on purpose. For after His apostles return from their work, Jesus willfully takes them there to take care of them and give them rest. To a desolate place. Not to some feast or party or comfortable place of ease, but to a desolate place - because desolate places are often where Jesus does His greatest work.

But they are not there long before the crowds show up. In fact, the crowds got there *before* them. And when Jesus gets out of the boat and sees them, He has compassion on them too. For they too are in a desolate place - but *not* because they ran there on foot. The desolate place for the crowds was their hearts. For, we are told, **they were like sheep without a shepherd**. They were not being fed or cared for, and so they were lost and lonely and spiritually hungry.

So in that desolate place, Jesus does a great work - He feeds them all. He feeds them all first spiritually with His Word, and then He feeds them all physically, using only five loaves of bread and two fish. And they are filled in body and in soul. They receive the care that only He can give. For Jesus has turned that desolate place into the green pasture of the Good Shepherd.

And so it is for you.

For what desolate place - or places! - do you find yourself in? There are no shortage of them in this world. Places of isolation, or loneliness, or emptiness, or struggle. Perhaps you are there because, like the apostles, *Jesus has led you there* - not to punish you, but to care for you. To take away all in which you put your trust, that you trust only in Him. Or perhaps you are there because, like the crowds, *others have let you down*. You have not received the care they should have given and that you needed. Or perhaps you are in such a place because *you yourself have wandered off*, looking for what you thought were greener pastures and tastier pleasures, only to find yourself entangled in satan's sinful web of lies and deception. Or maybe it is all of the above. But make no mistake about it, however

you got there, desolate places are difficult places.

So sometimes we think we shouldn't be in such places. That if Jesus really loved you, He wouldn't take you there. Or that if Jesus really loved you, He wouldn't let you be in such a situation. Or that if you really loved Jesus, you wouldn't have wandered off. And with such thoughts, our desolate places become even more desolate, as satan uses these times and places to try to drive us to doubt and despair.

But do you see? Do you see, O child of God, how satan tries to use these lies and your sin to define you? To define your situation? To define love? He wants to make you think your experiences and feelings define the truth. That if it feels good it is good, that if it feels bad it is bad, and that whatever you feel is the truth.

But it is not so. Not all pleasure is good, and not all struggle is bad. And there are lots of changes in this world, and changes in you. To base truth on anything in you or anything in this world is to have a truth that you can never be certain of and never rely on, and so a truth that is constantly changing, constantly shifting, and so in the end no truth at all. It is to have no foundation on which to stand, on which to live.

But we do have such a foundation! For in the midst of this world of change and desolate places, there is one thing that never changes, where truth is to be found. One thing from outside of us, come into our world, upon which we can base our hope and put our faith. And that is the cross of Jesus. The cross, which is the desolate place of all desolate places, which our Saviour has turned into the greenest pasture of all.

For the cross shows us truth of the desolation of our sin. It is the cursed tree with no branches, the place of separation, the altar of agony and death. It is what you deserve because of your sin. But the cross also shows us the truth of the love of God, for when you look at that cross, it is not you on it - but another. Another who has taken your place. Another who has taken your sin, your curse, your guilt, your punishment, your death, that it all be His and not yours. That He be the prisoner and you be set free. And that is possible and true, because the One hanging there is not just another, but God Himself. The Son of God come in love to give Himself for you.

And so the cross is where the lovelessness of sin and the sinlessness of love come together, **and love wins**. The love of God. *[The next seven statements based upon the seven last words of Christ from the cross.]* The love of God who is forsaken, so that you will never be. The love of God who thirsts, that you may drink His living water and never thirst again. The love of God who lays down His life for His Bride, the Church. The love

of God who promises us Paradise through His blood. The love of God who says **“Father, forgive them.”** The love of God who gives His Spirit to you. The love of God who dies your death, that you may live His life. His life, for He is not dead, but risen! For death cannot reign where sin is atoned for and forgiven.

And that is the love and truth and victory that came to Annalise and Patricia this morning - and which came to you - in the waters of **Holy Baptism**. For although it looked quite ordinary, or like something we were doing, what happened there was quite extraordinary and something our Saviour was doing. *For there, the lovelessness of their sin and the sinlessness of God’s love came together, and love won.* Their sins are washed away, they are children of God, and have the promise of eternal life.

And that is the love and truth and victory that came together for you this morning in the **Absolution**. For although those words sounded quite ordinary, or like something we are doing, what happened there was quite extraordinary and something our Saviour was doing. *For there, the lovelessness of your sin and the sinlessness of God’s love came together, and love won.* For His Word - which always does what it says - said to you: “I forgive you all your sins.” And in that forgiveness you were raised from death to life again.

And that is the love and truth and victory that comes to us this morning on the altar in the **Lord’s Supper**. For although this looks quite ordinary, or like something we are doing, what happens here is quite extraordinary and something our Saviour is doing. *For here, the lovelessness of our sin and the sinlessness of God’s love come together, and love wins.* We eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus, our sins are forgiven, and we receive His life and salvation.

And so in the midst of our desolation - the desolation of sin, the desolation of the world, the desolation that seeks to overwhelm you - Jesus has firmly planted His cross, to do His greatest work in you. **To turn your desolate place into the greenest pasture of all with the abundance of His gifts.** To feed you and care for you and shepherd you. Though all the world forsake you or leave you or turn against you - He never will. For you have His promise, that He is here for you. Always.

Perhaps, though, sometimes He will have to lead you to that desolate place Himself, like with His apostles, that you lie down in these green pastures. Perhaps sometimes you will run to them, like the crowds, because you are hungry. Or perhaps, lost in your sin, your Saviour will send a messenger to you, to bring that green pasture to you. For remember, there *were* twelve baskets full leftover. One for each apostle. Not for them *to eat*, but as Jesus said, for them to give **“you something to eat.”** And so for them to continue to give His gifts, His life, His salvation. Wherever they go. In every place and every time. That no one be

without. That in big churches or little churches, in groups of fifties or hundreds, all be fed by our Saviour, who is the Bread of Life. Fed first by His Word, then fed by His meal, that our desolate places be desolate no more, but be green pastures of life, forgiveness, and love.

And so it is as we sang:

*The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord.
She is His new creation, by water and the Word.
From heav'n He came and sought her To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her, And for her life He died.* (LSB #644, v. 1)

That is the foundation proclaimed by the prophets and the apostles, and the truth upon which we now stand. And there is no other. There is no other truth on which we can rely. No other Shepherd who can give us life. No other Saviour who can overcome sin and death. Only one. And He is here, for you.

And that makes a difference in everything we do. That we have a place to stand and a truth that will not change or let us down. That no matter what others say, no matter what others do to us, when we stumble in sin and fall flat on our faces, when we feel like we are in exile and desolation, when we finally succumb to death and the grave - in all these things there is one constant which will never let us down: our Saviour, whose Strong Word created you, redeemed you, and will one day restore you, when He calls you from your grave and is for you forever what He is for you now: ***The Lord our Righteousness.***

So even,

*Through toil and tribulation And tumult of her war
[We] wait the consummation Of peace forevermore
Til with the vision glorious [Our] longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious Shall be the Church at rest.* (LSB #644, v. 4)

At rest in green pastures forevermore.

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.