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Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Truth, Cross, and Joy”

Text: John 16:12-22 (Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-7)

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

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

There is a change of emphasis in the readings today. The first four weeks of the Easter season our focus has been on the resurrected Jesus, His appearances to His disciples, and how He is our Good Shepherd in life and in death. The focus has been a looking *back* to what has happened and what it means. Starting today, however, we look *forward*, to the next step in salvation history as we hear Jesus speaking of the promise and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit through whom God will continue His work in the world. The Holy Spirit who had *always* been active and working, but will now be in a new way. For as we heard in the reading from Revelation, the death and resurrection of Jesus means a new reality - **a new heaven, a new earth**, and Jesus **making all things new**. Which sounds like a very exciting time, to say the least.

So what does Jesus say about this? First He tells His disciples: ***I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.***

It is a wonder, actually, that they were able to bear as much as they did up to now! So much had happened the past three years they had spent with Jesus. Yet the next few days would hold even more. They would be overwhelmed. Overwhelmed with sadness at His crucifixion, and then overwhelmed with joy at His resurrection. Their heads and hearts would be overloaded with it all.

So there would be time, later, to complete their education. In the forty days after His resurrection, Jesus would open their minds and open the Scriptures to them and teach them how all that He did fulfilled all that they said. What God had long promised He had now completed. The sly serpent who by death overcame now by death has been overcome. The deceiver who overcame by the tree of the Garden had now been overcome by the tree of the cross. The great exodus, the great passover, the great salvation is now about to be accomplished for all people, in Jesus.

But they could not bear that now. You can only talk about a top so much before you just have to spin it and see it for yourself. Or for those of you who are younger and don't know what a top is: you can only talk about a computer so much before you just have to turn it on and see it for yourself. And now, Jesus knew, the time had come to stop talking. It was time to go to the cross.

So after that, Jesus says: ***When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.***

Jesus gives them a promise. What they cannot now bear or understand, they will be taught in the future. The Spirit would guide them into all the truth. Not a new truth or a different truth or from a different authority, but in continuity with all that had been spoken before. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit speak one truth with one voice.

And we heard an example of this guidance in the first reading from Acts, as Peter is guided into the truth that the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit is for all people - Jews and Gentiles alike. Now that was true in the Old Testament as well, but again, now in a new way. For now, the Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit just like the Jews. The Holy Spirit was making no distinction but treating all people the same. Before, the Gentiles were gathered into the Jewish people and became Jews to be clean. Now, the Holy Spirit is going out into all the world and making clean not by union with the Jews, but by union with Jesus. It is the same God and the same forgiveness, yet at the same time a great reversal and a new reality. It was a truth Peter needed to learn. A truth the Church needed to learn.

Which is good news for all of us Gentiles gathered here today for it is why we are here. For the Holy Spirit has come to us in the waters of Holy Baptism and made us clean, adopting us as children of God in Christ Jesus. What Peter and the Church learned that day has been happening ever since.

But a warning here: some would use this verse to speak a different "truth." Some will use this verse to claim that the Holy Spirit has led them into a new "truth" and so what they are saying must be right. The new truth, for example, that new forms of sexuality are okay, that women are now able to serve as pastors, that abortion and mercy killing and assisted suicide is acceptable, that greed is good, that you don't have to go to church to worship God, and about a hundred or a thousand other new things folks want to be true these days. And how can you say no? The Holy Spirit has led them into this truth after all, they claim.

But the truth - if it be the truth - does not change. To be sure, there are new ways

and new realities, new cultures and new times, but the foundation of the truth does not change. The Holy Spirit will not reveal one thing as truth this day and a contrary truth another day. There is one truth, just as there is *one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all* (Ephesians 4). And so a truth that changes or contradicts the Scriptures - as those things I mentioned above do - is no truth at all, and is not from the Holy Spirit.

Now, are people caught in those sins welcome in the Church? Is forgiveness and cleansing and newness of life for them? Yes! Or, at least, it should be. That we are not always as welcoming as we should be is undoubtedly true. But it is one thing to welcome *them*, and quite another to welcome *their sin*. And it is not that their sin is worse than ours or any other. The truth is that *all have sinned, you and I have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God* (Romans 3). **The goal, though, is not to change the truth and accept the sin, but to repent of the sin and change the sinner.** And it is into *this* truth that the Holy Spirit is leading and guiding His Church. Not a new truth, but this one truth, for all people of all times and places. This truth of repentance and forgiveness and new life in Christ.

And so, Jesus continues, the Holy Spirit ***will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.***

Sin comes when we glorify ourselves, when we focus on ourselves, when we raise ourselves. The Holy Spirit and the truth glorify Jesus. For it's all about Jesus. If the glory goes toward an individual, it is not from the Holy Spirit. If the glory to what we do or who we are, it is not from the Holy Spirit. If the glory goes to anything but repentance and forgiveness, to anything but the cross and resurrection, to anything but where those are given to us now in Word and Sacrament, it is not from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit points to Christ, brings all glory to Christ, and brings Christ to all people. And so the Father sent the Son and the Son sent the Spirit, and the Spirit takes us to the Son who takes us to the Father. Three in one and one in three. All for us and for our salvation.

And this truth is now about to be accomplished. And so Jesus says: ***“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father?’” So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.”***

Well what Jesus was talking about was the cross. And when it came to the cross, the pre-Spirited disciples always got it wrong and never understood. They are a microcosm of the world - both then and now - for the wisdom of the cross is

foolishness to the world.

So, for example, when Jesus asked His disciples: *Who do you say I am?* They got it right. Peter replied: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* But then when Jesus explained what that meant - that it meant the cross - Peter got it wrong, saying: *No Lord! This shall never happen to you.* To which Jesus had to apply the rebuke: *Get behind me satan* (Matt 16). Or when Jesus told His disciples that the Son of Man was going to be betrayed and they would all run away, Peter says: *Never Lord! I will die with you.* But when it happened, when the cross appeared, Peter was no where to be found, and was scared to even answer a servant girl honestly (Matt 26). And the other disciples, too. Thomas doubting the resurrection and the power of God (John 20), and James and John wanting a worldly kind of greatness, not the greatness of the cross (Mark 10).

And truthfully, this is where we often get it wrong too. Jesus we like! But the cross - the trials and struggles sent by our loving Father for our good, to strengthen us, to help us, to save us - not so much. But we need the cross. Jesus' cross, but also the cross laid upon us in our lives. And it is only for a time - **a little while**. Now granted, it may not seem like it. Those days of Jesus' crucifixion must have seemed an eternity to the disciples. And maybe your crosses seem to last an eternity. But in truth, an eternity is coming; an eternity of **life** because of the little while of the cross. Because of the new life, new creation, resurrection and forgiveness of the cross. Because God is merciful. We may not always understand that, as the disciples had trouble understanding it. But it is the truth. The truth that the Spirit is leading us, and teaching us, and enabling us to believe.

And then finally Jesus says: ***Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.***

A woman giving birth is a most apt description of what is indeed happening now in the time of the Church; the time of waiting for Jesus to come again. For the Church, the Bride of Christ, is giving birth to new Christians every day, all over the world. The new birth from above in Holy Baptism. And it is a struggle and in the midst of much struggle. In some countries and places a violent and deadly struggle. For the Church in this world is and always will be under attack. Satan will never rest. But the Church will never be defeated. Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not stand against her (Matt 16). And so while there is travail now; no small sorrow as we see a world spinning deeper into sin, into false doctrine, into relativism, into idolatry; as the Church witnesses her children leaving the faith, or enduring persecution, or suffering martyrdom; and the world in many cases rejoicing . . . joy

is coming, Jesus says.

So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

A joy no one will be able to take. Doesn't that sound good? There is so much that robs us of joy now, but a promise here from Jesus. A promise to cling to. A joy that is coming. A joy that is, in fact, ours now - just not yet in its fullness and completion. The same joy the disciples felt when they saw the risen Christ. For then we will see the risen Christ, in His same body that appeared to the disciples, when He comes to take home His Bride, forever. To take you home. For as we heard from John in Revelation: ***“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”***

Until that day, that day and joy for which we now wait, we gather at the table, as Peter did with the Gentiles. All of us together. No matter who you are, what you have done, where you have come from. In the Gospel, in Jesus, in Easter, we are all the same. We are all sinners forgiven. We are all slaves set free. We are all the dead in sin raised to a new life. Now given a seat at the table of God, to be served by God. A seat of honor at the Lamb's High Feast, to eat and drink the Body and Blood of the one who has redeemed us and forgiven our sins, the one who has given us His Spirit, to strengthen us and keep us, and the one who is returning to take us home. Home to a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, for new you and new me.

For Christ is risen! *[He is risen indeed! 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.