

17 April 2016
Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Listen to the Empty Tomb”

Text: John 10:22-30; Acts 20:17-35; Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 23

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.

As long as we are in this world and life, faith and truth will be a struggle. We should not expect it to be otherwise. It was a struggle in the days of the Old Testament, the time of the apostles, and now. It is not as if we can say: *okay, we know the truth. We've got it. Now we can move on to something else.* No. The attacks and challenges and doubters will come. Maybe sooner, maybe later. The wolf is just going to keep putting on different sheep skins, to deceive us. Error will keep evolving and keep trying to come into the church in different ways, at different times, and with different names.

That is what we heard in the readings today. In the first reading from Acts, the apostle Paul said: *I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.* From the 23rd Psalm we heard that Jesus *prepares a table before us in the presence* - not the absence - *of our enemies.* And from Revelation we heard that those in white robes are *the ones coming out of the great tribulation.* The message is unmistakable: Christians are not going to have it easy in this world. Satan is relentless. He will exploit every weakness and use every ally. Some attacks will be quick and sudden, while others will be slow and seem like they will never end. Some will come from without and some will come from within. You can count on it.

But everything is not bad news for us. For in each of these readings, where we heard these things, there was good news also. Assurance. Reason for confidence. Paul commends the Ephesian pastors *to God and the word of his grace, which is able* to protect and defend them, *to build them up and give them an inheritance* in heaven. The 23rd Psalm ends on a note of confidence, and in Revelation, the ones in white robes were the ones *coming out* of the great tribulation, not swallowed up in it. Or in other words, in each case, faith and truth wins. And I will even go so far as to say this: **the truth always wins.**

Now, as you look around at the church and world today, it may not seem so. And there were times in the Old Testament when it did not seem so, and times in the early church

when it seemed like the outcome was in doubt. But **the truth always wins**. You know why? Because the truth is not just a thing, a concept, my idea against your idea. If it were (as many today think of it), then we couldn't be sure who would win. It would come down to who argues better, who gets more votes, who (as they say) is on the right side of history.

But **the truth always wins** because the truth is not a thing, a concept, or an idea, but a PERSON. Jesus said: I am the Way, the **Truth**, and the Life (John 14:6). And Jesus won. That's what we're celebrating this Easter season. The Jews did not win, Pilate and the Romans did not win, the cross did not win, the grave did not win, satan did not win, sin did not win - *Jesus won*. He rose from the dead, defeating all who tried to take His life; defeating all who tried to suppress the truth of Him and His Word. He won. The Truth won. The battle is over.

And Jesus claimed that victory as He said today that those who are His, ***no one can snatch them out of His hand***. That's a pretty confident statement, but He backed it up. That's an absolute statement - no one can do it - for who is greater and stronger than the one who defeated sin, death, devil, and grave for us? And to those who would answer: the Father . . . Jesus puts that to bed as well, saying: ***I and the Father are one***. The Father will not reject the Son or those who belong to the Son. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, then the forsakenness of the cross would have been all we had, our sin would still eternally separate us from the God, and death and hell would seal our fate. But risen from the dead, the forsakenness is over, sin is forgiven, and there is peace with God. And so, Jesus says, ***I give them eternal life, and they will never perish***. And what Jesus gives is given. He's not going to change His mind, He's not going to take it back. You can walk away from it, but the fault will not be His. He won, for you.

Which does not mean that satan will ever quit trying or the struggle in this world and life will end. In fact, as the end draws closer and his time grows short, he will try even harder. Old heresies will be recycled, tribulation will become great, and truth will be attacked. Now, in our days, we see it as the wolfly falsehood of tolerance dressed in truth's clothing.

So how good to know that we have a Shepherd, a Good one, to shepherd us through this world and life in His truth. For to know Him, to know Him as truth, is to be set free (John 8:32). Set free not from all enemies, but from the fear of them. Set free not from our sins, but from the guilt of them. Set free not from dying, but from death - for dying is for us now just the gate to everlasting life. For as we heard, Jesus shepherds us through that as well. ***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.***

So, Paul tells the Ephesian pastors, ***pay careful attention to yourself and all the flock*** - this truth must be proclaimed. ***Be alert***, also, for the attacks. And for us, ***hear the voice of***

your Shepherd, that you may know and follow Him who knows you. For, you see, this too is one of satan attacks, to either drown out the voice of our Shepherd in a deluge of other voices and truths, or convince us who hear that He is irrelevant, that His truth is no longer truth, that we know better now, to judge what is invisible by what is visible, that the here and now is all that matters, that what is good is what seems good or feels good to me.

But if you hear the voice of your Shepherd, you hear something quite different than all that. That the truth doesn't change. That there's much more to life than just what meets the eye. That what's here and now is part of something much bigger.

Hearing the voice of your Shepherd, you hear of His love and sacrifice for you on the cross. You hear of His victorious resurrection. You hear where that victory is for you today in Holy Baptism, and that the day you were baptized is your own Easter day. You hear that your sins are forgiven, your robes made white in the blood of the Lamb and His Absolution. You hear that there is no forsakenness or separation from God left for you - he took it all. You hear that the quiet waters and verdant pastures of the 23rd Psalm are not some mystical, made-up place, but here as your Good Shepherd feeds you with His own Body and Blood. You hear of the glorious future and rest that awaits you in Him, and of the Lamb in the midst of the throne in heaven, around which you will be.

And that voice, those words, are the truth - the truth that will keep and sustain you through this world and life, its attacks and troubles, and from all falsehood and deceit. For ***salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb***. The Lamb who is your Shepherd. And He gives to you what is His. And what He gives is given.

And so Jesus speaks today to encourage us - to in-courage us; put courage into us. Which we need, for how easy to get dis-couraged, un-couraged. To look around and lose hope, grow weary, and despair. So Jesus gives what we don't have. Jesus is what we are not. And as much as we cannot rely on ourselves, even more we can rely on Him. For our feelings are not the truth, He is. Our thoughts and fears are not the truth, He is. And He is your Way and your Life.

So there is cause for rejoicing on this Good Shepherd Sunday - not because life in the flock is easy, but because our Saviour is great, and our Shepherd is Good. We rejoice in His promises, which are more sure than anything in this world. And we rejoice in knowing this truth: that no one can snatch us from Jesus' hands. The hands that were pierced for our sins, now the hands that hold us tight.

And knowing that Shepherd, like Paul, we be confident no matter what comes our way. In Revelation, we see a glimpse of our future. And the 23rd Psalm is about us. For Jesus is the Christ. It is true. He is true. Listen to the empty tomb! You won't hear it more clearly and plainly than that! That Christ is risen, just as He said. That Christ is risen, and

death is defeated. That Christ is risen, and our Shepherd lives.

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