

24 April 2016
Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Life in the Midst of Death”

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

[After a very arduous week and countless hours in the hospital, enjoy this encore presentation of a sermon from 2010, with very few and minor modifications . . .]

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.

We prayed in the Collect of the Day earlier *that among the many changes of this world may our hearts be fixed where true joys are found.*

To be sure, there are many changes in this world that effect us everyday. Changes to your health or the health of a family member can turn your life upside down. Changes made by our government often have a profound influence on our lives. The loss of a job, or divorce, or unexpected expenses make us concerned about the future. Moving to a new and strange place where you have to figure out where everything you need is, and make new friends, and find a new church is never easy at best, and is often quite difficult. And how many other changes could you list? Changes, which as the collect suggests, can rob us of the joy of our Lord and the joy of the life He has given us.

But among the many changes of this world that effect us, there is one change above all others most difficult to bear, **and that is death.** The death of a parent, the death of a spouse, the death of a child, the death of a good friend, even death on a massive scale, like we see with terrorism and natural disasters. All those other changes I mentioned earlier are difficult, but at least can be dealt with in time. But death is final. Death robs us of the companionship and community God has given to us and blessed us with. Death is not “just a part of life,” as some would have us think today. Death was never part of God’s plan for us, but an intrusion into the life that He has given. The intrusion of sin. For death is sin made visible. Sin doesn’t just result in a bruised ego or a bruised arm, but with a body in a casket. It is the very opposite of God’s “let there be,” and there was. And so we should not be comfortable with death. We should hate it. And the truth is, that no matter how prepared you think you are for death, you never really are.

Among the many changes of this world. The disciples had experienced many changes. Following Jesus for three years, they had seen things they had never dreamed of - things

wonderful and challenging and confusing all at the same time. They had left homes and jobs and families and entered upon a new life. But there was now one more change they would face; the one above all others most difficult to bear: **death**. The death of their Lord Jesus. It would be a difficult time. Jesus had told them that this day was coming, but the crucifixion - seeing Jesus hung on the wood of the cross - would shake them to the core. For this was not just the death of a man or a friend, but the death of the One who taught with an authority never before heard, who healed diseases, who expelled demons, who cleansed lepers, who forgave sins, who raised the dead, and whom Peter had confessed as *the Christ, the Son of the living God!* To see this Jesus die would be far more than the grief of death - **it was the end**. The line across the page of their story. What more was left for them now? Nothing. Jesus' death is their death.

This Jesus knew, and so in the words of the Gospel that we heard earlier from John, Jesus is speaking to His disciples about this change. To prepare them. For soon He will be taken from them - arrested, convicted, and crucified. "***A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.***" But they don't understand what He is talking about. They would not see Him. They would see Him. But if we will see Him, how can He be going away? And if Jesus is going away, how shall we see Him? It must be one or the other, but not both. It can't be both. How can it be both?

Their minds were swimming, for their minds did not yet have room for the destruction of death and the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus would *bruise* the serpent's head with His heel! It would take the work of the Spirit to enable them to understand. "***When the Spirit of truth comes,***" Jesus said, "***he will guide you into all the truth.***" Until then, they would see the empty tomb and wonder and doubt and disbelieve. Death they knew. *Could they know life?*

That is what we need to know - the disciples, you, me, all people. Death we *know*. Death is our reality. People die, animals die, computers die, cars die, friendships die, marriages die. And you can do death by yourself. . . . But life is quite different. You cannot give yourself life. Life is a gift. Life comes only from another life. A woman, Jesus says, gives birth to a child, giving life to another. And in that there is pain and anguish - of division, of separation - but then the joy of life. So too will it be with Jesus. The pain and anguish of the division and separation of Good Friday will give way to the joy and life of Easter. Jesus will be *the firstborn from the dead*, that from His life *we* receive the gift of life. For life is only from life. And so from Jesus' life comes our life. And no ordinary life this, but a life that will never end.

And so Jesus must first go away and be seen no more. There will be the pain and anguish, the division and separation of the cross. But then they will see Him again, in the life and joy of the resurrection. And while the first will seem too much to bear, it is the second that will bring a joy even greater. Which is why, I suppose, we remember Good Friday but one day, and celebrate Easter for 50! Death will have its day - for all of us. But the

life we receive from Jesus will last forever.

And that's really what we need to learn - the disciples, you, me, all people. We need to learn how to live. *How to live this life*. Which sounds funny, doesn't it? For doesn't life and living just come naturally? Well, no. Just as we need to teach our children how to live, so we need to learn how to live this life. This life of Christ. To stop looking for life in things that die, and learn how to be born anew each day, into the life of Christ. To realize that baptized into Christ, you are - as God told Peter - ***no longer common, but clean***. You may *look* common, average, like everybody else out there in the world; working for a living and trying your best. **But baptized into Christ you are not common - you are a child of God**. A treasured child. A loved child. Now matter who you were or what you were, now you are different. For the Holy Spirit fell on you in those waters. Your sins were forgiven in those waters. You were given a new life in those waters. How can anyone, given such gifts and adopted by God, be common anymore? Or *live* common anymore?

That's what God was teaching Peter in the reading from Acts that we heard. Can Gentiles become Christians? Can the dirty become clean? Can outcasts become children of God? If we look at them and who they are (*or if we look at ourselves and who we are*), who knows what answer we will come up with. But if we look at the cross and the empty tomb and the power and love of God, there will be no doubt. Yes, Gentiles can. Yes, the dirty can. Yes, the outcasts can. Yes, the sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes can. Yes, heathen and atheists and Muslims can - and yes, even folks like you and me, can. For look not at the sinner, but at the One who came down from heaven ***to make all things new*** and clean. Is there any sin greater than His cross? Is there any death greater than His resurrection? Absolutely not. And so this new life is for all people. The life of Christ. Life *in* Christ. And so yes, ***to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life***.

And so also to you and me. Whatever "death" you are facing in your life right now, it cannot win. *It cannot win*. It has already been defeated. And so for us there is life. The life of forgiveness, not of grudges and anger. The life of love, not of hatred and revenge. The life of joy and peace, not of worry and anxiety. Can we live such a life? Can we know such a life? That *our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found*? It sounds too good to be true.

But true it is. As true as the empty tomb. And this life is yours - not because you've done it, but because the life of Christ and His death and resurrection is given to you. Life from life. It is given by the Spirit, whom Jesus had promised to send, and who would, as Jesus said, ***take what is mine and declare it to you***. Which means when the words of Jesus are declared to you, the Spirit gives you what they say. They are not just words, or empty words, but words filled with the Spirit and life. And so when it is declared to you, *I forgive you all your sins*, the Spirit gives you what those words say. And when it is

declared to you, *Take, eat, this is My body; Take, drink, this is My blood*, the Spirit gives you what those words say. And the forgiveness, life, and salvation of Jesus are yours. You are filled with Him. He is alive in you. That your sorrow be turned to joy. A joy that no one can take away from you.

You will see me, Jesus said. And they did, those disciples. And you see Him, even now. You see Him here, in His gifts. You see Him out there, in the least of those who need your help. You see Him by faith, the Spirit giving you ears to hear and eyes to see. Not to live a life that ends in death; but to live a life that not even death can end. Can we live such a life? Can we know such a life? That *our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found?*

Sometimes, perhaps, it seems that the answer is no. The troubles too many, the problems too much, the struggles too mighty, and the joys of life too fleeting. But the good news of Easter is that there is a peace and joy that surpasses that of this world, and anything this world can give. The peace and joy of the life of Christ, of life which can never be taken away. Not by anything this world and its devil can dish out. It is the joy and peace not of having everything go right, but a joy and peace even when they don't.

For we too, as children of God, are *going to the Father*. In Christ, in fact, we are already there. But like Christ, one day our tombs will be empty, when the Word of God once again does what it says, calls our bodies from the grave, and *death will be no more. It cannot win*. Oh, satan will tell you that death has won when you're standing at the grave of a loved one. Your feelings will tell you that death has won when your life is falling apart. You may think that death is going to win when your own body begins to fail. But it is not so. These are only the birth pains to a new life. A new life that you have even now, and live even now.

And so the line across the page of your story has been erased. Forgiven. Done away with. Now, there is no end, there is no bottom, there is no period, end of story. No! Jesus has turned the page to a new life. *"It is done!"* He said. *And His words are trustworthy and true*. He has conquered, and *we* are made sons of God. Jesus' death is our death, for He died for our sins; and now His life is our life. *He has made all things new*, life from life! Even you, even now. 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.