

9 March 2016  
Lent 4 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“The Little (or BIG!) Peter in Each of Us: Keeping Your Distance”  
Text: Matthew 26:57-58; 1 Peter 3:13-22

He watched them as they bound Jesus, as they cinched up those ropes tightly about His hands. Those hands that had done nothing wrong. Those hands that had so often reached out in compassion. Those hands that had touched lepers, restored sight to the blind, gave hearing to the deaf, and embraced the unloved. Those hands now tightly bound, as if they could do harm. As if they were a weapon. Those hands that had done nothing but good.

Then they shoved Him. *Get going!* they yelled into His ears, clearly enjoying the power they now exercised over Him. As if they had any power. Did they forget how He had just knocked them all down by just the power of His Word? But soldiers aren't paid to remember, but to act. And so they did. Manhandling Jesus out of the Garden and to Jerusalem.

Peter just watched at first. But then slowly one foot followed the other, and he followed the hostile group . . . from a distance. Never letting them get out of his sight, but never getting too close either. Lest they turn on him. Lest they decide to let him get a taste of the steely sword he had just pulled on them. Back across the Kidron Valley, up the slope to Jerusalem, in the gate where Jesus had entered to shouts of Hosanna just a few days ago, through the sleepy streets, and into the courtyard of the High Priest. But not too far in. Near the wall, so he could blend in. Near the gate, in case he needed to make a quick getaway . . .

Perhaps Peter tried to console himself with the thought that he hadn't left Jesus. He had said that even if all the others fell away, he never would (Matt 26:33). He was there; where were they? But even as he thought it, he knew it wasn't true. He was trying his best, but his best wasn't enough. He was afraid; so afraid. He was confused, he was distraught. He wanted to be with Jesus. He wanted to speak, he wanted to act, he wanted to die with his friend, his Lord. But something was holding him back. Something was keeping him away. Something was making him *keep his distance*.

You know how it is. So do I. For how often do we, too, keep our distance from our Saviour? Afraid to speak. Failing to act. Strong when it's easy but weak when too much is being asked of us. Hiding our faith lest we be mocked or attacked. Wanting to blend in with the world and not stand out; to be popular and not considered odd. Maybe, like Peter, we console ourselves with the way we come to Church every week and with what we give . . . but still you know in your heart how weak that excuse sounds. For faith is

something to be lived not just in Church, when it's easy, but in the world, even when it's hard. We see Christians in other parts of the world being persecuted and killed for their faith, yet look at us! How we keep our distance, not wanting to get too close; not wanting the danger. Like Peter, we try our best, but our best isn't good enough, is it?

So thanks be to God that in Jesus, God did not keep His distance from us. That in love for us, He didn't just draw near to us, but became one of us. Jesus, God in human flesh and blood. You can't get any closer than that. And in our flesh and blood He went through all that you do. He knows the fears and temptations, the worries and troubles. But where we are weak, He is strong. Where we fail, He delivers. Where we shrink back, He never does. He fights for us against all our enemies, even on the cross, and wins. Our sin is forgiven through His sacrifice, our death and grave are overcome in His resurrection, and our hell lies in ruins by His descent. For that man hauled off with His hands bound together would not remain bound for long. In just three days He would be free. To set us free.

It is the freedom now given to us in Holy Baptism, where the Lord who drew near to us now draws us to Himself. That's what Peter wrote - yes, the same Peter. It is a changed man who could later write so differently than how he once acted, writing: ***But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.*** For after Jesus rose and restored Peter, Peter realized he was safe in the ark - the ark of Christ and His Church. For he was baptized into Christ - the ***Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*** So what did he have to fear?

Oh, Peter still had his moments, as will we. Our sinful natures still get the better of us. But how good to know that those sins and failures cannot separate us from the love of Christ. That we, too, have forgiveness and restoration. That the promises we have received in baptism will never be taken away. Maybe Peter wrote that as much to teach and remind himself as to teach others. And we cannot be reminded too often, either.

Peter followed at a distance because he expected the worst. But the worst, in the end, turned out to be the best. And for us too. So when you shrink back and follow from a distance, expecting the worst, the worst might happen - but the best is not far behind. For the God who raises the dead to life is able to bring good from evil even now. And He will. He promised. He promised you.

And so we sang our prayer, based on that promise, earlier:

*Jesus, lead Thou on Till our rest is won;  
And although the way be cheerless,*

*We will follow calm and fearless.  
Guide us by Thy hand To our fatherland.*

*If the way be drear, If the foe be near,  
Let not faithless fears o'ertake us;  
Let not faith and hope forsake us;  
For through many a woe To our home we go.*

*Jesus, lead Thou on Till our rest is won;  
Heav'nly leader, still direct us,  
Still support, console, protect us,  
Till we safely stand In our fatherland. (LSB #718 v. 1-2, 4)*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.