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Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Devoted”

Text: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

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.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

It sounds like those early Christians were devoted to four things.

First, ***to the apostles’ teaching***. Those early Christians wanted to hear all that Jesus had said and done from those who were eye and ear witnesses to it all. From those Jesus Himself had commissioned to speak of this to the world and to give His gifts, especially His gifts of forgiveness and life. They ***devoted*** themselves to this. A little Jesus was not enough.

And then this led, second, to being ***devoted to fellowship***, or better and more accurately, ***the fellowship***. The unity they had as Christians. The faith they held in common and so the life they had in common. The life they lived together, shared what they had, and gave to those in need. They weren’t a bunch of individuals, but the Body of Christ. United in Him. What Jesus had done for them didn’t just change the future, it changed life now, in the present. And those around them noticed.

And that unity in Christ was fed and nourished by ***the breaking of bread***, which is Luke’s way of saying Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper. They were ***devoted*** to receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus, the gift Jesus had given to His Church just before He died, to strengthen them as Jesus lived in them and they in Him. It was as if Jesus was still with them, giving Himself to them. For He was. And how precious that was to them.

And so they were ***devoted to the prayers*** as well. ***The prayers***. The prayers they prayed together. The prayers they spoke back to Jesus after Jesus had spoken to them through the apostles. They lifted up their needs with one voice, for so had Jesus commanded them to do, and He promised to hear and answer them. Give them all they asked for, all they needed. They weren’t now on their own, they still had a Good Shepherd watching over them and providing for them. So *ask*, Jesus said! I will provide.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Yet while it sounds like those early Christians were devoted to four things, in reality, they were devoted *to only one*: **Jesus**. For all those things are from Him and lead to Him. And they were devoted to Jesus only because Jesus was first devoted to them. Because they knew Jesus not *was*, but *is*, their Good Shepherd. The one who came to care for them, to feed them, to fight for them, to protect them, and to die for them. And He did. And now risen from the dead, to continue to do this for them - and for us - forever.

And while this all sounds rather idyllic, it was far from it. Psalm 23 sounds all peaceful and nice, but we are walking ***through the valley of the shadow of death***. We ***will fear no evil***, but there *is* evil. And His table is set ***in the presence of enemies***. It was so in those early days of the Church, and it is now. There is death around us, especially these days with this virus. The evil one is always stalking us. And the truth of God's Word will always be opposed by those who think they know better, or who speak what people want to hear, not what they need to hear.

Peter spoke of this in his Epistle that we heard today. ***Sorrow and suffering unjustly*** for doing good. Which sounds really odd, doesn't it? For who could be against what is good? Well, it all depends on what your definition of good is. Proclaiming that there is only one true God, and only one truth not many truths, protecting life from the womb to the tomb, defending sexuality and marriage, pointing out sin and the need for forgiveness, speaking the truth of a Creator, and preaching that we cannot save ourselves by our own good works, that we're not inherently good, and that we need a Saviour named Jesus - some would say all of that is not good, but divisive and hateful. Teachings from the past that we've moved beyond today. Or should.

But if we move away from those teachings, that good, we are devoting ourselves not to the *apostles'* teaching and fellowship, but to the *world's*, to *man's* teaching and fellowship. And maybe, if we do that, we'll avoid being crucified. *Maybe*. But to what end?

Rather, Peter says, look at Jesus, as both Saviour and ***example***. Saviour from death, from the evil one, and from our enemies. He suffered, and so will you. But He now lives, *and so will you*. So follow in His steps, His good. And return good for evil, truth for lies, and love for hate. Not because you *have to*, but because that's who you are. Because by Jesus' ***wounds you have been healed***. Healed from sin by His forgiveness. Healed from death by His life. By the forgiveness and life of your Good Shepherd. Not who *was*, but *is* your Good Shepherd. Still. Through it all. No matter what comes your way.

For Jesus has not promised to take us away from all the sin and evil in the world, but He

has promised to be with us in it. **Devoted to us.** Doing everything *for us*, not for Himself. For if He was only about serving Himself, He never would have come, never would have been born, nor subjected Himself to suffering and rejection and crucifixion. And He would have saved Himself. But He didn't. He was devoted to us. Even to death and the grave. To be with us even in those places, that we not fear them, when they threaten us and come upon us, for He will bring us through them to life. That we *dwelt in the house of the Lord forever.*

And so those early Christians, devoted to the one who is devoted to them, show us what the Christian life looks like. It is a life lived in the Word of God, a life lived in unity with our fellow believers, a life that feeds upon our Lord's Body and Blood, and that prays together, here, in the Lord's house. The alternative is living a life that is uncertain, alone, weak, and silent. And many are, though they may not know it, and maybe they don't seem like it or look like it. But lying in a hospital bed with COVID-19 . . . uncertain, alone, weak, and silent seems like an apt description.

Unless you have a Good Shepherd who is with you *wherever* you are, in life and in death. *Unless* you have His Word and promises and strength. *Unless* you have the confidence of His forgiveness and life. *Unless* the rest of His Body is praying for you and speaking for you. Maybe we don't realize what a blessing that all is until we look like that. To have a Good Shepherd who is devoted to you Himself - and in His Body, the Church! - *no matter what.* Those early Christians rejoiced in that, and so do we.

In having a Shepherd who is not just a hired hand, but so much more than that! One who, as He told us today, is the gate, or *the door*, for the sheep. The one by which we gain access into the sheepfold, the church, and when a predator wants in, it is *over His dead body!* But since His body was dead and now is alive again, and cannot die again, we have nothing to fear. And then also as the Shepherd who is *the door*, He is the one who goes with us out into the world, to lead us in the way we should go, bring us back when we stray, rescue us from danger, protect us from the lurking evil one, and bring us safely home again. For He is no *thief* or *robber*, seeking only to get from us, but a true and good Shepherd, who has come for our life. And not just life, but life in *abundance.*

Which is another odd sounding phrase . . . for what does that mean, to *have life in abundance?* Does it mean to have a life abounding in the things of this world? Does it mean to have a long life? Or does it mean to have a life that abounds in the one who IS life Himself? Abounding in Christ and His abundance - an abundance of His forgiveness and life? It seems to me that's what we see in that description of the early church that we started off with today - they were abounding in life and eager to share that life with others. And the more they shared it, the more they abounded in it.

So if your life isn't like that, doesn't look like that, *return*, as Peter said to us today, *to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* Return to His **Font**, where He made you His

own and promised you forgiveness and life. Return to His **Word**, where He speaks His words and promises to you, to comfort you, assure you, sustain you, guide you, and strengthen you. Return to **confess** and hear His wonderful Word of Absolution. And return to His **Table**, to receive from His own hand the food and drink of His Body and Blood, the food and drink of life. And with He in you and you in Him, in His Body, the Church, with His fellow sheep, you have that life you're looking for. And you can go out and share it with others, for you don't have just a little life, but life in abundance. Life that will not end and never run out.

For when sin, death, and the devil want to take that life from you, Jesus, your Good Shepherd says: *over my dead body!* And since **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] they can't have it, or you. Ever. For you belong to the one who is devoted to you. The door, the gate, the very Good Shepherd.

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.