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Pentecost 13

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“From Never! to Yes!”

Text: Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

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

Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.

That’s what Peter said. His response to bad news. The bad news that Jesus was going to be killed.

It’s our natural reaction. To bad news. A loved one tells us they have cancer and are going to die. A friend loses their job and tells you they’re going to lose their home. A high risk person gets Covid, someone goes on hospice care, the doctor says there’s no more they can do . . . No! is our natural reaction. It’s going to be alright. You’re going to get better. That’s not going to happen.

But our denials don’t change anything. These things do happen. Maybe we just don’t want to think about it. We don’t want to imagine life without this person. So Peter’s reaction? Yeah, I get it. I probably would have - I probably have! - said the same thing.

So today, in the Holy Gospel, we heard an interesting contrast. Jesus sees death as something He **MUST** do. Peter sees death as something that should **NEVER** happen. Both are right.

Peter’s right - death should not happen. It was never meant to happen. Evolutionists say that death is just a part of life, that death makes us stronger, in fact, weeding out the weak. But the Scriptures tell us what we know; what each of us knows: that death isn’t right. Death isn’t natural. Death has been imposed on us. It’s not a part of life, it’s the enemy of life. The result of sin. And while it is, it shouldn’t be. Peter is right.

Which is why Jesus *must* die. Because we die. If there is going to be any help for us at all, any hope for us at all, Jesus must die. That dying, He rise and destroy the power of death. The power death has over us. Which is the power of sin. Sin which doesn’t just cause us to do wrong things, but robs us of life by separating us from God. Sin which says: Do this and you’ll live! And we do and we die. We become less, not more. The satisfaction, if there at all, is short-lived. And the power of sin over us increases. We feel guilty, *yet we do it again*. We are disappointed, *yet we do it again*. I don’t want to be that

way, yet I do it again.

So Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, must die. For me. If there is going to be any help or hope for me at all. He must break the power of sin and death or it will never be broken. **The good news for us is that He has.** But Peter and the others are still learning that.

And then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

And while we aren't told how Peter responded to this statement of Jesus, we can fill in the blank: *No! This shall never happen to me!* It's our natural reaction. If I don't want the cross for others, I certainly don't want it for me. There must be some other way . . .

But here is the difference between life in this world and life in the next. Between the kingdom of the world and God's kingdom. In this world, in this life, in this kingdom, there are other ways. If one way doesn't work, shift your weight, pivot to something else. If one tactic or strategy isn't working, come up with another. Or buckle down and try harder.

But for eternal life, there is no other way. There are no pivots or other strategies and tactics. There's just Jesus.

Now, you're all good Lutherans, so you know that. And maybe you've sitting there - either here, in person, or at home, watching our live stream - and thinking that I haven't told you anything you don't already know. Maybe. But now hold up these words that you know in your mind and believe in your heart next to your life, how you're actually living. Is there is a disconnect? Any inconsistency? Don't bother to answer. I know the answer. I know it from my own mirror.

We talk about eternal life, and yet live as if this life is all there is. We talk about God's kingdom and keep building our own. We talk self-denial but live self-fulfillment. We talk about bearing the cross but try to get out from under it as often and as quickly as we can. We say we follow Jesus, but does that mean for you as much as *following* people on social media? Thumbs up! But it's really more of a *virtual* reality? It's true, isn't it?

So it's good for us to hear these words again. To connect our hearts and minds with our hands and feet. In those ways that Paul talked about today in the Epistle. *Outdo one another in showing honor. Be constant in prayer. Bless those who persecute you. Associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Never avenge yourself. Feed your hungry enemy. Give your enemy something to drink. Repay no one evil for evil, but overcome evil with good.* That's a tall order. A heavy cross to bear.

And it really is: **a cross**. Normally, when people hear about bearing the cross, they don't think of stuff like that - they think of suffering; that it's all about suffering. And that's true. But it's more. It's more about death. And aren't all those things Paul talked about there, like death? Killing you? Killing your old, sinful, selfish man? Killing your ability to put you and your wants at the center? Focusing you not on *your* life and not on *your* kingdom, but on God and others?

But don't therefore think and fall back into the same trap that you can do these things if you just buckle down and try harder. You'll just fall harder. **It's all got to start with Jesus, end with Jesus, and have Jesus all in between!** Because this is *His* life that Paul is describing here. So if you're going to live it, He's got to give it. If you're going to live it, that old man's got to go, and a new man arise. A Jesus man, which only Jesus can create and keep alive in you.

So it all starts with your baptism, for there, as Paul said earlier in Romans (chapter 6), is where Jesus' cross was first applied to you. That's where you died and rose with Christ and became a new man. There your sins were forgiven and you rose to live a new life.

Only you didn't live that new life. Your sinful nature got the best of you. Satan's temptations sounded reasonable to you. The ways of the world looked good to you. And you followed them, not Christ. And *really*, not virtually. And the guilt came, and disappointment came, and death began licking its chops for you.

So Jesus called out to you: *come back*. Come back to your baptism. Come back to the cross. You're filthy, but here I make you clean. You're guilty, but here I forgive you. You're my child. Don't be afraid. Repent. And live. Not a life you save, but the life I save. For only My life is greater than your death.

And you're renewed, forgiven, raised again . . . *until you're not*. Until: *Hey Lord! I did unto others, but they didn't do unto me!* This cross, these people, they're crushing me! This life . . . it ain't easy.

So good thing you're not alone, huh? Jesus says. For you're right. By yourself, that cross is too heavy for you to bear. But I am with you. Didn't I promise you that? If *you* bear a cross, it's because *I* bore it first. For your good - your eternal good. You need *My* strength. **So here, My Body. Here, My Blood.** What you did to me I don't do unto you either. Remember that. **Do this in remembrance of Me.** Of what I did in return for what you did. For you. And receive the forgiveness, the life, the strength, the salvation you need. Here.

For what's the alternative? ***Gain the whole world and forfeit your soul!*** You think that's a good trade? That's a sucker's trade. But PT Barnum wasn't the only one to think there's one of *those* born every minute. Satan knows it too. And he's more of a con man and

huckster than Barnum ever was. But no con from Jesus. Only the truth. Life and death. Straight up, no sugar-coating. If you follow Jesus, know that satan is going to follow you! To hound you and bite at your heels, set traps for you and try to bring you down. But if you follow Jesus, he will not succeed. Not in the end. He might win battles, but he's already lost the war. And for the battles you lose, there is forgiveness from the one who won the war.

And when *the Son of Man comes with his angels in the glory of his Father, he will repay each person according to what he has done.*

That's not works righteousness, but rather a promise that your reward is in the future. Right now, you may not see it. In fact, things might look pretty bleak. It's not for nothing that the psalms often complain that the evil prosper and the righteous suffer. But don't rely on what you see, but on what you hear - the words and promises of God. What you see will deceive you and let you down - like satan playing three-card Monte with you! But the Word of God will not. Want proof? The empty tomb that was revealed when the stone was rolled away is your proof. What He said, He did.

And then finally, Jesus says, *Truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*

Now, some people think that because the disciples died, Jesus was just wrong here. But Jesus didn't say they wouldn't die, but that they wouldn't *taste death*. Interesting phrase, yes? For what do you think death tastes like? Well, you know. It is bitter, awful. When someone we love dies, it is a bitter pill to swallow. Judas died in bitterness and despair.

But for those in Jesus, for those baptized into Him and fed by Him and forgiven by Him, death has been transformed. It still isn't natural. It still shouldn't be. But it is. So Jesus transformed it. He transformed it from the end of life to the beginning of life. So when the disciples died, when the early martyrs died - and often in horrible ways! - death was not bitter for them. They often rejoiced! They didn't resist. The Church began calling those days birthdays - into heaven. Now I'm sure it was hard and very painful! But their Lord, their Jesus, was with them. Taking them with Him through death and the grave to life. From the sleep of death to the morning of Paradise.

Which brings us back to how I started this sermon . . . Our natural reaction to death is to say *No!* But because Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, as Peter would learn, you can face death with confidence. And being able to face death with confidence enables you to live now - not in fear, but in faith. Not worrying about your kingdom, but looking forward to His. And knowing that the crosses you bear are giving you life - killing your old man to enliven the new man, the child of God, that you are. For your Father wants you to live - and not just here and now - but with Him forever.

That is the mind of God, and the words of Jesus. To which we - and Peter, eventually - give a hearty *yes!* Yes, Lord, *Your will be done.* I live and die in you.

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.