

18 April 2021  
The Third Sunday of Easter

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Here We Stand”

Text: Acts 3:11-21; Luke 24:36-49; 1 John 3:1-7

**A**lleluia! 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.

*Hie(r) stehe Ich!* Here I stand.

Those words were not *first* uttered 500 years ago today, but they were *most famously* uttered 500 years ago today.

A little over three years ago, we remembered the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. The day Luther posted his 95 Theses on October 31, 1517.

Last year, we remembered the 500th anniversary of the writing of what are often called Luther's three great theological treatises. Specifically we remembered the one entitled *On The Freedom of a Christian*.

And this year, we remember another 500th anniversary, and that is, as the insert in your bulletin shows, the Diet of Worms. A “diet” was simply a formal assembly of the Emperor with the princes and bishops of Germany to conduct business. And at the Pope's urging, Luther was one of the items put on the agenda. The Pope had already condemned Luther as a heretic and excommunicated him earlier in the year, on January 3rd, but he needed the Emperor's help to enforce his ban on Luther. (That means: kill him. Because that what you did to heretics.) The Emperor, however, wasn't much of a theologian. He was a politician, and with the Turks marching on his empire and their threat becoming ever more dire, he needed Germany to help him fight them off. Germany, where Luther had become wildly popular. So he summoned Luther. He would give him a chance to recant. But Luther would not. And it was on this day, April 18th, 1521, when Luther uttered his well-known phrase: *hie(r) stehe Ich*. **Here I stand.**

Now, while that's one of the best known - if not the best known - things Luther ever said, he probably wasn't the first to **say** it, and he certainly wasn't the first to **do** it. That honor I would give to the Apostles. We heard in the reading from Acts that Peter had healed a man lame from birth. The people were utterly astounded, the once lame man wouldn't him go, so **Peter took his stand** - on the Gospel; on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Y'all killed Him, he told the crowd of Jews. But God raised Him from the dead. What you see is that the miracles Jesus did *before* are continuing *now*, because He is not dead but living. What the prophets said has been fulfilled. So repent, receive His forgiveness - which is *for you!* - and be refreshed with His forgiveness and life. **Here I stand.**

But that's only half the story. For while Peter was still speaking, *the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them* (Acts 4:1) and arrested them. (We're actually going to hear those verses next week.) For, you see, the Jewish leaders had the same problem the Emperor had - like with Luther, people were believing the apostles. The group of Christians was now starting to get dangerously large - they were now up to some 5,000 men, Luke tells us. And maybe more if you count families. So they brought Peter and John before the Diet (well, they called it the Council) and ordered them to recant. Well, OK, not to recant, but like Luther, to stop preaching what they were preaching. To stop preaching this heresy about Jesus and His resurrection and His forgiveness. So Peter and John responded, in words that Luther would echo so many years later: *Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard* (Acts 4:19-20). **Here we stand.**

Now if you're like me, you admire Luther and Peter and John and all the rest of the Apostles and all the early Christian martyrs for doing that - for standing firm in the face of danger and death and saying **here I stand!** But the reason they could is the same reason we can: because *Christ is risen!* [He is risen indeed!] Because Jesus was the first to stand from the dead. We heard the account from Luke today, of what happened that first Easter evening, when Jesus appeared to His frightened and confused disciples and said: *Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. Here I stand!* Alive! What are you afraid of?

*Are you afraid of your sins?* Don't be! I was crucified for them and now **here I stand!** Alive! They are atoned for and you are forgiven.

*Are you afraid of death?* Don't be! I died and now **here I stand!** I defeated death for you, so that though you die, yet you will live.

*Are you afraid of satan?* Don't be! He did his worst and tried to defeat me, yet **here I stand!** I've stripped him of his power.

*Are you afraid of those who wield earthly power?* Don't be! They tried to get rid of me and yet **here I stand!** And they'll try to get rid of you, too. But all they can do is take your life. But I give you eternal life, which they can't take away.

*And why are you troubled and confused?* This is exactly what Moses and the Prophets

and the Psalms said was going to happen. And Jesus taught them. *He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures*. So that they, too, could say: **here I stand!** And stake everything, even life and limb, on Jesus' resurrection.

And they did. Peter did, when faced with the gruesome death of being crucified upside-down. **Here I stand**. And the same John who was with Peter that day when the man lame from birth was healed and they were threatened by the Council, did as well. He wasn't martyred, but he was persecuted and exiled for his stand. Yet even so, and even after he witnessed or received word of all his brother Apostles killed, he could write the beautiful words we heard today, to encourage the believers: *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are*. That is, **here we stand!** The love the Father has given us no one can take away. We are His children now, and His children forever. We will not deny Jesus. We will not go back to the old life of sin. We will not recant. **Here we stand!**

And **here we stand**. On the death and resurrection of Jesus. On the empty tomb. On every Word and every promise of God fulfilled in Jesus. On the forgiveness of our sins by grace through faith.

And **here we stand** because this is the witness of the Scriptures - which is not just another holy book like other religions' holy books - but *the eye witness testimony* of those who saw Jesus die on the cross and then risen from the dead and alive again. Those who saw His flesh and blood. Who saw Him eat - which spirits or ghosts do not do. Who put their fingers into those nail holes and their hands into His side. And who were then sent by Jesus - *apostled* by Him - to go tell the world this fact, this truth - that sin, death, grave, and hell are defeated. That there is life and salvation in Him who did that. For them. For all people.

*The witness of the Scriptures*. That is the rest of Luther's quote that is so important but often forgotten; what gave Luther such boldness. And so as you can read on the insert, Luther said: "*I am bound by the Scriptures . . . and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. . . . It is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand . . .*"

Conscience. You can't go against conscience. You hear that a lot these days by people defending what they do and believe. But the truth is that your bare conscience is not a good and reliable guide. Your conscience, like the rest of you - your mind, your body, your desires - is fallen. Infected by sin. So when Luther said "it is not right to go against conscience" it was after he had said that his "conscience was captive to the Word of God." For a conscience formed and informed by the Word of God is a good and reliable guide. A conscience *without* the Word of God is not.

Which is why on that first Easter evening, we read that what Jesus did is *open the mind*

*of the disciples* to understand the Scriptures. In their case, the Old Testament Scriptures. He opened their minds **first** to clean out all the junk that accumulated there; all the wrong thinking and error. And **then** filled them with the truth of the Scriptures. And once they had that solid foundation to stand on, once Luther had that solid foundation to stand on, they could all boldly say: **Here I stand!**

And so for us. Why is it that we, at times, are not able to stand so firmly? Why is it so hard for us to say: **Here I stand?** Why do doubts and fears seem to get the better of us? Is it because we do not have this firm foundation to stand on, as they did?

What junk has accumulated in your mind? Thoughts and “truths” of the world that contradict the Scriptures and so make you uncertain. What fear - of the world, the people in the world, or of losing what you have in the world - has replaced the fear of God? What do you love in the world more than God and so cling to that rather than the Word of God? You see, when our fear, love, and trust is wrong, then where we are standing *is not firm*, and may even be dangerous.

So we, too, need the firm foundation of God’s Word. It is no accident that the Reformation was launched after Luther became a professor of the Scriptures at the University of Wittenberg and spent his time diving into them. They - and the Spirit that works through them - changed him. And gave him a conscience captive to the Word of God that could say: **Here I stand!** Even in the face of all the powers of the world roaring against him.

And they are what strengthen and embolden you as well.

To **take your stand** on your baptismal identity. You are not who others say you are, but who God says you are.

To **take your stand** not on the fact that you are good, but on the full and free forgiveness of your sins.

To **take your stand** on the Body and Blood of Christ given to you here as food for body and soul.

To **take your stand** on the truth of God’s Word, that what God says is right is right, and what He says is wrong is wrong, and not the upside-down thinking of the world.

You and I may have to take such a stand, as Luther did. The truth of the Scriptures is becoming less and less accepted these days, and less and less tolerated these days. Calling certain popular sins sin these days is out-of-bounds, and calling Jesus the only true God and Saviour has been discouraged and disallowed ever since the earliest days of the church. But **here we stand**. Popular or not. Allowed or not. Legal or not. Our conscience captive to the Word of God.

And if you don’t? If your doubts and fears get the better of you? Well, that’s why we come back here every week, isn’t it? To confess, to repent, and to hear Jesus say to us

again, "I forgive you all your sins." To have Jesus open our minds again, clean out the junk that has accumulated in there this past week, and be filled again with His truth. And to receive the food of His Body and Blood to strengthen us for another week. Another week of temptations, challenges, trials, dangers, needs, fears, and whatever else satan can throw at you. For satan wants to make your life like standing on a ball! So that you'll always be off balance and shaky and uncertain . . . and easy to topple over. But what Jesus does is lift you up off the ground and put you on the unshakeable, unmoveable, reliable, and steadfast foundation of His Word. When you're on a ball, you can't say **Here I stand!** But on Jesus and His Word, then yes! **Here I stand!** Not because of me. Because of Jesus. Because of all that He has done for me.

A lot has changed in 500 years. A lot has stayed the same. But what will not change, and will never change, is our Lord, His Word, and His promises. The one who said **Here I stand** after His resurrection is the one on whom we can now say **Here I stand!** In life, in death, and forever.

For **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

And **hier stehen wir!** We can do no other.

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.