

15 February 2004  
Epiphany 6  
The Baptism of Merryn Elspeth Grindstaff

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Baptized into an Open Grave!”

Text: 1 Cor 15:12, 16-20 (Lk 6:17-26; Jer 17:5-8)

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

*“Depart, unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit.”* (Quotation from Luther’s baptismal liturgy, used this day.)

That’s a bit over-the-top, isn’t it? A bit dramatic, many in our world today would say. Children are innocent. What has this child done to deserve such language? Such demeaning talk? What are we going to do to her self-esteem if we continue to speak this way once she gets a little older? This talk of unclean spirits is just not helpful.

Well, whether helpful or not I do not know. But I ask you this instead: is it true? Because if this statement is not true, then what have we just done? In a word, nothing. We have performed a meaningless rite, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. . . . But if this statement is true, then what you have witnessed here this morning is nothing short of a miracle. A rebirth; a renewal; a snatching away of a child from the jaws of Satan and into the loving hands of her Saviour.

Is it true? Was this child lost in sin and possessed of an unclean spirit before her baptism this day?

Sin, to define it in a basic way, is selfishness. It is self-absorption of the worst kind. It is Adam and Eve not being satisfied with what God had given them and reaching out for themselves. It is you and I taking from our neighbor in order to benefit ourselves. It is me not being satisfied with God and wanting to take matters into my own hands and be my own God. Its all about me. The Ten Commandments, in order to show us this sin, turn us outward, away from ourselves, and say that we should “love the Lord your God with all your hearts and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Dt 6:5) And “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev 19:18)

But what has this child done, from the moment of her birth? She has been selfish. She

has cried and demanded to be changed. She has cried and demanded to be fed. She has cried and demanded to be held. She has woken her parents up in the middle of the night. She has exhausted them. She thinks of no one but herself. . . . And as she grows older, this will continue. Children have to be taught to think of others; this is not natural to them. They want for themselves; they look out for themselves. They do not naturally think about the consequences of their actions on others. Its all about me. . . . And then we continue to see this even in adults. If you tell people today that they're only thinking of themselves, they'll say "So?!" . . . As Luther described it, we are curved in on ourselves. Its all about me.

"That is natural!" many would say in response. And I would agree. In our world, the way it is, yes. This is true. This is how we act naturally, or by nature. But we are sinful by nature. Our world is sinful through and through. That's why in one of our confessions of sin we confess that "we are *by nature* sinful and unclean." We are self-absorbed. By nature, we do not love God. We do not love our neighbors. We love me, myself, and I.

But even more certain than this testimony by nature is the testimony we have in the Word of God. The Word of God which tells us that we are conceived sinful (Ps 51:5); that we are born dead spiritually in trespasses and sins (Eph 5:1); and that every inclination of our hearts is evil from our youth (Gen 8:21; Mt 15:19). We do not have within us the ability not to sin. We do not have in us the ability to choose God or to choose the good.

We are men and women, boy and girls, infants and newborns of unclean spirits. It is true. We may not like it; our world may not want us to talk about it; but it is true. Merryn who looks so alive, was really born dead. Dead in sin. A spiritual stillborn. And what can you do with a stillborn? All you can do is bury the child.

And so this morning Merryn was buried. For as St. Paul tells us in Romans, "***do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him by baptism into death.***" (Rom 6:3-4) Buried with Him. Buried in His grave. . . . But what does that mean? That means that today is no funeral, because to be buried in Christ's grave is to be buried in no ordinary grave! It means, in fact, to be buried in an *empty grave*, for Christ's grave is an empty grave! Christ's grave is the grave from which Christ broke the power of sin, the power of death, and the power of the devil. Christ's grave is where His weeping mother Mary went looking for her son, only to be told "***He is not here.***" (Mt 28:1-6) Christ's grave is where the angel told the women, "***He is risen from the dead!***" (Mk 16:6) Christ's grave is where the hopeless are given hope. Christ's grave is where the dead are given life! And so St. Paul continues, "***We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just***

***as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.*** (Rom 6:4-5)

And so today, Merryn was not only buried, but also raised from the dead. She is stillborn no longer. She has been born again, born from above, and given a new life. A new life of faith. Today you witnessed no ordinary rite. Not just a simple baptism, a washing with water. *No today, you witnessed a resurrection.* The miracle of life that we witness in the delivery room is in fact surpassed by the miracle of life that we witness here in the Church, at the font. For here, Merryn has been raised with Christ. Here, Merryn has gotten death over with. Here, Merryn has been given a life that will never end. There is no blessing or benefit given by God that she does not now have. All has been given to her.

This is why Paul made such a big deal about Christ's resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians. He knew what was at stake – namely, our life. And so he wrote (as we heard in the Epistle), ***“For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”*** For if Christ has not been raised, then we are buried in a closed grave. A closed grave with no way out.

But that is not our grave! For, as Paul continues, ***“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”*** The firstfruits – the first of an abundant harvest of those who will be raised. Christ's grave was never meant for only Himself – but for you and I and all men, women, and children. And so He died for all, taking the sins of all to His grave that He might leave them there. He died our death, truly. No nice, antiseptic death, with make-up, and a blue dress or suit, and flowers all around Him. No, He died ugly, like we die ugly. Like the aborted baby, the body ravaged by cancer, the terrorist victim. He is hung on a cross. A public spectacle. Mutilated by whip and nail and spear and thorn. Humiliated by nakedness and scorn. But He is there because He wants to be there. Willingly. Not against His will – this is His will. To walk with us into the fiery furnace, into death and grave, that joining us in our death, we could join Him in His life.

And so we have! ***“For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.”*** There is life after death. And not just in the future, whenever we die physically, whenever that may be. But life after death already now. For like Merryn, we have been given the life of Christ. We have been raised, and the life that we now live shall never end.

Now that doesn't mean that we live a heaven on earth. That it were only so. No, the hunger, the weeping, the struggle, the hatred, the exclusion, the persecution – all that we heard in the Holy Gospel we will have on this earth. And Merryn will too. But they cannot overcome us! Even in these we are blessed. We are like the trusting tree mentioned by Jeremiah; *“the tree planted by water, that does not fear when heat comes; that is not anxious in the year of drought.”* These things will come – heat and drought, struggles and doubts, times of trouble and need. But the living water, the water of life, is greater than these.

So Chris and Elspeth, and Mollie and Jay as sponsors: make sure you tell Merryn about this day: that she is baptized. Tell her over and over. Celebrate her baptism birthday every year. You cannot extol this gift enough. Tell her, when the heat and the drought come, she is baptized. When the struggles and doubts come, she is baptized. When there is trouble and need, she is baptized. She is baptized into Christ. The Christ who hung upon the tree for her, the Christ who gives His body and blood here for her, the Christ who will come again for her. She is forgiven. The *Holy* Spirit lives in her. She is a child of God.

And for all of us who were privileged to witness this miracle today, this resurrection, remember that you have been baptized. All the blessings and benefits of God have been given to you! You are forgiven all your sins. The grave – your grave – is empty. It is true! In *fact*, you have been raised from the dead and live in Christ, both now and forever.

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.