

28 May 2017
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Chosen”

Text: 1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11; Acts 1:12-26; John 17:1-11

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [*He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia!

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

If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?

If the righteous is scarcely saved. That’s a sobering verse for us to consider this morning, this last Sunday of the Easter season.

For seven weeks now we have been rejoicing in the resurrection of our Lord - His atonement for our sin on the cross and His great victory over death in His resurrection. As we should. Easter is, as one of our hymns puts it, *the queen of seasons*; the most important season in the church’s year; the season all the others revolve around. Without Easter, we are nothing and have nothing. Without the resurrection of Jesus, the church is only a fantasy. And so we celebrate Easter long and loud.

And this week, in case you missed it, we also celebrated the Ascension of our Lord, Jesus’ coronation day. The fact that our brother and Saviour is now sitting on the throne of David, at the Father’s right hand, ruling all things for the good of His Church. Another reason to rejoice, which the disciples did after Jesus ascended. They weren’t sad that Jesus had left, as we might expect; they returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Luke 24:52). They knew this was a good thing.

But they also knew the world was still a dangerous place. That there would be, as we heard from Peter today, ***fiery trials***; that Christians would suffer for their faith; that ***the devil prowls around like a roaring lion***. Usually, today, when we say something like *the world is a dangerous place*, we think of terrorism - and there were four or five such attacks just this week. But today with these words we are reminded that there is a greater threat than that. Greater both because its consequences are greater, and because it often happens without our even knowing it - and that is **the threat to our faith**. Jesus said: *Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell* (Matt 20:28). But honestly, we’re usually the opposite, aren’t we?

So maybe it’s not pleasant, but it’s good for us to hear and consider Peter’s words today,

as hard as they may be. ***If the righteous is scarcely saved . . .*** If those righteous - those made righteous by grace through faith - ***are scarcely saved*** - saved with great difficulty . . . we should pay attention.

And we heard of the danger today, also from Peter, in the first reading from Acts as we heard about Judas. You know his story, but don't rush past his story, as I think we usually do because we're used to hearing it, just lumping him together with other famous betrayers like Benedict Arnold.

But I don't think it was like that in that upper room where those 120 Christians were together. Judas was their friend. He had been their companion for three years. They had done everything together. They relied on him and he on them. He was one of the twelve pillars, the twelve disciples, Jesus' inner circle. They were brothers, they were close, they would have taken a bullet for Judas. And then suddenly, without any warning, *he turned the gun on them*. And they probably wondered *how? What happened?* It was earth-shaking.

And so as they gathered in that upper room, and they were praying, they were also, I think, mourning. Not Jesus - they were joyful because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, but at the same time mourning the loss of their friend. This was a tragedy. ***Scripture had to be fulfilled***, Peter sadly said. True. But that didn't make it any easier. Jesus was crucified, but He rose from the dead. Their friend wasn't coming back.

Danger, all around. Threats greater than the threat to your life. . . . ***If the righteous is scarcely saved . . .***

How does it happen? How does a Judas happen? Well, there's probably lots of ways, but often, I think, is the devil, the world, and your own sinful nature chipping away. Slowly eroding your foundation. Little by little luring you away. So that you don't even notice. What you once thought unthinkable, now you find yourself thinking about. Places you would never go, you start to go. You're acting different . . . your priorities have shifted . . . why?

If the righteous is scarcely saved . . .

So Peter says: ***be sober-minded!*** or clear thinking about these things. ***Be watchful!*** or, don't let down your guard.

These are good words coming from Peter. For he not only knew the sting of losing his friend, Judas - maybe he was also thinking of how close he had come to being in that very place. He was the one who had denied Jesus three times. He was the one who tried to walk on the water but sank like a stone. He was the one to whom Jesus said: *Get behind me satan* (Matthew 16:23)! ***If the righteous is scarcely saved . . .*** when Peter wrote

that, I think he was talking about himself.

Danger, all around. We rejoice in Christ's resurrection and ascension, but the world is still a dangerous place. So what about you? Are you in less danger? Are you less susceptible to the temptations of satan and the allures of sin? Are you stronger than Peter . . . and maybe think, *I would never be a Judas?*

Pretty heavy stuff, I know. And not very easterly, Pastor! Give us some good news, will ya'!

Well Peter does. For he also writes this: ***Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.***

Humble yourselves. Know yourself. Take a realistic look at yourself. How do you do that? By repenting. By acknowledging not just the danger, but that you've given in; you've been taken in; you've turned away; you, too, have gone your own way. You thought you were strong, you thought you could do it . . . *Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

And He does. ***Cast all your anxieties on him*** - cast 'em all on Him! Cast all your sin and guilt and shame and failure and all that weakness on Him - ***because he cares for you.*** He wants it. *He cares.* You're not on your own. The reason He came down from heaven is because He cares. The reason He went to the cross is because He cares. And the reason He is here is His Word and Sacrament for you is because He cares. He cares, and so He says: *I forgive you.* For all of it. That sin you're thinking of right now, *I forgive you!* That you've drifted away from Me, *I forgive you!* Your taking Me for granted, *I forgive you!*

And that's not just words. Here, I give you My Body and Blood. Most holy things to make you holy. To ***restore*** you, ***confirm*** you, ***strengthen*** you, and ***establish*** you. To make you My own and keep you close to Me. For you are My child. I baptized you! How could I leave you? How could I not forgive you? Hear My Absolution. Eat My Body and drink My Blood. *I forgive you!* And I will tomorrow, too.

That doesn't mean your sin doesn't matter. It does, of course. But it means that the love and mercy of Jesus is greater than your sin.

You see, Jesus knows how hard life is. He lived it! Life here in this world as a person like you. Under the assault of satan, facing the ridicule of the world, being tempted and lured. He knows. That's why He's here for you. That your future may not be an ***Akeldama*** - a *field of your own blood*, but yours be in the pasture of your Good Shepherd, washed in His Blood.

Jesus knows how hard life is, and that's why He also prays for you. We heard some of those words in the Gospel today, culminating with these words: ***Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.*** You know how that happens? That you are kept as one with God? That we can be one with each other? You know: forgiveness. For when you have forgiveness, though we may not realize it, when you have forgiveness, you have everything. For you have Christ. You are a son, a daughter, of the Father. And you have the Spirit who has given you such faith to believe. And in a world where life is hard and dangerous and ***the righteous is scarcely saved***, that is good to know. That you have Christ. You have a Father. You have the Spirit. You have someone you can rely on, who will not let you down.

That confidence is what turned Peter the denier into Peter the martyr. Peter didn't suddenly become strong - Christ and His Spirit were strong in Him. And they are strong in you as well. His Word, His water, His food, His forgiveness, strong in you. That knowing how great the danger, you know how great your Saviour. That knowing how great your sin, you know how great His forgiveness. And that knowing how great your weakness, you know how great His strength.

And that is our joy this Easter season. That's why we've been rejoicing loud and long. Though you may ***suffer as a Christian***, though ***fiery trials may test you***, though sin still lurks, the devil still prowls, and the world still attacks, you have a Saviour. A risen one! An ascended one! who cares for you. And whose care for you will never end. And though humble now, He will ***exalt you at the proper time***, raising you from the dead to live and reign with Him in eternity.

For while Matthias was chosen to take Judas' place, Jesus was chosen to take your place - on the cross. And you were chosen to take His place in heaven.

That's our Easter joy. All the promises of Scripture fulfilled. **For you.** So, yes, the world in a dangerous place. And, yes, the righteous is scarcely saved. But saved you are. For - let's say it one more time this season - Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia!

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.