

Confident in the Good Shepherd

Sermon on Acts 4.1–12 for Easter 4B on April 21, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Was anyone else uncomfortable during the Gospel Lesson today? I was. “*I am the good shepherd*,” Jesus says. That phrase in Latin is, “*ego sum pastor bonus*.” I am the good *pastor*, the good shepherd. In what way is Jesus the good pastor? Well, He’s not like those hired hand pastors who leave the sheep and run away when the wolf comes because they do not care about the sheep. Jesus is the good shepherd in that He stays with the sheep, fights for the sheep, and dies for the sheep because He loves His sheep. He is the good pastor, the good shepherd. So, I am uncomfortable in light of Jesus’ words. This pastor does not feel like a very good pastor right now. Am I like the hired hand because I am taking a Call and leaving you? It certainly feels that way, doesn’t it?

But it isn’t that way. For one thing, I am not leaving out of fear. There is no wolf in this case. Instead, the Good Shepherd Himself, Who has called me to serve Him and His people in Wauwatosa is the same One Who has called me to serve Him and His people in Nebraska. But it doesn’t take away that feeling. It’s difficult because we have come to love each other.

But let’s not miss the main point. Neither this pastor nor any pastor is the main point. Jesus is. He is the Good Shepherd. He is *your* Good Shepherd. He is Pilgrim’s Good Pastor. This pastor is called to be His under shepherd, or maybe better, His sheepdog. My job is to keep my eyes on Jesus and my ears open to His Word so I can faithfully serve Him by serving you, by preaching the message that He is your Good Shepherd. The same Jesus who laid down His life for you in love took it up again in victory and He now lives and reigns to all eternity. If He did not run away and save Himself at the point of crucifixion, He will never leave you, forsake you, or abandon you. He will be faithful to you to the end. He will shepherd and pastor you through this life and into life eternal. Not only that, but listen to His promise, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10.27–28).

That John-ten-reality is the basis of our lives. Our Good Shepherd is our constant in all change. His faithful presence is the foundation for everything else, including the message in Acts chapter four.

What were the Jewish leaders trying to do in Acts chapter four? They were trying to get rid of Jesus-preachers just like they had gotten rid of Jesus. Catch the irony, there. Jesus wants His sheep to know that He will never leave them or forsake them, but those who are not His sheep cannot stand His presence and just want to get rid of Him. But Jesus just will not go away. That’s good news for the sheep and bad news for everyone else.

Luke tells us that the Jewish leaders were “greatly annoyed” not only because Peter and John healed a lame man in Jesus’ name, but because they took the opportunity, once a large crowd had gathered, to proclaim Jesus’ name. They proclaimed a Jesus who had been driven away and killed but raised up by God. They proclaimed a powerful and living Jesus who had conquered death, stepped out of the grave, and ascended into heaven as the Lord of all. They proclaimed a Jesus who was living and active right there in the middle of that temple to heal that man. Thousands repented and believed.

The Jewish leaders still tried, though. They made some arrests and threatened Peter and John with death. Did that work? No. Why? Peter and John were not afraid, specifically of death.

Think about the life-changing impact of not being afraid to die. For Christians who believe in the risen Lord Jesus who promises to lead His sheep to eternal life, there is no more fear of death. So, when the Jewish assembly asks Peter how the lame man was healed, Peter is bold, *"Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4.10–12). That is contagious confidence in the Good Shepherd.

The Jewish leaders have no effective strategy at that point. Their attempts to drive Jesus away had proven ineffective both with Jesus Himself and with His apostles. Not even death could drive Jesus and these Jesus-preachers away. How do you threaten, intimidate, or control people who aren't afraid to die? You don't. So, the leaders end up slapping Peter and John on the wrist and asking them politely to be quiet about Jesus. Listen to the response from Peter and John: *"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). That is fearless confidence in the Good Shepherd.

Do we have that kind of contagious, fearless confidence in the Good Shepherd? Are you confident that death is no longer a problem for Jesus, for His followers, or for you? You can be. You are baptized into Christ. Death no longer has dominion over you (Romans 6.9). That doesn't mean you have no room to grieve. It simply means that Jesus Christ who conquered death is with you. You don't need to be nervous or afraid, as if He is powerless and absent. Your Good Shepherd is with you. You are His own. He laid down His life for you and He will lead you into eternal life.

This message is so profound that you have called a pastor to preach it. This message is important that we come together every week to hear it again. This message is life-changing that we hear it for ourselves in daily devotions and Scripture readings. He is the Good Shepherd who died for you. You are His precious sheep. He is with you. You can have Acts four confidence. You can have Psalm twenty-three confidence: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me"* (Psalm 23.4).

We do not know what God has in store for us. We do not know exactly how the Good Shepherd will lead me and my family or any one of us. We do not know exactly how the Good Shepherd will provide for His flock right here at Pilgrim. But we do know our Good Shepherd. We know that He forgives our sins. We know that He has conquered death. We know that He has promised to raise us to eternal life. So, it is our Good Shepherd, living and present, who makes us bold and confident in His name no matter what.

Have no fear, little flock; Have good cheer, little flock, For the Father will keep you In His love forever; Have good cheer, little flock!

Thankful hearts raise to God; Thankful hearts raise to God, For He stays close beside you, In all things works with you; Thankful hearts raise to God! (LSB 735.2, 4).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Joy of Believing

Sermon on Luke 24.36–49 for Easter 3B on April 14, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them” (Luke 24.41–43).

When the disciples saw the Lord Jesus alive, their joy went through the roof. Their joy was so great, they couldn’t believe it. It was too good to be true.

Have you ever disbelieved for joy? Sure, you have. You expected the worst and it all turned out for the best, or at least not as bad as you expected. But we don’t have that experience very often.

More often we have the experience of disbelieving for grief. We watch the news. We hear what someone is going through, like what Noren, our Church Organist is going through. Or we live something ourselves. Many times, we disbelieve for grief. In other words, things are so bad that we say, “I just can’t believe it. I can’t believe that happened.” And when you have had enough of that disbelief for grief, enough of that disappointment in life, it is hard to stop it all from making you cynical, jaded, and all too realistic in your expectations for life. Disbelief for grief makes us very good at spotting something that is too good to be true.

In all honesty, Lutherans are especially good at being extremely serious about reality. One reason might be that we hold strongly to the doctrine of original sin which teaches that every human heart is corrupt beyond repair, sinful from birth, and naturally at enmity with God. Things are so bad with the human heart that the only thing to do is to drown that old nature, end it, kill it, and let God raise up a new person. Being serious about sin makes us Lutherans serious about salvation.

Now, all of that is completely true. All of that needs to be said. All of that points to the depth of our need and the height of Jesus’ love for us, the greatness and the glory of His salvation for us. But it’s not surprising, then, that we who believe the doctrine of original sin can be cynical (pun intended) about our hope for humanity. The world is changing and not for the better. We disbelieve for grief. That’s our natural attitude. And with that attitude, we see the corroborating evidence all around us.

But that serious and cynical is not the only attitude available to us. In fact, we Lutherans also believe that the risen, reigning, and returning Lord Jesus Christ gives us a different attitude, especially now in this season of Easter. Jesus offers to us the joy of believing.

The disciples disbelieved Jesus’ resurrection for joy, and we do, too. The reality of disappointment, the reality of pain, the reality of being hurt by someone, the reality of cancer, the reality of death, these harsh realities surround us, lay siege to our souls, and weigh us down. Under that kind of weight, what do we do? Will we give in to the inevitable, to the heaviness, to the hopelessness?

No. We won’t. Because Jesus is with us. Jesus conquered death. Jesus rolled the heavy stone away. No, He burst forth from the tomb, like spring bursting forth from winter with joy. He is our strong Champion who rescues us while we are under siege. He bore the weight of the world for us and the weight of our sin. He was crushed by it and crucified. But He rose and He lives. He is now our hope. With Him and by faith in Him there is no situation that is hopeless and no weight that is too heavy.

Not only that but just as Jesus promised in our text today, He has given us power from on high in the Person of the Holy Spirit. You do not have it within you to will yourself into true joy. Without the Holy Spirit dwelling in you continually by means of an ongoing reception of God's Word and Sacrament, cynicism and realism are the only attitudes available to you. And I'm not saying you can never have cynical or realistic thoughts. I'm saying your soul should not be dominated by them. The Holy Spirit has been given to you and one of the Spirit's fruits listed in Galatians chapter five is joy (Galatians 5.22). So, pray for joy. Ask for joy. Let the Spirit give you joy. Receive that joy not by wishful thinking, not by pretending all the heaviness is not that heavy, but by letting the Holy Spirit connect you to the risen and reigning Lord Jesus by faith.

In Jesus you have the joy of believing. He knows the heaviness of life. He's been under it but He did not buckle. He conquered. And now He lives to lift the heaviness off of you and onto Himself. How do we know He lives? How do we know it's not too good to be true? Jesus proved that He is a living, breathing human being by asking His disciples for some food and eating broiled fish.

But it is not just Jesus who rose from the dead. Yes, He is the restoration of our humanity. But He is also the hope of our own restoration. That's what Peter preached in Acts chapter three. He talked about *"times of refreshing"* in this life but also *"the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."* Times or refreshment in this life reminds me of stopping for a water break on a marathon. That's good. But it's not enough. We need to know that at the finish line there is full restoration in every way. Hebrews chapter twelve talks in those terms: *"Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Hebrews 12.1-2).

There's another metaphor in Hebrews chapter six. There, it says that our hope of entering paradise is our *"sure and steadfast anchor of the soul"* (Hebrews 6.19). That's sort of ironic because I've been talking about the heaviness and weightiness of life in this world compared to the lightness of the joy of believing in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. But in a different way, weight can be a blessing. When the winds and the waves whip around, our souls are like the little boat getting thrown around. We need the weight of the anchor to hold us fast and we have that weight. It is our faith in Jesus and the hope we have in Him and the joy we have in Him.

What we have to wrestle with now on a daily basis is whether or not we are going to let the heaviness of reality make us cynical and take away our joy in Jesus or whether we are going to let the Holy Spirit give His gift to us in Jesus and in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. Are we going to let this world determine our attitude or are we going to live in this world while letting the world to come determine our attitude?

We all know people who do this. They have unbelievable joy in the midst of their suffering. But here's the thing: You can be one of those people. Because where does that joy come from? It does not come from within the human heart. It comes from the Holy Spirit who gives us joy along with His gift of faith in Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit who still speaks Jesus' promises to you, you have access to an attitude of joy, the joy of believing, in any and every circumstance.

Let me close with two prayers by Martin Franzmann.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The One Good Life under the One Good Lord

Sermon on Acts 4.32–35 for Easter 2B on April 7, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Acts chapter four: “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” (Acts 4.32).

What would it be like to be truly united in heart and soul with every other Christian in the world? “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity” (Psalm 133.1). We want that kind of unity and we pray for that kind of unity. In fact, Jesus prayed in John seventeen that His Church “may become perfectly one” (John 17.23). Experiencing that unity is part of what heaven will be like. But experiencing true unity is not what life in this world is like. In fact, have we ever experienced it?

What examples do we have of unity in our world? Sports teams bring people together. People have a commonality in a team. But that’s only on the surface. People are united in that they all happen to be wearing the same expensive team logo. But that says nothing about their heart or soul.

What about political parties? Well, a party is only part of the bigger picture. A party finds its identity in being distinct from another party. So, different parties actually need each other to exist. And I’m not just talking about political parties in the United States. There are political parties in the church, too. In every human institution, likeminded people find commonality in common interests or passions, but no party can claim to operate with one heart and soul like the Church in Acts four.

We can see from life in the world and all our failed attempts at true and lasting unity that, on this side of heaven, true and lasting unity is a miracle, a work of God, a gift for which we must pray. Why? Because there are so many forces working against it. There are different personalities, different perspectives, different opinions, different preferences, but those are not the real problem. The real problem is not in the commonalities or lack of commonalities outside our souls. The real problem is our souls. In our souls, in the deepest part of who we are, there is a brokenness, a powerful natural force of disunity called selfishness. We have been reprogrammed by the fall into sin to feel, think, speak, and act in ways that show that our first and foremost priority is ourselves.

That force of disunity is so powerful and so pervasive that humans cannot overcome it. We cannot overcome it even in one little congregation, let alone the full number of those who believe. Only God can bring about true unity by the power of His Holy Spirit at work through His Word. So, we pray for unity, we wait for unity, and, in the meantime, we fight against that disruptive selfishness in us. We need to be remade from the inside out, and that is exactly what God intends to do with us.

As a concrete expression of their spiritual unity, those first Christians “*had everything in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need*” (Acts 4.32, 34–35). So, the Holy Spirit of Jesus took spiritually broken people, selfish from birth, and unable to see beyond their own noses let alone find unity in one heart and soul, and He changed them. He freed them from selfishness, and He freed them for selflessness. The sharing of their stuff on the outside showed that a real change had happened on the inside. God united their hearts and souls first and then they responded by having all things in common.

How can we participate in that kind of spiritual renewal, that kind of transformation, that kind of real unity in heart and soul? God gives us the answer in John chapter twenty. This, of course, happened before Acts chapter four and as a basis for it: *“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld”* (John 20.19–23).

Let’s notice two things, here. First, the same Jesus who was crucified, died, and was buried appears to the disciples completely and totally alive. Let’s remind ourselves of this life-changing, life-giving truth: *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* How does the fact that the same Jesus who died is now alive relate to a bunch of Christians who are so united in heart and soul that they put all their earthly possessions together in one common place? How does the resurrection relate to unity?

Let’s think of it this way. If Jesus died and rose again, never to die again, then our lives in this world are different. We were born not only thinking selfishly, always doing what is best for us, but we are also born thinking that our life in this world, surrounded by all the things of the world, is really the only reality there is. It’s all we’ve ever known, so it’s all that matters. But if someone has gone from this life, through death, and on into a life that is limitless and cannot ever end, that is filled with eternal blessings that can never rot, rust, be stolen, or be destroyed, then this life is not all there is and the stuff of this life is not really what truly matters most.

If Jesus died and rose again, never to die again, then what matters most in the life is not our stuff, but our souls. Our souls will live on into eternity. Our stuff will be destroyed. What matters now is people. What matters now is souls for whom Christ died, sinners Jesus forgives and authorizes us to forgive. In light of Easter Sunday, all our material goods become a test case for our confession that Jesus Christ is the risen and reigning Lord of all. So, by the simple but powerful message of Jesus’ resurrection, the Holy Spirit begins to free us from selfishness and free us for selflessness.

But let’s notice a second thing about John chapter twenty. Jesus does not just appear to His disciples after His crucifixion and death to prove that He was alive. He did something with His life. He acted. He gave gifts to His Church and He is still alive giving His Church His gifts today.

First, Jesus gave them peace. Three times in John twenty, Jesus said, *“Peace be with you”* (20.19, 21, 26). Jesus is present here in this place today to give you peace, as well. To do that, He puts Himself in the middle. He is your peace with God. He is your peace with each other. Now, you do not have a surface unity in commonalities or like-mindedness. You have one Lord who gives you peace.

Second, Jesus gave them a sending: *“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you”* (20.21). He did not send them each individually with their own missions. He gave them one mission to share. He does the same with us. He has called us out of the world and claimed our lives for His mission.

Third, Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit: *“And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”* (20.22). You have received the Holy Spirit again today. It always comes through God’s Word. You received the Spirit at Baptism, but you receive it whenever you hear God’s Word and believe it. But beware. The Spirit comes to change you, to transform a selfish sinner into a selfless saint. And when the Spirit accomplishes that miracle in you, it not only means your own life and salvation. It means unity with everyone else who has received the same Spirit.

Fourth and finally, Jesus not only forgive their sins but gave them the authority to forgive: *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld”* (20.23). Jesus has given you that same authority and He calls you to exercise it every day. When those forces of selfishness would disrupt the unity God has created in His family, the Church, He calls you to forgive. When sins are forgiven, unity has a chance. When sins are forgiven, it is just like those early Christians who had everything in common. It is an external sign of an internal change.

From all these good gifts—the peace, the sending, the Spirit, and the authority to forgive—we know that our Lord is good (1 Peter 2.3). He is good because the unity He prayed for in John chapter seventeen is the unity He accomplishes in His Church. He is good because He puts Himself in the midst of us as the foundation of our new and eternal life. He is good because He calls us out of the world and sends us back into it to be examples of a different and better kind of life. He is good because He gives us all the same Holy Spirit to unite us by His Word and enable us to be His people. He is good because He authorizes us to enact our spiritual unity and overcome the forces that would tear us apart by forgiving sins in His name. With all these gifts, we have started to experience the one good life under the one good Lord.

What would it be like to be truly united in heart and soul with every other Christian in the world? One day, we’ll find out. Today, we aim toward it. Today, we pray that Jesus’ good gifts would enable us to confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus Is the Way

Sermon on Isaiah 25.6–9 for Easter Sunday on March 31, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Isaiah twenty-five: *“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken”* (Isaiah 25.6–8).

So, how do you get to that mountain? There is rich food there. There is well-aged wine there. There is a feast of victory there. There is a celebration there. So, how do you get to the Mountain of God?

There is a 2010 movie called “The Way Back.” It is a story set during World War II. Russia has invaded Poland and taken prisoners. They found all kinds of reasons to lock people up for being spies and enemies of the State. They then sent those prisoners to labor camps in Siberia.

One of the prisoners in this movie is a Polish man named Janusz. The Soviets tortured his wife to get her to lie about Janusz and say that he was a spy. From the moment Janusz set foot in that Siberian labor camp, he was looking for a way out, a way back to his wife.

But Janusz was not alone. He found himself with many others who wanted nothing more than to find a way back to freedom. So, they gathered food, they gathered information, and they made a plan to break out. Once out, they would head south. They would walk from Siberia to Mongolia, to freedom. So, they waited for the moment. When it came, they escaped. Seven prisoners, including their leader Janusz, started to run. By the time the guards realized that they were gone, those prisoners were making their way to freedom.

Many things would stand in their way. Maybe the greatest was the fear that they wouldn’t make it. After months of hiking through the frigid forests of Siberia, the group finally reached the Mongolian border. But when they did, they were greeted by a huge, red archway over the road. There was a picture of Stalin and a red star on that archway. Mongolia would not provide their freedom. So, they traveled on. They keep heading south, this time toward India. But in their way stood the massive Gobi Desert. After sandstorms and sunstroke their group got smaller.

The four remaining men made it through the desert only to find themselves face-to-face with the Himalayan Mountains. Those mountains would be their final challenge. But, in the end, they would overcome them, they would reach India, and they would find the freedom they were looking for. The movie would not have done very well at the box office if it had ended any other way.

All kinds of things stood in those prisoners’ way: the oppressive prison, the frigid Siberian forests, the deadly Gobi Desert, and the heights of the Himalayan Mountains. But their greatest obstacle was the fear that they wouldn’t make it. But it’s all conjecture, because that movie was based on a book written by a Polish man who did not escape but did survive a Soviet labor camp. So, that story is not true. It’s the product of one man’s dream. He wanted his dream to give people hopeful feelings in the face of the obstacles in their lives.

There are plenty of people who believe the same thing about Easter. Many people would say that the victory we celebrate today is a dream. It's a dream that is meant to give people who are dumb enough to believe it hopeful feelings in the face of the cold, hard realities of life and death.

Where do you find yourself on the journey of life today? What are your obstacles? What are your fears? Those obstacles and fears can look like the Himalayan Mountains sometimes.

Maybe you're afraid of losing someone you love, afraid of facing the future without them. Or maybe you've already lost someone you love, and you are afraid because you are facing the future without them. Or maybe isn't fear at all but the heavy grief that darkens every day.

Maybe you're afraid of your own death. You know it's coming. But you don't know when or how. You know no one can walk that road for you. It is a road you will have to walk yourself. Maybe death is something you are afraid of facing alone.

In any case, death can seem like a massive mountain. Isaiah uses a different metaphor, though. He says death is like a veil that covers the whole world, a covering that is thrown over all peoples. That almost makes it sound like we are prisoners in death's camp. Some prisoners might talk about a way to freedom, a way of escape, but you will never make it. You can eat all the right things, have countless procedures, take the best medicine money can buy, and maintain your health longer than anyone else ever has, but even so there will be a day when your road will hit a dead end. Like prisoners of a death camp, we might try to find a way around it, but we won't make it.

But to people under the veil of death, imprisoned in death's camp with no way out, Isaiah gives a message of true hope. He tells us about that Mountain of God. There is a celebration of victory there. It's a celebration of God's victory over every enemy, even death. Isaiah says that on that mountain, God will swallow up death forever. Is this just a dream? Is this just a story meant to give people who are dumb enough to believe it hopeful feelings? No. You are not here today because this is a dream. You are here today because it is the Truth.

This past week, we visited our tax man. Death and taxes, right? On the back of his computer monitor there was a picture of the Canadian Rockies. I didn't know that at first. So, I asked him if it was Glacier National Park. He said it was a few hundred miles north of there. But then he asked if I had been to Glacier National Park and if I had driven on the Going-to-the-Sun Road. I told him I had and that we loved it. We enjoyed talking about the dangers and thrills of driving on a mountain road.

But the thing about a mountain road is that there is one. I would not want to be an engineer tasked with designing one. For us, it's just there to use. But there aren't a lot of options up there, are there? There's just that one road, that one mountain pass, that one way through.

There is a Mountain of God. There is a victory celebration there. There are all kinds of obstacles standing in the way. Maybe the greatest is the fear that we won't make it. But there is a way there, a mountain road, engineered by God Himself. But there is only one road, one way. Jesus is the Way. Every other road we might try is a dead end.

You have come here today on this Easter Sunday because of the truth that Jesus died. He came claiming to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and we put an end to Him. He is the Author of Life and we killed Him. He is the Son of God and we rejected Him. He is an innocent, sinless man, and we tortured Him and crucified Him as a criminal. Jesus walked that road of death through the mountain called Calvary.

But you are also here today because of the truth that Jesus lives. He did not stay dead. He rose and He lives now and forever. And because He and only He has both died and lives, He and only He is the Way through death. He was crucified, dead, and buried for three days. But when those women went to the tomb early in the morning that tomb was empty and the angel said, *"You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you"* (Mark 16.6–7). And because He lives, you also will live. This is the promise of Jesus: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (John 11.25).

Now there is a way through that mountain called Death. There is a way to that Mountain of God, to that glorious feast of rich food and fine wine, to that place where God swallows up death forever and wipes away tears from all faces. There is a way, but there is only one way. Jesus is the Way. He made His way through and He made His way back to invite us to trust Him and to follow Him in the way that leads to everlasting life.

Since it is true that Jesus is the way, we do not just have hopeful feelings, we have true hope. Since it is true that Jesus is the way, we do not just have a little help to get us through the challenges and obstacles of this life like grief or the fear of death, we have real, lasting strength that will carry us through to eternal life. Since it is true that Jesus is the way, no failure, no loss, and no pain can ever stand in the way of your God. He has won the victory for you in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If Jesus is the way to that Mountain of God, and if He has invited you there, then you have nothing to fear. You will not face the future alone. You will not face death alone. Jesus has already walked that path for you and now He walks your path with you. He has gone through that mountain, made it to the other side, made His way back, and now walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death to the celebration of victory on the Mountain of God. With Jesus, you have nothing to fear.

If Jesus is the only way to that Mountain of God where death is swallowed up forever, then you have a message for every prisoner of death's camp, every person in this world. You have a message to share that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This is no dream. Jesus is risen and we shall arise. That is our real and certain hope.

In the movie "The Way Back," Janusz and his companions make it to freedom. But the story doesn't end there. Janusz keeps on walking. After the war, he finds his way back to Poland and back to his wife. After walking 4,000 miles to freedom through the forests, and deserts, and mountains of Asia, Janusz finally reaches home again. But, you know, that imaginary victory would not last forever.

Your future is not imaginary or temporary. Instead, Jesus is your way to the Mountain of God, to the feast of rich food and fine wine, to that place where our God will swallow up death forever and will wipe away tears from all faces. Jesus is your way to that celebration of victory that will have no end.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

Confirmed

Sermon on Mark 15 for Palm/Passion Sunday and Confirmation on March 24, 2024
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Confirmation happens every day. When forecasters said four to eight inches of snow, we all said, “We’ll see about that.” But, this time, the snow confirmed the forecast. When you make a financial transaction, book a hotel, or buy a ticket, you get a confirmation number. When you need to prove your identity, your identification confirms you are who you way you are. When the umpire in the upcoming baseball season makes a questionable call, confirmation comes from New York. Confirmation happens every day, all the time, in many ways. Confirming the truth is part of life.

The harder confirmations in life revolve around our words. When a friend tells you they’ll meet you at a certain time and place, you may need to confirm that a few times, depending on the friend, and, even then, they might not show. When you hear a rumor, you might consider confirming the truth about it, especially if that rumor is about you! If someone is telling untrue stories about you, you will be sure to confirm the truth with evidence and proof. Confirming the truth is part of life.

You know the Progressive Insurance commercials that feature the What Really Happened Replay. A daughter tells her mother that certain words came out of her mother’s mouth. The mother denies it. A challenge flag is thrown. A screen emerges. The mother watches the What Really Happened Replay and her face says it all. The daughter was right. The truth is confirmed. It cannot be denied.

Does your heavenly Father need a What Really Happened Replay of your life to confirm how you have lived it? No. Even though He has adopted you as His child by grace through Baptism into Christ and called you to follow His commandments to love Him above all and to love your neighbor as yourself, your words, actions, and attitude do not confirm your identity as His child. He sent His only Son to become a man, to enter Jerusalem humbly, to give His life out of love for you, and He has called you to have within yourself the same mind of Christ, the mind of a humble servant and an obedient child, but you have not confirmed His call in your life. The evidence is not there. All your attempts to excuse yourself or justify yourself are empty. So, give it up and turn again to Jesus.

When Jesus speaks, He calls us to trust Him. When Jesus speaks, He wants us to be confident that His words are true. So, what does Jesus do? He confirms what He says, not only by putting His words in writing, but by doing what He says He will do. We see Him do that in today’s readings.

In Mark eleven, as Jesus and His disciples were approaching Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus sent two of His disciples ahead into the village of Bethany. Jesus told them they would find a colt tied up right when they entered the village, and they did. Jesus told them someone might ask them what they were doing, and someone did. Jesus gave them the answer to that potential question, and they gave it. Everything happened as Jesus said it would. So, He confirmed the truth of His Word.

A few days later, Jesus sent two of His disciples into Jerusalem. He told them, “*Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us*” (Mark 14:13–15). Then, Mark says: “*And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them*” (Mark 14:16). So, Jesus’ words are confirmed.

The Passion account we read today from Mark fifteen is an account of Jesus confirming His words. Three times in the Gospel of Mark, in chapters eight, nine, and ten, Jesus tells His disciples exactly what would happen to Him in Jerusalem. The first time, Peter rebuked Him and tried to stop Him (Mark 8.32). The second time, His disciples *"did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him"* (Mark 9.32). The third time, James and John responded by saying, *"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you"* (Mark 10.35). What?! But it didn't matter how the disciples responded. Whatever Jesus says is true. Mark fifteen confirms it.

After Jesus is delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, after He is condemned to death and delivered over to the Gentiles, after they mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him, just as He said they would, we hear the voice of the centurion who saw the way Jesus died and said, *"Truly this man was the Son of God!"* (Mark 15.39). What is this but confirmation of the truth about Jesus not from a disciple but from the man who oversaw His crucifixion. Even he confirmed that Jesus is not just a man but God Himself. That, of course, is the reason Jesus' words are always true.

When it comes to the central thing, the death of Jesus, Mark records, *"Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead"* (Mark 15.44). In other words, Jesus' death happened on Jesus' terms and on Jesus' timeline. His life was not taken, but given. But because it happened quickly, and because Pilate would have to answer to his superiors, Pilate confirmed the fact that Jesus died. But this is good news for you. Why? Because *"the wages of sin is death"* (Rom. 6.23). We have earned it. God comes to pay it. When Jesus' death is confirmed, His payment for your sin is confirmed, as well.

But Jesus death does not only mean that your debt is paid, and your sins are forgiven. Since it's Confirmation Sunday, we should ask, "What does it mean that Jesus died on the cross?" Martin Luther gives us a beautiful answer in the *Small Catechism*. Can you say it with me? *"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."* Yes, Jesus died to purchase you from sin, death, and the devil. But Jesus also died to purchase you for life with Him, that you may be His own forever. This is what Zechariah means when he says that God will restore to you double; rescue from death and rescue for life with Christ. *This is most certainly true.*

The greatest confirmation moment, though, came on Easter Sunday. Whenever Jesus told His disciples about His death, He always told them about His resurrection: *"and after three days [he will] rise again"* (Mark 8.31); *"after three days he will rise"* (Mark 9.31); *"And after three days he will rise"* (Mark 10.34). The third day came, and Jesus' words were confirmed. The women went to the tomb very early in the morning, wondering who would roll the stone away, but when they arrived, it was already done. An angel met them and said *"Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you"* (Mark 16.6-7). *"[J]ust as He told you."* Do we get it? How much more evidence do we need?

Because Jesus died and rose again, just as He said He would, we believe that there is a Day coming when He will confirm all His words and fulfill all His promises. In the Collect of the Day, we prayed about that Day. We asked God to make us "partakers of [Jesus'] resurrection." In our Hymn of the Day, we sang about that Day, "Lord, when Your glory I shall see And taste Your kingdom's pleasure,

Your blood my royal robe shall be, My joy beyond all measure! When I appear before Your throne, Your righteousness shall be my crown; With these I need not hide me. And there, in garments richly wrought, As Your own bride shall we be brought To stand in joy beside You" (LSB 438.4). How can you be so sure? Can you confirm it in yourself? No. The evidence is not there but in Jesus and the truth of His Word. *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"* (John 6.68).

Jesus has spoken His words of eternal life to each one of you. At your Baptism, the Father said that He forgives all your sin, clothes you in the righteousness of Jesus, gives you His Holy Spirit to dwell within you, and claims you as His own child. Where's the confirmation? In your words, actions, and attitude? It should be. But it isn't always there. No. It's in God's Word. In the same way, in the Lord's Supper, Jesus says to you, *"this is My body"* and *"this is my blood."* It doesn't taste like it or look like it, but we believe it because whatever Jesus says is true. "Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: 'forgiveness of sins.'"

But, then again, your presence here in God's house today is confirmation of your Baptism. Your confession of faith is confirmation of His Spirit within you. Your good works that are good not in themselves but because they are done in faith and covered by God's forgiveness are confirmation that you belong to Jesus. And the challenge for all of us, but especially now for Evie and Trevor, is to confirm, as much as we are able, with our words, actions, thoughts, and attitudes that we belong to Jesus. It's like the Bluetooth adapter in my car. When I turn it on, I hear "Power on." When it connects to my phone, I hear, "Connected." Our lives should confirm that we are connected to Jesus.

For two of you, your confirmation will happen today when you come up here and confess your faith in Jesus. No one could ever do that unless the Holy Spirit has been given to them through Baptism: *"no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit"* (1 Cor. 12.3). So, God confirms today in your confession of faith that His words are true, that you are His baptized child, just as He told you.

One of the questions you will answer today is, "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?" Your answer will be, "I do, by the grace of God." In other words, you will say that your faith in Jesus is the most important thing in your life. Nothing else in life matters without Him. Life only makes sense with Him. But you can only say that by grace, that is, by the Holy Spirit's work in you. And the Holy Spirit always works through the words of Jesus. So, do not stop listening to the words of Jesus and do not stop the Holy Spirit from working in you so that your life can confirm that you belong to Jesus.

But when your life does not show the evidence of that, when your words, actions, thoughts, and attitude do not reflect the mind of Christ, repent and return to Jesus, your Savior. He continued steadfast even to death and did not fall away from doing what He said He would do for you. He did not have to keep walking toward the cross. He could have gone off in any other direction. But He kept His feet on that path because He loves you. With every step, He confirmed it. His cross confirms His love for you. Today, He calls us all again to follow Him, to let our every step confirm our connection to Him by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

Confirmation happens every day. Confirming the truth is part of life. So, when Jesus speaks, we listen to Him. When Jesus speaks, we trust Him. What He says, He will do. What He promises, He will fulfill. It will all be exactly as He has told us.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

But It Shall Not Be So Among You

Sermon on Mark 10.32–45 for Lent 5B on March 17, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two Fridays ago, after picking up our children from school, I started driving home from Mount Olive Christian Day School. We were almost there when a pickup truck started backing out of a driveway right into the street where we were. Apparently, this person had somewhere to be because it happened fast. I honked. He kept coming. I swerved. He barely missed us. Our hearts were pumping. Our palms were sweating. Our mouths were gaping. I don't think he ever saw us. I went into dad mode. I started calmly telling my children about something called "the right of way." It seems like most days provide way too many examples of drivers not understanding or not abiding by "the right of way." In other words, that whole thing should never have happened. To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

But that's nothing. This past Friday, our church organist, Noren, went to the movies. He told me he's there a lot. The security guards know him by name. In the middle of the movie, Noren left because a group of young people were being very disruptive. But when Noren left, one of the young women followed him out and pushed him down a flight of stairs. He broke his cheek bone in the three places and his jawbone in another. He had a procedure yesterday to have a metal plate installed behind his cheek bones. When I visited him at Froedtert yesterday, he told me to tell you that this will not stop him and he that hopes to be back with us as soon as possible. But that whole thing should never have happened. To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

Why tell those stories? They are examples, one insignificant, one very significant of the way that the world is not right, the way people are not right, the way people do not act the right way or do the right things. All of us daily experience in some way or another the distance between how the world should be and how the world is. People should not be like bulldozers, but they throw their weight around and steamroll the world anyway. People should care about others enough to know and abide by "the right of way," but it's "my way or the highway." People should be at least aware of other people if not courteous and considerate, but instead they are loud, forceful, rude, belligerent, and even violent. To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

But it is so. This is our daily experience. There is the way things should be. And then there this is the way things are. There's nothing new on the news. It's the same old story. People don't do what they're supposed to do. There's nothing new in your family. It's the same old arguments, the same old attitudes, and the same old actions all the time. It feels hopeless. It will never change until the Last Day. St. Peter writes, "*But according to [God's] promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*" (2 Pet. 3.13). Life in the world to come. Can't wait. Things will work the right way. People will act the right way. Bring it on, Lord! Until then, it is what it is.

But there is a real danger in that attitude. There is a real danger in the assumption that people do not change or cannot change. If people do not change, than I do not have to change, either. Notice that so far in this sermon we have managed to keep the problem out there with them. We have not yet dealt with the problem in here with us, with me, with you. And we don't really want to. When we look at the world and say, "It just is what it is," it leads us to add, "And I am what I am and you're just going to have to live with it." To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

Jesus used that phrase when He dealt with His disciples in the Gospel Lesson for today. They were on the road to Jerusalem and Jesus was walking ahead of them. They were actually dragging behind. They were afraid. Why? Jesus had told them what would happen: *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise"* (Mark 10.33–34). The first time Jesus said that, Peter tried to stop Him. It should not be so, Jesus. But this time, it's almost like no one even heard Him. James and John seem to ignore His words and say, *"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."* And he said to them, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* And they said to him, *"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory"* (Mark 10.35–37). As true man, tempted in every way we are, but without sin, Jesus certainly had to deal with the distance between how things should be and how things are. Jesus certainly had to fight the attitude that His disciples are never going to change.

Do you ever think Jesus has to fight that attitude with you? You hear Him speaking week in and week out but then you pray to Him as if He has said nothing. You hear about His love for you week in and week out but then you walk out there into the world and act like everyone else, pushing and shoving your way around. You know you have habits and attitudes that are out of step with the Spirit, but will you ever change them? We can point out the distance between the way things should be and the way things are in the world all we want, but when will you let the Lord point out that distance in you? You are not who you should be. You are more like the world than you are like Jesus. You have made your own way rather than following God's right way laid out quite clearly in the Ten Commandments and summarized by Jesus, *"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,"* and *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mark 12:30–31). Will you ever change? Will you ever get it right?

Jesus is very patient with His disciples in Mark chapter ten and Jesus is very patient with you. In our text, Jesus points out the difference between the way things are and the way things should be in order to point His disciples to Himself. *"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10.42–45).

In other words, Jesus is different. Instead of waiting for the world to get it right, instead of being frustrated that people don't understand something as simple as "the right of way," instead of demanding that His disciples change, Jesus simply shows them how He is different and He calls them to be like Him. Yes, the world is not what it should be, but Jesus serves it anyway and gives His life as a ransom for it. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, *"And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him"* (Heb. 5.9). Jesus is different, the way people were made to be, but even more. Not only does He obey the rules and live the right way, but He even lets His enemies murder Him and prays for their forgiveness. Why? To rescue us from this world and its inability to change; to rescue us from ourselves and our unwillingness to change.

But then, after pointing to Himself and the difference between Him and the world, Jesus calls His disciples, He calls you, to become like Him. He not only comes to serve us. That is the main thing. But He also comes to change us. What does He tell His disciples about power moves? That might be the way of the world, *"But it shall not be so among you."* He does not say "should not" but "shall not." Do not hear that only as a command that you must obey. Receive it as a bestowal, an enactment, a gift. By His Word and Spirit, Jesus makes you different than the world.

And this is exactly what Jeremiah prophesied, *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more”* (Jeremiah 31.33–34).

Why come to church if not to be changed? You are not supposed to remain the same after worship. You should not come here to have our own righteousness confirmed but to encounter the righteousness of Jesus, to be forgiven by Him, and then to be changed by Him. Why go through Lent, go to church at all if not to be changed in heart, mind, and action and to be more like Christ?

Listen to Luther, “You must hear the Gospel from [Christ]; you must let yourself be taught and instructed; you must not resist the message. Then the Holy Spirit can be effective in you through the Word and implant and impress Christ in your heart, with the result that henceforth you speak differently, believe differently, suffer differently, do good works differently, and declare: “Now I will bear whatever suffering is imposed for the sake of God’s Word.” Now the tree has become good, and its fruit will also be pleasing and good (Matt. 12:33)” (LW 23.151–152).

And in another place Luther writes, “The whole man must crawl into the gospel and become new. He must shed his old skin as does the snake. When the snake’s skin becomes old, it looks for a narrow hole in the rock, crawls in it, sheds its skin, and lets it lie outside in front of the hole. In like manner must man enter into the gospel and the word of God, must boldly believe its promise that God does not lie; in doing so he sheds his old skin and leaves lying outside his light, his conceit, his will, his love, his desire, his words, his deeds. Then he becomes entirely different, a new being who looks at all things differently from the former way. He judges and considers differently, thinks, wills, speaks, loves differently, desires, performs and behaves differently” (LW 52.79).

Today, your heavenly Father sees the distance between your righteousness and His righteous expectations. But into that void the Father places the righteousness of Christ. He has lived the right way for you so that your heavenly Father sees you as someone already made new. *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* (2 Cor. 5.17). But by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you, guided by the Word of God and the law that His has written on your heart, you are beginning to be different; different than the world and more like Jesus. And it shall be so among us.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.