

"Words of Life For A Dying World"

Acts 5:12-20

April 3, 2016

2nd Sunday of Easter

So, now what? We spent so much time and energy building up to our celebration of Easter within the confines of this church building last Sunday. We decorated the sanctuary with flowers and the fellowship hall with crafts by the youth. Special music was practiced and prepared. We put on our best clothes. (There were more ties and dresses than normal.) We came to church and enjoyed a delicious breakfast prepared by the youth. We sang the familiar Easter hymns. We listened to the familiar Easter Gospel. We received our Lord's resurrected body and shed blood in Holy Communion. By the time it was all over, we were joyfully exhausted (at least I was). It's easy for there to be a let down today. So, now what?

Let's take a look at the church in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus to see what they did after the first Easter. To say that they celebrated the first Easter like we did would be a bit misleading. While they were together like we were, they experienced the resurrection of our Lord firsthand – first at the tomb, on the road to Emmaus that afternoon, and then in a locked room that evening (i.e. the Gospel reading).

Rather than being a letdown, the days, weeks, and months after the resurrection of Jesus Christ invigorated His followers by the time our text was written. This little group that was more scared than excited on Easter had changed. They were worshiping together publicly. The apostles were teaching the Word of God openly in the temple at Solomon's Portico. New believers – multitudes of men and women – were being added to the church. The apostles were doing signs and wonders to care for people's physical needs.

Not everything was rosy and problem free though. They were also being persecuted for their Easter faith. The high priest and the Sadducees, jealous of the apostles' success, had them arrested and thrown into the public prison. But they had something more valuable than success. They had something the people needed more than physical healing. They had something more to offer than a lively and meaningful worship experience or an effective evangelism technique. They had something that prison bars could not contain. They had the message of life. An angel of the Lord came at night, freed them from prison, and sent them right back to where they had been persecuted and told them, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."

What exactly is this message? It is a message our world desperately needs to hear as much as it did back then. Our world is dying. Many argue about global warming, increased pollution, and more violent weather patterns as the causes. Regardless of your opinions on specific hot button issues like these, the Bible does say that, because of sin, all of creation is in "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). Simple observation implies and the Word of God confirms that it's all going to come crashing to an end on the Last Day. St. Peter says, "The heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." (2 Peter 3:10)

Humanity is dying as well. You don't need to read the Bible or come to church to know that. Common observation tells you that as you read in the newspaper about terror attacks and natural disasters killing many people. You see death take your friends and family and know that it is coming for you one day. Your non-Christians friends and family members know this, too. As a Christian, you know the cause of death – sin – and the fact that death will take all people because all have sinned.

Politicians and activists try to save the earth by passing various laws and devising various ecological policies. Physicians and scientists try to keep people alive with various medicines and technologies. At best, these efforts can slow down the destruction of earth and postpone the death of humanity, but they cannot stop either of these. Sin and its effect are just too strong.

We have the answer to all of this – the message of Easter. The message is, as the angel said, "all the words of this Life." But what does this mean? What is "this Life" which the resurrection of Jesus brings?

First of all, we should be clear what this life is not. It is NOT a life free from suffering, troubles, rejections by our friends, persecution by our enemies, or even death. It is not the creation of heaven on earth despite what some religious leaders might say will happen if you just believe hard enough and pray fervently enough. The apostles are good examples. Their lives did not suddenly improve (as the world measures improvement) because of this life they now had. Measured by worldly standards, their situations got worse. They and many other of the disciples were thrown into prison, flogged, and persecuted in many ways. Eleven out of twelve of the apostles were martyred for the faith – killed believing in the life Jesus came to bring. Only

St. John died of old age. What was it about this life which would cause these people to accept such bad treatment, even death?

It's not that the life Jesus came to bring is not concerned about the evil, suffering, and pain of our present life. The life Jesus came to bring you, me, and the world is concerned about so much more than just those things. Even if Jesus came to bring a life that was free from evil, suffering, and pain, that would make us comfortable for a time, but would do nothing to help with our greater problem of death – death for our world and death for ourselves.

Jesus came to bring a life that overcomes death. Death is more than a physical condition measured by a lack of brain waves or the stopping of a beating heart. Death is primarily a judgment of God against sin. Jesus' death on a cross on Good Friday did away with God's judgment against your sin and my sin by transferring it to Jesus. He underwent the judgment against your sin and my sin by enduring hell and offering His perfect life as sacrifice for sin. God has removed and forgiven your sin and my sin and has declared us to be "not guilty" in His eyes. We have a new life with Him as His dear children instead of as His hated enemies as it was before.

Knowing the One who holds all power and authority in His hands and being in relationship with Him as His dearly loved children would be good enough but the life Jesus brings is more than the freedom from the negativity of sin and its consequences here and now. The life Jesus brings is a positive life with hope for the future. Jesus' resurrection on Easter did away with death's power to frighten us and the devil's power to defeat us. We can live joyful and fearless lives in service to God and our neighbor, not without pain, suffering, rejection and persecution, but despite them. For the absolute worst that this world and its inhabitants can deal us is death and death has been defeated by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And He shares that victory with us.

The new life that we have now, begun in Holy Baptism, strengthened by the Word of God, and nurtured through the Lord's Supper, does not end when physical life ends. The new life continues on past death, past the grave, and past the Last Day when what we confess regularly here by faith will come to pass for us in reality: "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." This is what the apostles and people in the early church were hoping for, waiting for and living for in the midst of severe suffering, rejection, and persecution. This is what they declared to the people around them and which added multitudes of new believers to their group. This is what we are still hoping for, waiting for, and living for in the midst of our troubles, too. This is still our message, too.

Don't restrict Easter and its message to a one-day celebration. The early Christians didn't. They changed their worship from Saturday – the Sabbath Day – to Sunday – the Lord's Day so that they could celebrate the resurrection and the new life it brings every single week. Although we may put away the Easter lilies, the Easter hymns, and even the Easter ties and dresses, let us not put away the message of the resurrection and new life, but celebrate it every week.

Also, don't restrict the Easter celebration and its message of new life to a particular building like a church. People already have the idea that the Good News of Jesus Christ is purely religious and has nothing to do with real life. We reinforce this caricature by only talking about the Good News when we are safely behind these walls. The life Jesus brings is not merely a religious doctrine we confess, but a life we experience. It has everything to do with real life – real life now, real life at the time of death, and real life after death into eternity.

Share this real life with those who need it. Share it with those who feel life is pointless and meaningless. Share it with those who are in the hospitals facing fatal illnesses and serious surgeries. Share it with those living in fear of political, meteorological, and military disasters. You don't need the signs and wonders that Peter and the apostles performed. You have something even more powerful and authoritative to distribute this new life. St. John tells us what this is at the end of our Gospel reading for today: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31) Speak that Word in your vocation as the Lord gives you opportunity.

There is no need to ever have a letdown after Easter or any other day. There is no need to worry about anything in this life or fear anything about death. We have new life now. We have new life at the time of death. We have new life for all eternity. Hear all the words of this Life now and every day. Share those words of life with the dying world around you that they may have life, as well. Amen