

Easter 3, April 14, 2024 (Lk 24:36b-48; Acts 3:12-19; Ps 4; 1 Jo 3:1-7)

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Friends in Christ, you have just been witnesses to the true gospel of our Lord Jesus: the Good News that God himself, once dead, now lives and reigns for the salvation of our souls! *That* is the main objective of today's text from Luke.

These verses should sound familiar, because they're very similar to last week's gospel text, which was from John. Again it's evening on that first Easter day, and again the disciples are gathered together, talking, when Jesus appears among them. They look as if they'd seen a ghost—and truly, that's what most of them are thinking!

They'd been talking about Jesus, because various people reported having seen him since that morning. And **while they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."**

On seeing their fear, their disbelief, Jesus tried to reassure them that he really wasn't a ghost. He showed them his hands and his feet, and invited them to touch him, to feel his flesh and bones, which a ghost *wouldn't* have. When they still weren't sure, he asked for something to eat—because everyone back then knew that *ghosts didn't eat*.

Once he'd proved to them that it really was *he*, Jesus himself, it was time to do what he'd come to do all along: to teach. He began by reminding them of the things he'd told them during their years together. He'd spent much time teaching them about the *holy history* of their people—*God's* people, chosen and sealed with a holy covenant. Listen to the things Jesus taught while he was with them:

- The first five books of the Bible, called *the Law of Moses*, which set forth the relationship between a holy and righteous God and the people he named and claimed as his own.

- He'd interpreted for them the prophets, revealing how God's plan for the salvation of the whole world was being thwarted by arrogant and idolatrous rulers, and by the misplaced faith of the people God had appointed to be a light to the whole world.

In Luke's gospel, the first words spoken by Jesus in his public ministry were from the prophet Isaiah. He read this passage aloud in the synagogue shortly after his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness: **The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free**

For three years he's lived and worked among his disciples, teaching, preaching, healing, and in general working to bring about the kingdom of God. He's been betrayed by those he loved, then arrested, brought to trial, mocked and scorned, hung on a cross like a common criminal. He died, and was taken down from the cross by those who loved him, and was buried. And those who loved him believed they had lost him forever.

Now, today, against all hope, he's back among his disciples, alive once more and going right on with his teaching. **He opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. . . ."**

In these words, Jesus defined for his disciples, *and for us*, the Christian life: a life lived *for God, in the service of God*, is going to include suffering and death. You can't rise from the dead until you've died. But for those who follow Christ, *death has a different connotation*.

We believe that in our baptism, the old Adam or Eve died, and a whole *new creation* arose from those baptismal waters. We believe we die daily to sin, renouncing every day the power of the devil, the world, and our own sinful selves, and claiming *new each day* the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

On that first Easter evening Jesus **opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.**

Then he told them, **You are witnesses of these things.** Jesus was sending them out to transform the world through the Good News of God's saving grace for *all people*. That was the beginning of the Christian Church.

And *we*, present-day disciples of Jesus, pick up where the disciples of every age left off. *We are witnesses of Jesus in our own world.* We are entrusted by him with continuing the task to which his first disciples were called, the task *for which his first apostles were sent.* **We** are called to ensure that repentance and forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, because **we** are witnesses of these things.

Usually when we hear the word *witness* in English, it has something to do with a legal issue. If I *witness* a crime, I might be called to testify as a *witness* in court. But the Greek word from which our English word comes is *martyros*-the root of our English word *martyr*, one who dies for his or her faith.

We're not called to be *martyrs*, dead witnesses for Jesus. Nor do we have to be *expert witnesses*, who understand all mysteries and can answer all questions. *We are* called to tell the truth about how we experience Christ in our lives, and the most effective way to do that is by *living* Christ.

We are called to live the truth that Jesus, the only Son of God, lived on earth as a human being *in order to suffer and die for our sins so that we might repent of them, and be saved to eternal life.* We're called to live the truth that the same power given by God to the disciples at Pentecost is at work in *our* lives, through our baptism into Christ.

But above all, we're called to live a reality that's very different from the world around us. Jesus told his disciples that **repentance and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.**

The world around us does a really good job of *judging*, of criticizing and condemning, of seeking vengeance for wrongs real or imagined. Forgiveness isn't very popular. We hate to ask for it, and it's hard for us to grant it. It's much more comfortable to feel *self-righteous and defensive* when we've done something wrong, or *self-righteous and indignant* when we're asked to forgive.

But in today's text here we are, on Easter evening, and Jesus is telling his disciples *they* are the ones who are to go out and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. Don't you find that astonishing?

God just died on the cross, betrayed and abandoned by those he loved, condemned by the very people he came to save. Wouldn't you expect his message to be one of *condemnation and judgment*? Instead, he comes in mercy and compassion, and commissions his followers and friends to go out and change the world.

If the *church* doesn't proclaim and practice forgiveness, who will? And if the church *proclaims* forgiveness but doesn't embody and enact it, how are people to perceive the living, forgiving love of Jesus which he was dying to give to *us*—and to *all nations, all people everywhere*?

What does this mean for us today? It means that no matter how faithless *we've* been, Jesus is calling us to begin again, right where we are, to try to embody his forgiving love. The hands and feet of Jesus, which he showed to his disciples that Easter evening, ascended into heaven at the end of Luke's gospel—but we are his body, the church. We are his hands and feet in the world today.

Jesus wanted to prove to his followers that he wasn't a ghost, so he asked them for something to eat—because eating was something only the living do. Sisters and brothers in Christ, are you living? Because whether you are or not, **we** have something to eat.

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We have Jesus himself, waiting for us to touch him, yearning to give himself to us again and again in the Holy Supper, so that we can live *with him* and *in him*. So that we can be true witnesses to the reality of his power over sin for the whole world—including us!

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Thanks be to God!