

Alive Forevermore!

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

Pastor Ken Welsh
April 28, 2019

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’ Revelation 1:17-18-also read vs. 4-16

Easter is more than one day in the life of the Church. The fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is of such great importance, we could well be justified in looking at every Sunday as a “little Easter”. Without a bodily resurrection, we would be left with nothing. With the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have it all.

What other than a dramatic resurrection from the dead could have so changed the disciples? If you read Acts 5, you will find they were out performing miracles and wonders among the people and healing them. More and more men and women came to believe in the Lord as a result. This led to the apostles being arrested and put in the public jail. But when God decides to do something, he will have his way. During the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.

Then at daybreak, the disciples entered the temple courts, and they did what the angel had told them to do. He had said, “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life.” (Acts 5:20)

Now the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of the elders of Israel, had sent to the jail for the apostles to be delivered to them to give an account of what they had been doing. But the apostles were not there. Instead, they were standing in the temple courts teaching the people about Jesus. The Sanhedrin were not pleased, and the captain of the temple guard went with his officers and brought the apostles to appear before the Sanhedrin.

The high priest said to them, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” (Acts 5:28)

Peter and the other apostles replied that they had to obey God rather than men. They said, “The God of our Fathers raised Jesus from the dead-whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, who God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:30)

The Sanhedrin were furious at hearing this. There is little doubt that they would have initiated action to have the apostles crucified also, but a teacher of the Law named Gamaliel, well respected by the Sanhedrin, persuaded them not to do that. They did have the apostles flogged, ordered them to not speak in the name of Jesus again, and let them go.

Why is it that there are people in the world who cannot accept the testimony of the resurrection? There are many reasons. In today's account the leaders of the Jewish elders felt threatened. Jesus, dying on a cross to save people from their sins, was not the kind of Savior they were looking for. In our day, many people want to be independent from God, and they don't want to hear anything about Jesus' call for repentance of their sins. Some are confused by worldly teachings that are critical of the Holy Scriptures but have no basis in fact. Many question why a good God would allow people to suffer, and when God does not behave according to their expectations, they go on in their lives without God.

Thus, they miss out on the greatest gifts that God offers us: forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the Kingdom to come.

Just as Scripture tells of the real death of Jesus on our behalf, so the apostolic witness is clear: Jesus bodily rose from the dead. That fact supersedes everything. There is no way that all twelve of Jesus' disciples would have been willing to die for a lie.

In our Gospel reading today, we hear the testimony of the one disciple who was not martyred because of his Christian faith, a disciple to whom Jesus was particularly close. The Apostle John had been exiled to the island of Patmos because of his testimony about Jesus. Patmos is a rocky outcropping about fifteen miles in circumference off of the coast of Greece.

John received a vision of Jesus and was told by Jesus to write down what he had seen in a book. John states that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and he heard a loud voice behind him. He turned around, and what did he see? He saw one like the Son of Man, who was clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were as white as snow. His eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze. His voice was like the roar of many waters. His mouth held a two-edged sword, and his face was like the shining sun. This was the risen and ascended Jesus, in all of his glory, standing before the Apostle John and really dressed for the occasion!

Let me ask this: how would you have reacted? I think I would have reacted just as John did. John said he fell at his feet as though dead. But John says that Jesus laid his right hand on him and said, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." (Rev. 1:17-18)

What are these keys that Jesus is talking about? The key he is talking about is his Word. The sharp two-edged sword that John saw in our Lord's mouth may stand for the Law and the Gospel. Jesus is alive to give us that which we need more than anything, a cleansing of our sins by the washing of water with his Word. He is alive to strengthen us through the power of his Word. He is alive to make us a kingdom of priests to his God and Father, so that forgiven and restored, we can serve him. Yes, we die a real death. Jesus also died. He rose from the dead and is truly alive forevermore. He said, "Because I live, you shall live also." Because he will live forevermore, we shall be alive forevermore.

Last week we touched on some important evidences of the resurrection of Jesus. Virtually everyone agrees that the tomb was empty. The lives of the disciples were totally transformed. Jesus even predicted his death and resurrection ahead of time, and he showed his power over death by raising others from the dead.

We add another evidence of the resurrection today. That is related to the continued existence of the Christian Church. From the very beginning, believers of Jesus Christ have been put in prison, threatened, and put to death. That is still true today. It is said that more Christians died for the faith in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined. The enemies of Jesus think they can silence the church by killing believers. It happened again this week in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of Christian worshippers were killed in their churches on Easter Sunday. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters worship in countries where they are persecuted by Moslem extremists and their lives are in danger whenever they go to their churches to worship. Where do men and women get such boldness that they can stand up for Jesus in the face of such threats? They get it from God. They get it from the one who said, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

(Isaiah 41:10)

We, who have received great assurance that we will be "alive forevermore", have a great responsibility to share the account of what Jesus has done with others. The gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ can make a difference in the lives of people today and in where they will spend eternity. We may receive disapproval of some people; we may be persecuted in some ways; we may even lose our life for the sake of the Gospel. But the final reward will be great.

As we leave our church this day, we are going back out into the mission field. Our commission from the Lord is to share the good news about the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead. It is not all that hard; there are many ways we can do that. May God help us to be faithful to our mission. Amen.