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St. James of Jerusalem

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Raised to a New Life”

Text: Matthew 13:54-58; Acts 15:12-22a; James 1:1-12

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

James was a most unlikely candidate to be head of the church in Jerusalem. He wasn't one of the twelve. He didn't hear all of Jesus' teaching and wasn't there for all His miracles. In fact, he didn't believe his brother (or half-brother) was anything but that - his brother (John 7:5). The guy he grew up with. Even when Jesus began teaching with an astonishing wisdom and authority and doing mighty works that could not be explained (as we heard in the Gospel today), even then He was *without honor in his hometown and in his own household*. Mark even tells us that after Jesus began doing these things, *when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind”* (Mark 3:21).

Yet as we heard in the first reading from Acts, there he is, in the very first church council - gathered to decide what to do with the Gentiles, whether they needed to become Jews in order to be Christians - it is not Barnabas or Paul or Peter (who were all there) making the final judgment and decision, it is James. James, who after hearing all the testimony, points to the prophet Amos who said all this was going to happen. When God said: *After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.*

For James had come to understand that, you see, those verses were not just about the Gentiles, *but about his brother*. For how had God come and rebuilt the tent of David? How had He come and rebuilt its ruins and restored it? It wasn't a physical or political reality. The Romans were still ruling over them. Israel was not its own kingdom. And the glory days of David certainly hadn't returned. But the restoring and the rebuilding had happened **when his brother rose from the dead**. That changed everything. The kingdom of God was greater than a nation, it was for *all* nations. And it was for *all* people. For Gentiles - people not born of Jewish descent - too. That they too have a place in the kingdom of God.

Yes, God had come and done it. God had come in the person of his brother! And for so long, he didn't even know it. He didn't believe it. For so long he thought his

brother was more than a few cards short of a full deck. And I wonder whether James hadn't been the most stubborn in the family in his opposition and unbelief. For that's how God often works. Saul the great persecutor becomes Paul the great missionary. And in the same way perhaps James the great skeptic becomes James the head of the church. And we see the power of God's Word and resurrection.

Yes, James struggled to believe it. And maybe he had a lot of guilt about his past - for thinking his brother crazy, not believing him for so long, and even trying to stop him. And so the struggle to believe was not just that *his brother* was who He said He was - the promised Messiah, God in the flesh - but then also to believe that there was room in His kingdom not just for Gentiles, but for someone like him. A sinner like him with a past like his.

And maybe that's your struggle too. The skeletons in your closet, the sins that still haunt your mind, the past that seems to follow you around, all of which the devil is more than happy to use to try to convince you that you are too sinful, your past is too sordid, that you're accepted here only because no one knows your past and the really nasty and sinful stuff you did. It's all just too much.

Or maybe your struggle isn't with your past but with your present. The sins that you're stuck in now, the sin you can't seem to shake. The anger and bitterness, the doubts, the immorality, your love of the things of this world, your weakness, your failure to pray, to spend time in God's Word, to care for others. You come here and confess and then do it all again the next week. And you're so afraid others will find out the fraud you really are, that your good Sunday appearance is just that, and that'll be it. Game over. No room in the kingdom for someone like you.

Which would be true . . . *if* there were still bones in Jesus' grave. If sin had overcome Him. If the power of the grave had been too much for Him. But when Jesus said "It is finished" (John 19:30), it wasn't His life that was finished, it was game over for your sin and guilt. For death and the grave. For any doubt that there is room in the kingdom of God for someone like you. He struck down all those things when He became a worse sinner than James or Paul or you on the cross because He made all the sin and guilt of James and Paul and you and all people His own on the cross, died the stinging death for it all, **and then rose from the grave**. Your sin and death couldn't hold Him, couldn't defeat Him. Then or now. And so there really is now *no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1).

And that means for you. For you are in Christ Jesus for you have been baptized into Him. Baptized into His all-encompassing death and resurrection so that your past - no matter how nasty and sordid and sinful - is His past (and so dealt with and forgiven), and His future is your future - a place in the kingdom of God. James may have been Jesus' brother then, but you are His brothers and sister now (Matthew 12:49-50).

And with that, while the struggle may not go away, it takes on a different dimension. For while you still struggle with sin and with the temptations of Satan to disbelieve the Word of God and all its promises to you - that what He says is good really is good, and what He says is bad we really should avoid, and that He really does know better than us - we know this too, as James learned and then wrote in his epistle that we heard today:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials - or when you have struggles - of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

In other words, when you are in Christ Jesus, the struggle is good and for good. Just as Jesus' struggle with sin and death on the cross was good and for good, so too the trials and crosses that you bear and the struggles that you face. They have a purpose: are to produce steadfastness in you.

But what does that mean? It is a word that means patient endurance, patient waiting. It is a faith word. It does not mean that you'll become so steadfast that you'll stop sinning, and it does not mean that you'll become so steadfast that you'll not feel temptation anymore. Satan's not giving up and your sinful nature will do what sinful nature does - and that is to be drawn to sin. That struggle will only end when - in death - you pass from this life to the next.

What it means is steadfastness *in Jesus*. A steadfast faith, *reliance*, on what He has done and not on who you are and what you can do. Steadfastness in His forgiveness and life. Not that what you do doesn't matter and that you're free to sin - that would be being the double-minded, unstable man that James speaks of. No, it is rather the steadfastness of knowing what you do matters, and the confidence that your sin, your falling and failing is forgiven, swallowed up by Jesus. It is the joy of having a place in the kingdom even now as Jesus invites you to His banquet, to feast on His Body and Blood. For you are ***perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*** only when you are in Jesus and He in you. When you die with Him and rise in Him. When you repent and are filled with His love and His forgiveness. That's why He came and is still coming. To so ***perfect and complete*** you; to give all that He is and all that He has *to you*.

And then whether you are the ***lowly brother exalted*** to the head of the church, like James, under the trial of leadership with all its problems and temptations to pride and power, or if you are the ***rich who is lowered***, and under the trial of loss and shame, or somewhere in between with other trials and struggles, you are blessed. For through it all God is working in you to make you ***perfect and complete*** in His forgiveness, ***lacking nothing*** in His love, and working through you to bless others. If you are exalted, it is to be a blessing. If you are humbled, it is to be a blessing there too. Steadfast not in your own abilities or

strength, but steadfast in Jesus, in His Word and promises, in His life and love.

Now, that is quite a different way of thinking, you must admit! Much different than how the world, and we, usually think. That our strength comes not from within us but from outside us. That life comes from dying. That trials are not a punishment but lead to joy and blessing. But that is what the resurrection is all about. A new life, a new way of thinking, a new James, a new you.

And then, James says, a ***crown of life***. That is God's promise for those who remain steadfast; for those who remain, by faith, in Christ Jesus. Who really, when you think about it, was an *even more* unlikely head of the church than James. Born under questionable circumstances, a king who tried to kill Him before He could even walk, His parent fleeing to Egypt, growing up in a little backwater town, hated and opposed by all the religious leaders of His day, with only a ragtag little band of not very capable misfits following Him, and then killed not just as an ordinary criminal, but tossed out with the garbage to a humiliating crucifixion as a really bad one. Yet there He is, risen from the dead, on the throne at His Father's right hand.

And what happened to Him He wants to do for you. As He did for Peter and Paul and His brother James. You may not think you're anything. You might think you're unworthy. You might think someone else is better qualified. If so, good. *You're exactly right*. And you're exactly right for Jesus to raise you to a new life. And like James, you just might be surprised where He puts you.

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.