

11 April 2021  
The Second Sunday of Easter

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“New Life”

Text: Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

**A**lleluia! Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia.

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

The reading from Acts today was remarkable. *All who believed were of one heart and soul. They had everything in common. There was not a needy person among them.* They sold and gave away what they had. I think we see glimpses of this in the church today. There is a certain unity we have here. All of you are very generous people. But still . . . there’s something different, isn’t there? About that early Christian church . . .

Some would chalk it up to a bygone era. Different people, different time, different culture. Some try to find in it a political ideology that we should strive to implement today. And some think that those early believers were like that because they thought that Jesus was coming back to end all things in a couple of days, weeks, or years at most - and when He didn’t, they had to scramble to adapt and stopped living that way.

There’s a kernel of truth in all of those thoughts - but *only* a kernel. None capture the heart of the matter. For in all three of the readings we heard today, there are two truths that hold them all together; two truths that were life-changing for them then, and for us still today. And those two truths are what we are especially celebrating this Easter season: **Jesus’ resurrection from the dead**, and **the forgiveness of sins**. Jesus’ triumph over death and the grave, and the reconciliation we have in Him, both with God and with one another. Those are the two things that change us, no matter *when* or *where* we live.

So for those believers in Acts . . . when you know Jesus has risen from the dead, that changes everything! That changed *them*. What was so important to you before seems not so important now. We don’t have to suppose that they were naive in thinking Jesus was coming back imminently - whether He did or not, His resurrection meant their resurrection. His life now formed their life - and it showed. He gave everything for them, how could they not now give to others? Even everything they had.

But there was something else they needed to do that, and that was **the forgiveness of sins**. For you’re not going to give to someone you have a grudge against. You’re not of one heart and soul with someone you resent. You’re not going to be generous when you are suspicious. But when there is forgiveness, when there is reconciliation, when you have

peace with God, then you can live at peace with others. Without that forgiveness, we're constantly trying to defend and justify ourselves, our actions, our value, our needs - that we're right, that we're okay, that the problem isn't with us but with others. The focus is on ourselves, not others. It is, really, *against* others. But forgiveness changes that focus. With this gift from God - not having to justify ourselves because He has justified us - we can focus on others and giving to them, both spiritually (forgiveness) and physically.

Now, all this does not mean we should try to imitate the Christians in the early church and try to form Christian communistic communities. Some have tried that over the years. I'm not sure how they have turned out, though I can guess. Sin usually, sooner or later, intrudes and causes even our best efforts to fail. No, we are, in fact, different people of a different time and culture. So what we *should* do it take the two truths that enabled them to live that way - **the resurrection and life of Jesus** from the dead and **the forgiveness of our sins** - and apply them to our lives and circumstances today. What would such a life look like today? If the resurrection and life of Jesus was so real to you that everything else in this world paled in comparison? If you really stopped trying to defend and justify and exalt yourself and focused entirely on others? How would that change you . . . and your life . . . and our church?

**The second reading** we heard today, from the Apostle John, talks about all this, too, just in a slightly different way. He talks about having touched and seen the risen Jesus and the fellowship (or unity) we have with each other because of the fellowship (or unity) we have in Him. That is, that united to Jesus, reconciled to Jesus, we are reconciled and united to one another. We don't say *we have no sin* or that others haven't sin against us - sins *from* us and *against* us are the reality of this fallen world and life. But we **DO** have something more powerful than sin: *the blood of Jesus* [that] *cleanses us from all sin*. That forgiveness creates our fellowship. That is, it changes our relationships - with God and with one another. Sin no longer defines us and our relationships, forgiveness does. Your sins, shortcomings, and failures are not your story, the forgiveness and life of Jesus is. The forgiveness and life of Jesus, the uniting to Jesus, you received when you were baptized into Him.

And again, think about how your life would look, how our life together here as a church would look, if that forgiveness - *and your baptism* - more fully defined you and our story. I say *more fully*, because it already does . . . just maybe not as much as it should. For there is still division among us - in the world, in the church. Are we quick to accuse and slow to repent? Do we focus on some and ignore others? Do we see others as a brother or sister for whom Christ died, or someone who's annoying or irritating and so avoid? Are we lacking in love? Are we jealous instead of generous? Expecting instead of giving? Are we walking in the light, or, if not in the darkness, at least spending some time in the shadows?

Now, it wasn't perfect in John's time either. We shouldn't idealize the early church. John says he writes these things so that our joy may be complete. It's not yet! And it won't be on this side of eternity. But the life and forgiveness we need, we have. Because we have Jesus. Because He gives Himself and all that He is to us.

Which is what we see in **the third reading** we heard today, the Holy Gospel, the familiar account of Jesus appearing to His frightened disciples. What are the marks of that account? The very same things: **resurrection and forgiveness**. (1.) The risen Jesus appears to them and shows Himself truly risen and alive. (2.) He gives peace to their broken and restless hearts in the forgiveness of their sins. And (3.) He commissions them to give this forgiveness and life to others. *Real* forgiveness, just as if it came directly from Him.

And they do. For what is the first thing they do with the reconciliation and forgiveness, the fellowship and peace, they have received? They go include Thomas. It is as John said: *their joy would not be complete* without him. There would be something missing - someone missing. And maybe Jesus told them to do it. After all, in the Gospel we heard last Sunday, the angel singled out Peter when he told Mary Magdalene: *go, tell his disciples and Peter* (Mark 16:7). So maybe here, too, Jesus told them to go get Thomas and meet back here in this same place exactly one week later. And He would be here. How else would they know to gather again and expect Jesus?

And so it is for us. Here we gather together each week and the resurrected Jesus comes to us. First He gives us peace in the forgiveness of our sins. We remember that we are baptized. Whatever you have done this week, however hard and however often you have fallen, you are His child and you are forgiven. Whether you denied like Peter, doubted like Thomas, betrayed like Judas, or sinned in any of a thousand other ways, all has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus. You have peace and fellowship with God. You are forgiven. There is no sin too big, no stain of soul too deep, for the powerful blood of Christ to cleanse. You are forgiven and you are free.

Which is not, then, the freedom to go live however you want and to sin as much as you want. Remember those Christians in the first reading today from Acts - what did the resurrection, forgiveness, and fellowship of Jesus do to them? *It changed them*. Amplifying not their focus on themselves and what they could do and get for themselves (which is what sin is), but amplifying their focus on others and what they could do for them. And they did. There was now something in their lives - a new reality - that completely reordered their priorities. And those ten disciples wanted that for Thomas too, as Jesus did. As Jesus wants for all people.

So we gather here, all of us foul sinners, all of us who have lived this week as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most. Who have lived as if Jesus wasn't risen at all and I had to get for myself what I could. Who have lived in competition, not service, and in doubt, not faith. And here, Jesus says, not to put our fingers into His nail holes and our hands into His side, but even better - not us into Him, but Him into us! He places into our mouths His Body and Blood. And we say: **My Lord and my God!** And we, who do not see, are blessed. Blessed, because we are reconciled to God, forgiven our sin, and have fellowship with Him. All that we need we have, in Jesus. For life now, and life forever.

And then like the then, to go out and bring those who are not here, here, the next week. Where Jesus will be for us again in His Word and Sacrament. Look around. *Who is missing?* Our fellowship is not complete, our joy is not complete, without them. We need them. And they need us.

And yes, there are a thousand things in life that get in the way. I don't think that's an accident. I think satan knows exactly what he's doing, to divide our fellowship with God and with one another. But whatever is in the way - whether it is a large stone sealing a tomb, a burden in life, or something between Christians - the resurrection, forgiveness, and fellowship of Christ is greater. To restore what we lost, to repair what we damaged, and to reconcile sinners. That's the new life we have in the risen Christ. It might look a bit different now among us than it did with those early Christians, but it is the same new life in Christ.

Of course, that new life you have is renewed in you *every day* through the Word and Spirit of Christ. It is not just a Sunday thing. You live it every day. You live in your baptism every day. But here is our life *together*. Here we have everything in common. Here there is not high or low, better or worse - we are all children of God. Here there is not less for some and more for others - all receive the same. The same Jesus, the same forgiveness, the same gifts, the same life. Here, we are of one heart and soul, one confession, one faith. Here we are for one another. And just like for those Christians in the early church, that's special. Even remarkable. It is what many are looking for, craving for. Especially in our dog-eat-dog world, and nowadays, in our separated and isolated world. Here is the risen Christ and the gift of His fellowship. Here is a unity not of this world. It's not what we have done, but what He has done *for us*, and brought us into. And blessed are we to be here.

For ***blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*** Believe what? That **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

And here, with forgiveness and new life, for 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.