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Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Hear. Follow. Live”

Text: John 10:22-30; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; Acts 20:17-35

Alleluia! 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.

It was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. Today you know it as Hanukkah. It was not one of the feasts God established in the Old Testament. But that’s okay. It was a feast that began during that period of time between the testaments, a festival to celebrate the cleansing and rededication of the Temple after a time that it had been taken from the Jews and desecrated. They had triumphed over their enemies. So it was a festival of great joy.

So at this festival they remembered that - the people’s thoughts were of victory and freedom. So when they saw Jesus this day, they tried to put two and two together. For they were now living under the political dominion of Rome. People were saying Jesus was the Christ. So was Jesus going to do for them *now* what had been done for them *then*? Was He going to be the Christ, the Messiah, to give them victory and freedom from Rome? ***How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.***

Well, Jesus said, I did. ***I told you, and you do not believe.***

Why not? Because He was not the kind of Christ they wanted. So what usually happens in a situation like that, when things aren’t exactly as we want or hope, is that we just hear what we want to hear. Or we re-interpret what we hear but don’t like; make it fit the way we want things to be. Or ignore what we don’t want to hear, what doesn’t fit the way we want things to be.

So Jesus had told them that He was the Christ, that this is the reason He had come into the world, and that He was *this* kind of Christ - not a political Saviour, not to establish a kingdom in this world and life, but to give eternal life. To lay down His life for the forgiveness of sins. To rescue us from sin and death, not Caesar and Rome. But that’s not what they had in mind. Not really what they wanted. They heard what He said but didn’t want to follow that kind of Christ, to that kind of kingdom, in that kind of way.

And it is something that is still happening today. Today, too, lots of people hear the Word

of God. Lots of people hear of Jesus and His Word. But . . . well . . . that's not really how I want to live, what I want to do. So, as Jesus said, *they hear **but do not believe***. They hear but do not follow. Or they hear only what they want to hear, re-interpret what they don't like, and ignore what they don't want to hear. They make Jesus into the kind of Saviour they want Him to be instead of the Saviour He is. The tail wags the dog. They want Jesus to follow them where they lead, do what they want, rather than the other way around.

We do it, too. Let's not just point the finger at others. Aren't there things in the Scriptures you don't like? Things you wish were different? Commandments, teachings, instruction - let's be honest - that you overlook? ignore? Because, well, things are different now. Maybe it's whether or not women can be pastors. Or God's design for sexual activity to be only between one biological man and one biological woman joined in marriage. Or maybe it's to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. To forgive those who sin against you, and not just a couple of times. To honor your father and mother and the earthly authorities God placed over you. And that's just a few examples, some of the hot button issues in our world today. Because I want to do *this*, or I don't want to do *that*, and wouldn't things be better if God did things our way? Modernized. Changed with the times. And so instead of conforming our lives to the Word of God, to conform the Word of God to our lives? That's what we want, isn't it? That's what the sin in us wants. To make ourselves the authority. To make ourselves gods.

But where does that lead? Well, you can look around at our world today and see. The havoc in people's lives, identity crises, family crises, ever-increasing polarization, power struggles, vilification, marginalization, isolation, hate - people being robbed of life. Because what we think is good may not be good at all. What we think we want may wind up being not what we wanted at all.

We need a word to point out the dangers we can't see, from someone who knows what they're talking about. I think of the people who want to go swimming in the Potomac at Great Falls. The water looks so good - because you can't see the current beneath the surface that will sweep you away. Or people who go skiing up in the mountains after a new snow fall, and it looks so perfect, all that pristine new snow - but they don't realize that right above them is an avalanche ready to unleash on them. And the problems in our world today, and in our lives today, because we didn't listen, or we listened to the wrong voices. And things didn't work out, didn't give us what we wanted; didn't get us where we wanted to be. And so things are a mess.

So the Good Shepherd comes. He who knows the good pastures, the good waters. *Follow Me*, He says. And we say: *Hey, that pasture looks good! That water looks clear! Let's go there! Let's do that!* But He knows better. **Follow Me**, He says. There are predators there. There is poison there. There is danger there. *To your soul*. Oh, maybe you'll survive for a while, maybe things will even seem to get better for a bit. But it

won't last. In the end is ruin and death.

The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, Jesus said. They bear witness that what I do, what I say, where I lead, is good. The sight to the blind, the hearing to the deaf, the walking to the lame, cleansing to the lepers, life for the dead. Cleaning up the mess of this world. *But that's not what I came to do*. That all is a witness; it ***bears witness about me***, about what I did come to do. Because there's a greater mess, a more deadly mess, that I have come to save you from. For I have come to give not just life here and now, to heal one disease only to have you succumb to another; to fix you one way only to have you break in another. What's the good of that? I have come to ***give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand***. That's the kind of Christ, the kind of Saviour, I am.

Now that's a pretty bold claim! But the empty tomb that we celebrate this Easter season shows that it is not an empty claim. That there is one who conquered death. That there is one who really can give a life that is eternal. The one who came to clean up the mess in our souls with His atonement for our sins. To heal us from the inside out. The one who promises, as we sang earlier, that ***surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever***. Which doesn't mean that we will have no trouble and an easy life, but that as He said earlier in that psalm, that when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, He will be with me. Not that there won't be evil, but that when there is evil all around, ***your rod and your staff, they comfort me***. In the ***presence of my enemies***, even there is His ***table before me***, to provide for me and strengthen me. And not that I won't wander and sin, but that when I do, ***He restores my soul*** with His forgiveness. For ***the Lord is my shepherd***. Not in a perfect world or a world that is progressing to perfection. If that were the case, we wouldn't need a shepherd! He is a Good Shepherd for not good sheep. A Good Shepherd, my shepherd, in a sinful, imperfect, struggling, evil, and hurtling toward death world. God didn't stay away in disgust for what we had done - but came, was born for us, was born as one of us, to save us.

And He has. The reading from Revelation giving us a glimpse of that victory. That great multitude in heaven, those who have passed through ***the valley of the shadow of death*** and come out alive. Because of their Shepherd. The one who blazed that path through death and takes us through it with Himself. The one who died with us that we might rise with Him. To that life that is not a mess, with no more hunger, no more thirst, no more heat of persecution or tribulation, no more tears. Only life. Life as it was meant to be. Life the Lord wants for you. For us to be with Him, in peace.

That is the kind of Christ He is, and He told us plainly. In His life, in His death, and with His empty tomb. To give us life for more than just 100 years or so. To give us hope greater than just what our small minds can think of. To give us what is *truly* good, not just what I think is good for me, for now.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them . . . And that word - *know* - is so much bigger than just what's in your mind. It *is* that, but it's more than that. It's a husband and wife word, a bride and bridegroom word, a unity word. He knows you because He has united Himself to you, and you to Him. You were baptized into Him and He into you. So He's going to care for you as He cares for Himself. Where you go, He goes, and where He goes, you go. ***They follow me.*** And I hold onto them. He's not going to let you go, divorce you, or forsake you. ***No one will snatch them out of my hand.*** And if it seem that way at times, His Word, His life, His death, and His empty tomb teach us otherwise. That He really is a Good Shepherd. Our Good Shepherd. My Good Shepherd.

And He sets His Table here for you today, to come and eat. In the presence of our enemies. In the midst of a world that has less and less room or desire for this kind of Christ and His truth. In the midst of those ***fierce wolves*** Paul was talking about, and ***men speaking twisted things.*** Here Jesus feeds you. With His Word, with His forgiveness, with His Body and Blood. And He holds onto you. Because that's the kind of Christ He is. Faithful. With you in life, with you in death. With you in good days, with you in bad days. With you in joys, with you in sorrows. With you in ease, with you in trials. With you. Because you're going to have all of those things! But they is not greater than He. They did not overcome Him, so they will not overcome you. He and His Father are one, and He made Himself one with you.

So you can leave this place today and live in confidence, that whatever comes, however it comes, whenever it comes, your life is secure. You belong to Him. Hear His voice, follow where He leads, and rejoice! For **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] You have a Good Shepherd.

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.