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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Marching to an Empty Tomb”

Text: Luke 10:1-20

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

The march of Jesus to His death is on. We heard that last week. *Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem* (Luke 9:51). He *set His face* - nothing was going to stop Him. He had not just a destiny, but a destination, and it was the cross. For this He was born. He is like an inmate walking from his cell to the execution chamber. There is only one way this is going to end. With Jesus dead. Jesus is the Lamb led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). He is going to Jerusalem. He is going to the cross. He is going to lay down His life. FOR YOU.

But as He goes He sends out 72 others to go ahead of Him. We're not told the names of the 72 because their names aren't important. Their mission is. A mission of peace. Of proclaiming peace and giving peace. The peace that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to establish - not with Rome or the political powers of His day, but with God.

And they will go Christologically. They will speak and do as Jesus does. When they speak, those who hear will hear not them, but Jesus (v. 16). They are representing Him. So they will take nothing, even as the Son of Man had nothing, not even a place to lay His head, as we heard last week (Luke 9:58). And they, too, will be rejected, Jesus says. As He is. They will be *as lambs in the midst of wolves*.

But they do not go powerless. They do not go unarmed. They are armed with the same weapon as Jesus: **the Word**. The Word which in the beginning created all things. The Word which heals. The Word that forgives. The Word that both proclaims and gives the peace of Jesus.

So they go. Was it with excitement? Reluctance? Fear? They certainly are excited when they return! And filled with joy. *Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!* they report. But there is something more important than this. So, Jesus tells them, *do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven*. For in not very long, Jesus will arrive at His destination, at His death on the cross, and it will seem as if God's Word isn't so powerful after all. And not long after that, disciples and apostles will begin to die in all manner of unpleasant ways, and it will seem as if they are just tasty morsels for the wolves. And not long after that, Christians will begin dying for Roman entertainment, sent out into the arena with nothing; with nothing to face

the wild beasts and the flames, and they were devoured and consumed. Life in this world is passing away. For us it may be by old age, disease, or war. But when your name written in heaven, that does not pass away. That's for eternity. So rejoice in *that*, Jesus says.

For Jesus knows what the disciples do not yet understand: **that His death will mean the life of the world.** For He will rise from the dead, defeating death, so that we, too, will rise to life with Him. That's why nothing will stop Him from going to Jerusalem. **Nothing will stop Him from saving you.**

And so Jesus dying on the cross *is victory*. The disciples and apostles being martyred *is victory*. Those early Christians devoured by flame and beast in the Colosseum *is victory*. And interestingly, a victory both sides claim! An unbelieving world claims victory over Jesus and those who belong to Him; Jesus claims victory over an unbelieving world. But it is the empty tomb which shows us who is right, and who really won.

So not much of a victory for the world, which is on its own march of death. In this world we go from the womb to the tomb, with varying numbers of years in between. Ever since Adam and Eve welcomed sin into the world, that's been the sole destination of those who live in this world. Just look around a bit and you'll see this march still. Accidental death, intentional deaths, deaths inflicted by war between countries or hatred between persons. Death as entertainment in movies and in video games! We've been on this march so long some don't know anything else, or any other way.

But why would people march to death like this? Why don't they - or *won't* they - turn around? Because from the beginning satan has deceived us and misleads us. That this path is good, that this march and parade will not, in fact, end in death. *You will not surely die*, he told Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:4). And they believed him.

You know, about that . . . I wonder . . . what if someone else had been there? To try to talk them out of it. To grab Eve's hand before she grabbed that fruit, or to knock it out of her hand. To block their way and yell *don't!* and stop them. What would they have done? Would they have shoved that person aside? Called him a liar? Trampled him? Killed him? Because they had already made up their mind to do this, that this was good, that this was their way they wanted to live and how dare you call it *not* good?

I ask that because that's what we see today, isn't it? People convinced that this march they're on is a good one, one that will get them what they want. They've already made up their minds that this is how they want to live and so don't get in their way. And if you do, you'll be shoved aside, trampled, called a liar, a hater, a bigot, a phobe, or worse. They, too, have been promised that *you will not surely die*, that this march is a wonderful parade that will end up good, and in a good place. And they believe it.

That's why Jesus is brutally honest with those 72 He sends out. He doesn't sugar coat it. ***I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.*** Wolves EAT lambs, of course. Don't

think it's going to be easy to convince these sons of Adam and daughters of Eve to not eat fruit they've already made up their minds to eat. Don't think it's going to be easy to stand against the flow of this world. Don't think it's going to be easy to convince people that what they think is good is really not good. Don't think this is going to be easy . . .

Which you all know from your own lives. From that fruit that looks really good to you, that you know you shouldn't eat, that you know you shouldn't do, and yet you reach out and take it and eat it. Maybe there were even folks God sent to warn you, to block the way and yell *don't!* and stop you. But you wouldn't listen. You shoved them aside - if not literally, then at least in your mind. Because you already made up your mind that this would be good for you. . . . *Well was it? Is it? Will it be?*

That's why it is exactly into this march that Jesus came and that Jesus sends His messengers - then and still today, in answer to our prayers - with a message of hope. That this march to death, it does not have to be so. There is another way. A way of life. A way of peace. The way Jesus came to pave for us. That just as nothing would stop Him from going to Jerusalem to die for you, so too nothing will stop Him from coming again to raise you from the dead to life again. He came and made your death His own, to make His resurrection your own. So this march we're on can end differently. That just like Jesus, our march to death become a march through death to life again.

So the march doesn't stop, **but it is transformed**. Because the grave we will one day all step into now has a door on the other side, to life. Because of Jesus. He's the only one with the key to that door. To unlock it. The key of forgiveness. To forgive us not only for our wrong and misguided desires, thoughts, decisions, actions, and words, of which there are plenty! But also and most amazingly of this: *for when we've shoved Him and His Word aside!* When He and His messengers and His Word have told us the truth and tried to stop us and we've trampled them under foot. When we not only acted the wolf, *but were the wolf!* Even for wolves there is forgiveness. That's how powerful Jesus' death and resurrection.

So I asked you to try to imagine what it might have been like had someone tried to stop Adam and Eve from marching along the path they had chosen . . . Now I want to ask you to imagine what the disciples saw that made them report, ***Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!*** What do you think? Was there some big, spectacular exorcism? Or did it look more ordinary than that? Adam and Eve reaching out and eating that fruit was a pretty ordinary act, but one with extraordinary consequences. Is there something like that those 72 could have seen, or that we see today? That looks pretty ordinary, but has, in fact, extraordinary consequences?

There is, of course. Which we know not because of what we see, but because of what we hear. Because of the message of hope and life that has been proclaimed to us. So it is that when a sinner repents, satan is cast down. When a word of forgiveness is spoken, the demons shriek in agony. When a child or an adult is baptized, the unclean spirits are subject to the Word of God spoken in Jesus' name and are forced to depart this person. And when

you and I today reach out and take fruit not of the tree that was forbidden, but from the tree of the cross - the very Body and Blood of Jesus - life again triumphs over death.

All that the devil, the world, and your own sinful nature are trying to stop. Yelling their lies to drown out the truth. Holding up good looking forbidden fruit to capture your eyes. Flattering you so that you not repent, but think that you're the person who has been wronged, you're the person who deserves better, you're the person in the right! *C'mon, follow me! satan calls out. This is the way. This is good. This will get you what you want. . . Well did it?* Or is satan just trying to lock you in the grave? Into a death that will not end with life?

Repent. ***For the kingdom of God has come near to you.*** The kingdom of God is here for you. Which means the key is here for you. Life is here for you. No, it won't be easy. Yes, you will probably get trampled at times. You might even find yourself in some pretty wolfly jaws! So as for the 72, so it will be for you and all Christians: **a Christological life.** For you bear the name of Christ your Lord. So what happened to Him will happen to you. **But that's good news!** Because that doesn't just mean rejection and death, it means resurrection and life! For as with the 72, you also are not powerless or unarmed - you are armed with the Word of God, all His words and promises, and His forgiveness and truth. And especially this truth: ***that your names are written in heaven.*** So that when this march through life ends, it will not be the end for you. But just the beginning. Of a new life.

And as with the 72, as you live this new life already here and now, as you repent and forgive, as you encourage others with words of life and hope, as you warn others, too - there will be some who listen and some who won't. Those who repent and those who try to sink their teeth into you. So what do you do? Rejoice with those who repent. Pray for those who bear their teeth. And rely on Jesus. For He who was exalted to heaven will exalt you, too. After all, He's the one who wrote your name in heaven. With His own blood. The blood that forgives your sins. The blood that gives you life. The blood that is poured on you. The blood that is poured into you. The blood that bought you and made you His Bride. Don't reach for anything else. Don't march anywhere else. Don't believe anything else. March to the empty tomb, *and live.*

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.