

14 May 2023
Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Power and Victory of the Empty Tomb”
Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21; Acts 17:16-31

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.

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

Ideally, no one, right? But actually, Peter, to answer your question, as you know and I know, *lots of folks!* When a Supreme Court justice votes to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a man comes to his house to assassinate him. When a baker or florist stands up for God’s definition of marriage as the one flesh union of one man and one woman, they are attacked, sued, and put out of business. When parents go to a school board meeting to speak against the ideology being taught to their children, they are called terrorists, arrested, and demagogued. Pregnancy centers and churches have been spray painted with vile words. And maybe you have felt this in your own life. Harm done to you either physically, mentally, or emotionally, just because you were trying to do what was good and right. You spoke the truth, the good truth of God’s Word, but the truth was not welcomed.

Because there are different definitions of what *good* is in our world today. Oh, there is overlap, certainly; some things everyone would agreed are good. Don’t kick the dog, take care of your family, help little old ladies across the street. Maybe we could call those things simply being civil. But even those go out the window today, in those areas where we disagree. For those things I just mentioned, what we call good, many call evil. And those ideologies being promoted today, thought of as good by many, we would call evil. So it is no secret that there is a battle going on in the world today, for the hearts and minds of people. And as in any battle, there are going to be casualties. Harm done to those who are zealous for good.

Which Peter acknowledges in his very next sentence. He’s not naive. He lives in a time when Christians are being persecuted. He himself was harmed - executed - for doing what is good - proclaiming the Gospel. So while we *shouldn’t* be harmed for doing good, the reality is, we are. Because we live in a world that was created good but which has been plunged into sin. A world once of love and life, but now of harm and death. A world that continues only because of the love and care of its Creator who intervenes. Who

allows the sin and evil, harm and death, to go only so far, so that there still be goodness, life, and love in this world. Given by Him. Worked by Him. Which there is.

That's why Peter goes on to say: ***But even if you should suffer for righteousness 'sake, you will be blessed.*** But blessed not in some general sense of being blessed, like how we often, or maybe usually, think, with those material things we want, or happiness, but . . . what if I pronounced it this way: ***you will be blessed.*** You are among the blessed. ***Even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake,*** they will not conquer you or defeat you. For you belong to the one who already won the victory, and has promised you the victory. Things may not be easy. You will have crosses to bear. But you have a life they cannot take away.

So, Peter says, ***have no fear of them, nor be troubled.*** He was, once. Remember that? In the courtyard of the High Priest, with the people there, when he denied even knowing Jesus three times? He was quite fearful and troubled. And then he did it again, even after the resurrection, in the city of Antioch, when he wasn't acting as he should and Paul had to call him out. Peter struggled with this just like we do, when our fears get the better of us and we don't speak and live like we know we should. But we don't have to be that way. We don't have to be afraid when the tomb is empty! *Jesus'* tomb, empty now, and *your* tomb empty one day, too. When what we're afraid of looks so big and powerful, we look to Jesus and see that while those things may be bigger and more powerful than us, they are not bigger and more powerful than Him. Jesus conquered them and is on your side.

So ***have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy,*** - the holy and living one - ***always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.*** Now that sounds pretty intimidating, like we have to have an answer to every question we are asked! We have to know it all! But I don't think that's what Peter means, which I'll get to in a moment.

But when we talk to people, he says, ***do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.*** That's a good reminder to us, who may be tempted to think that if they blast us, we get to blast them! If they're loud, we have to be louder! Otherwise, we won't get results. But wasn't it the still, soft voice that spoke to Elijah and was louder than earthquakes and windstorms (1 Kings 19)? And wasn't it the still, soft voice of Christ from the cross that spoke of forgiveness and Paradise, that wouldn't revile in return for reviling, that wouldn't curse those who cursed Him? Shock and awe may be the way of the world, but gentleness and respect is the way of the Gospel.

Which does not mean we won't call sin sin, and evil evil. We will and we must. But when we get blasted in return, shock and awe in return, we will not become like them or adopt their ways. ***For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will,***

than for doing evil. And with those words, Peter has come full circle. ***Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?*** he began. Well, they're out there, right? But it is better to suffer than to go along with their evil. Better, because it is the way of life, and evil is the way of death.

Though it doesn't look that way, right? If good brings suffering and suffering brings death! But if we try to avoid death and suffering, what, then, of the good? Of life? It, too, then, falls away. So there must be something greater, and another way of looking at these things. And there is. And not surprisingly, it's Jesus . . .

So, Peter continues, ***For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.*** That is, Jesus' suffering and death brought the greatest good - life and salvation for all people. The one who was not only zealous for what is good but was *good incarnate*, good *in the flesh*, had that flesh crucified by a world that did not want His good. But they could not stop it. They could not prevent it. Jesus in the flesh descended into hell and proclaimed His victory. Jesus in the flesh rose from the dead and showed His victory on earth. And as we will celebrate on Wednesday night this week, Jesus in the flesh ascended into heaven to reign as the King of life for the life of the world. So in Jesus, from suffering and death came the greatest good.

For you, too. For it is Jesus' suffering and death, to which you are joined when you are baptized, that saves you and gives you life. That's what Peter went on to say, pointing to Noah and his family who were saved from an evil world through water. He says: you too! ***Baptism now saves you!*** This water sent from God saves you. For it is not an outward washing, but an inward one. A washing not of the body but of the soul, of the conscience. For here in these waters is the resurrection of Jesus for you, the life of Jesus for you, the forgiveness of Jesus for you. The Jesus who ***has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*** So if that is true - and it is! - that Jesus is on the throne and has all powers - ALL powers - subjected to Him, will He not work good for you? Will He not care for you? Will He not be for you?

Of course He will! It's just that we have trouble believing it. Because we believe **what we see** more than **what we hear**. The actions and consequences of the world are real - the canceling, the criticism, the hurt and pain - and the Word of God and His promises . . . well, seem so unreal? And maybe they would be if they were *just* words and promises. But those words and promises of God **are anchored in an empty tomb**. An empty tomb that proclaims Jesus alive and more powerful than whatever you are afraid of, whatever is threatening you. An empty tomb which fulfilled Jesus' promise that we heard today as well, in the Holy Gospel, when He said to the disciples ***I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*** And He did. And then this promise, too: ***A Helper.***

Which sounds good, doesn't it? Because on my own, on our own, we could never make

it. But *with* a Helper . . . a Helper who is God Himself, the Spirit of God, who will not just help us for a little while, but whom Jesus sends *to be with [us] forever*, we have hope. And not just hope, but confidence. And not just confidence, but certainty. For if Jesus rose from the dead, what can He not do? What *will* He not do for His children?

So this is the hope, the confidence, the certainty that is in us. So that if anyone *asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*, that's your defense! That's your answer - That Jesus is risen from the dead, and I am baptized into Him. *Because [He] lives, [I] also will live.*

That was what Paul did, too, as we heard in the first reading. The people in Athens had an altar *to the unknown god*. And Paul said: Let me tell you about this God you do not know. And he told them about Jesus and the resurrection. Without the empty tomb, Christianity is just words and morality and thoughts, like any other religion of man, to be judged by its practicality and usefulness. But with the empty tomb, it is much more! It is life, it is certainty, it is power and victory. And it is utterly unlike any other religion of man in this world. All religions of man are based on the power of thoughts and words to motivate and elevate. But this here is the power of God **to save and raise**.

So, Jesus told His disciples, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments*. He not talking about the Ten Commandments - though that's certainly true. Saved by Jesus and with His Spirit we will desire to keep the commandments, which tell us and teach us what is good and how we should live. But because of our sinful nature, we can't. Not perfectly. Not all the time. Not in every way. But there are *other* commandments Jesus gave, like *baptize! Hear! Confess! Eat and drink My Body and Blood!* These things which **give us Jesus** and His life and forgiveness and salvation. This is what Jesus wants us to do most of all, for here we receive Him and His gifts. And only by receiving Him and His gifts, His Spirit and His love - can we then go out and love others as He has loved us. And give them an answer to the hope we have. Point them to Jesus and the empty tomb. That they, too, might know the God who to them, right now, is unknown. But who wants to be known by them and save them.

So maybe there are some who want to harm you. Maybe you will have to suffer for the good you do and the faith you have. Maybe you will be canceled and threatened and mocked for not going along with what we are being told today is the truth and good. Maybe all that is already happening to you. But none of that can change this fact: that **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] and has won the victory for you, and gives His victory to you. The devil, the world, and even your sinful flesh cannot win and cannot have you. You are baptized. You belong to Jesus. And what we cannot see but believe now, we will one day see. Jesus, *at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers [all] subjected to him*. Therefore, *have no fear of them, nor be troubled*. For **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] And you are baptized into Him.

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.