

25 May 2025
Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“What if? No! What IS!”

Text: John 16:23-33; Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27; Acts 16:9-15

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.

I just finished reading a book titled *President Hamilton*. Now, if you know your history and your presidents, you know there was no President Hamilton! Alexander Hamilton was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr just short of his 50th birthday. But the premise of the book was *what if he wasn't?* What if he had survived and instead Burr had been killed? How might history and the story of America turned out differently?

It was an interesting read. And very optimistic. Probably a bit too optimistic. But that's how it usually turns out, I think, when we ask that question, *what if?* And unless you're a very unique individual, you've asked that question, maybe a lot. What if I had done things differently? Better. What if I hadn't acted that way? What if I had married a different person, taken a different job, made better decisions, was a better father, had taken better care of myself . . . and you can fill in your own *what ifs*. And usually - again, unless you're a very unique individual - the answers you imagine are very optimistic. If I had done things differently, I would be happier. My life would have been better. Things would have turned out better. Maybe a LOT better.

But maybe NOT. Truth is, there are a lot of moving parts in this world. So many that answering the *what ifs* might make for a good read, but is really an impossible task. And it usually doesn't help. Asking *what if*, and coming up with an optimistic answer in my mind about how things would be better, only leaves me discontented now, and maybe despairing, and maybe hopeless. Replaying the past ruins and hurts the NOW. It robs us of joy. It robs us of peace. It prevents us from seeing the good we have and the good God is working now. Despite us. And even using our sins and bad decisions to work good for us. Because God *can* do that. And *is* doing that. And has *promised* to do that.

And so **Jesus has given us a better way to live.** We heard it today. Because, I think,

Jesus knew His disciples would do this - play the *what if* game. After Jesus is arrested, convicted, crucified, and buried . . . Friday night and Saturday . . . those questions would come. What if we had fought? What if I hadn't denied? What if we hadn't run away? What if we had prayed and not fallen asleep? What if we had been better disciples? What if . . . ? And there were probably hundreds of those thoughts and questions plaguing their minds and consuming them.

So before all that happens, Jesus tells them: ***I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.***

Now, granted, it didn't look that way! When Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus' dead body down from the cross and the Roman authorities sealed His tomb, it looked as if the *world* had overcome *Him*. But it really was true. God brought the greatest good out of the rebellion and sin of the world. Rising from the dead, Jesus overcame sin, death, and hell, and brought us life and hope and peace. So that we not dwell on the past and despair in the *what ifs*, but look to the future with confidence and peace.

So let's think about what this means, that Jesus has ***overcome the world*** - *even when it seems as if the world is winning!* - and how that can bring you joy and peace.

And the first thing to realize, I think, is that when Jesus says that He has ***overcome the world***, it's not just the world *out there*, it's also - and maybe *especially* - the world *in here* [pointing to my heart]. The ways and thinking and beliefs of the world that have settled into my - and your - heart and life.

Because the world out there is going to do what the world out there is going to do. It's going to continue to sin and self-destruct. The Bible is clear: the world isn't progressing and getting better and better. Yes, technology and inventions are advancing and producing marvels and things we cannot imagine. But sin and death, unbelief and misbelief are advancing, too. So ***in the world***, in *that* world, ***you will have tribulation***, Jesus said. Troubles, when *our* beliefs and the *world's* beliefs clash.

But then what about the world *in here* [my heart]? The sin in me, the unbelief in me, the doubts and fears in me? This junk in my heart that causes me to wonder: *what if?* And then my answers that lead me to discontent and despair.

Well there is a better way. That instead of dwelling on the past and missing the good God is giving and doing NOW . . . instead of asking *what if*, hear instead how Jesus has overcome the world *in here*. How He has overcome your past and your sins and mistakes and regrets. And you hear it here every week: **I forgive you all your sins**. Instead of dwelling on your sins, know that Jesus has taken them to the

cross and overcome them. You may hold them against yourself, but *why*, when Jesus doesn't! And if Jesus doesn't, then you don't have to. And you can have peace, knowing that Jesus has forgiven your past and - just like with the cross - is able to use the things of your past for good now *and* in the future. That **He has overcome the world** means that He has overcome the world *out there*, but also *in here*. What began with your baptism, when Jesus took you and joined you to Himself in His death and resurrection to a new life, wasn't just a one time thing, but continues every day. A death and resurrection, a new life for you, *every day*.

So what are your *what ifs*? What if . . . I forgive you. But what if . . . I forgive you! But what if . . . I forgive you, my child! You are precious to me. So I died for you. I died for your sin. I died to give you release from your past, and hope and peace and a future. You're not going to be able to make things better. But I can. And do. And promise to. So **take heart; I have overcome the world**.

And that confidence, that promise, then leads us entrust all things to Him. *In prayer*. So, Jesus said, **Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you**. That's a truly, truly promise! Double certainty. Double confidence. That prayers *in Jesus' name* - which *doesn't* mean prayers to which we tack on at the end "in Jesus' name" like some magic words, or prayers that come from our own thoughts and selfishness - but that prayers that arise from the words and promises of God, are done. We can entrust the **future** to the God who has atoned for, overcome, and forgiven our **past**, and is working good and blessing us in the **present**.

Which is a matter of faith, because what you may see now is a cross and sealed tomb! Tribulation and defeat, with no way out. That might be what you see, what you think. But that - the cross and the tomb - didn't last, and neither will yours. Jesus **rose** to give you hope and peace and a future. So **take heart**, Jesus says. **Take heart; I have overcome the world**.

So if Jesus has overcome your **past** and has promised you a **future** - and what a future we heard today in the reading from Revelation! - then I think He just might be able to take care of your **present** as well. And along with hope and peace, you might even have joy as well, as you look to Jesus to see how He will bring good out of the mess we've made. How He will overcome. How He will rescue. It might not be easy - the cross wasn't easy! But it will be good. And it will be *for you*. To give you life.

And it may be in a quite unexpected way, like what we heard in the First Reading, when Paul's plans were suddenly changed. That was unexpected! And not easy! They had a trek. They had to sail from Troas, stop at the island of Samothrace, go from there to Neapolis, and from there trek overland to Philippi - and why? For

Lydia? Who was Lydia? Why should God care about Lydia? For the same reason He cares about you. God opened her heart by His Word and Spirit, just as He did you. She was baptized, just as you are baptized. And Paul and the others stayed with her, just as our Lord stays here with you. And here, feeding you with His Body and Blood, that you may depart in peace. Depart this altar in the peace, depart this church in peace, and ultimately, depart this world in peace. The peace of forgiveness. That no matter what else is happening in the world and in your life, you know that **Jesus has overcome the world**, and in Him have hope and joy and peace.

So instead of asking *what if* and dreamily and optimistically looking to how the future might have turned better if only we had been and done things differently, **we have a better way**. To look to see how the hand of God is working. To look to Jesus and know that because of what He did, we have a grand and glorious future - and not just in the far distant future, but even now. For even now, our Saviour is working His good. And He is! For you. Even now, He is forgiving your past. Even now, He is feeding you and blessing you - in ways you know and in ways you don't and really, can't even imagine. But He has. And He is. And He has promised to do so.

And of this you can be sure. For the empty tomb proclaims that **Jesus has overcome the world**. That **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] And that's no *what if!* That's the truth.

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.