

Fellowship with Him and with One Another

In the name of Jesus, our Lord and our God, dear friends in Christ: Last Sunday we gathered with joy to celebrate the highest of the Church's high holy days: the Feast of our Lord's Resurrection. As we did, we focused on the sublime truth that is of first importance to our faith: that Jesus Christ our Savior, true God and true man, died for sin in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and most critically, that he rose again from the dead exactly as the Scriptures declared he would. Our Lord's resurrection is the central and foundational truth upon which the Christian Church and every one of its members stand. And what needs to be stressed is that it is a verifiable truth. It happened in history. There were more than five hundred eyewitnesses who saw Jesus alive after he had died and risen again. They spoke with him, they touched him, they ate and drank with him. And following his instructions, they spread the Good News of his victory over death throughout the world, many of them at the cost of their own lives – it was that important to them.

That Jesus rose from the dead is a fact. The question before us this morning is that most Lutheran of questions: What does this mean? Consider the disciples at the beginning of today's Gospel gathered together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. At this point they know that Jesus has risen from the dead. He's appeared to Mary Magdalene, to Peter, and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus – who have just returned out of breath, having come sprinting back from there to tell the account of their long afternoon talk with the Lord. So they agree that Jesus is alive again. But they have yet to understand the implications of this. I mean for them it's great news *for Jesus* that he's alive; but what does it mean for the rest of them? The disciples all promised that they would stick by Jesus no matter what. And all of them fearing for their own safety ran off and abandoned him the moment he was arrested. Some of them, hiding among the crowd of mockers, stood by helplessly while he suffered on the cross. And all of them lost faith in him when he died. Yes, they fear the Jews and what they might do. But they have guilty consciences too. They fear what Jesus may do. Will he be angry with us? Will he punish us? Will he abandon us as we abandoned him? They know they deserve it.

That's why it's critical to note that when Jesus appears, the first word that comes out of his mouth is a declaration of peace. There is no anger, no righteous wrath, no hard feelings about their reneging on their solemn vows to stay with him even if it meant prison or death. There is no hint of any of that. Instead he displays for them the marks of his suffering for their sins: his nail pierced hands and his wounded side. And again he declares a word of peace from God. The result is that the disciples are overwhelmed with joy.

The Apostle John, who was present in that locked room when Jesus appeared, elaborates on that joy he and the others experienced then in today's Epistle reading. He also explains what it means for you and me. And so I thought it would be good for us to spend a few moments on this second Sunday of Easter listening to John give his eyewitness testimony of Jesus' resurrection and unpacking for us its implications for our lives.

But before he gets to it, first he wants to make absolutely sure we know who he's talking about. He writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—the Life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal Life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us". John's style can

be a little baffling to our western ears. It can seem a little repetitive or like it's always turning back on itself like a series of loops. Upon closer examination we can see that John is weaving together three important concepts that are intricately linked. First, that Jesus is God the Son. He is from the beginning and was with the Father. Second, that Jesus is man. We heard him, we saw him, we touched him. This was no spiritual apparition or hallucination; he had a very physical body. Third, is the first person nature of his testimony. I was there. I heard. I saw. I touched. So were the others. And he appointed us his witnesses to testify to you.

Testify what? That in Christ fellowship has been restored. The gigantic chasm that separated the holy God from sinful man as far as light is from darkness and the east is from the west has been closed and sealed. Because Jesus took upon himself the sins of the whole world, and because he suffered and died on the cross to pay the just penalty for them, the wrath and condemnation of God are completely satisfied. There is no judgment for those who, believing the testimony of the Apostles, are by faith in Christ Jesus. None. The conflict is over. The fear of just punishment is passed. With God we are at perfect peace once again.

This is amazingly relieving news – relieving especially in those times when Satan and your guilty conscience are afflicting you. We've all got those skeletons in the closet, so to speak; secret sins, dark thoughts, shameful lusts and passions that we fear may one day be revealed and that we will be held accountable for. Like the disciples gathered behind locked doors, we know how seriously and how often we have let Jesus down despite our well intended promises to remain faithful. We know our guilt. And we fear God's judgment. John knows that we do, which is why he says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But then he immediately follows up by saying "If we confess our sins, he [Jesus] is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness". He is faithful to forgive in that he can always be relied upon to do so. And he is just to forgive in that because he bore the penalty of sin in his own body, the righteous demands of God's Law have been satisfied.

Thus fellowship is restored on what we might think of as the vertical axis between God and ourselves. We have no cause to fear that one day the hammer of justice will fall, no reason to think that further payment may be required of us or that God will give up on us in disgust. In Christ the Father smiles upon us and welcomes us as his beloved children. And in Christ, that is, as we trust in the atonement he made for us, the Father always will.

But John stresses a further dimension to the fellowship we now have in Christ, and this is on what might be thought of as the horizontal axis; that is, between fellow believers. You see, sin doesn't separate us only from the Lord, but it separates us also from one another. On one hand you've got those who have offended you by something they said or did, or they looked down on you and made you feel bad, or they outshone you in some accomplishment and wounded your pride, or they lied to you, cheated you, betrayed you, or otherwise hurt you. Now, on your side, there's a wall of resentment there; a feeling that they should be made to pay for it. On the other hand, there are those you are just as guilty of doing the same sorts of things to, people who have been wounded in some way by your sins against them – sins which are somehow always perceived by you to be less serious than the things you've suffered from the misdeeds of others. Funny how that works. Nevertheless, those aggrieved people are holding up a wall of resentment against you. They think you should be made to pay for it.

To think in such terms, however, to build up walls of separation between fellow believers, is to walk in the darkness rather than in the light of Christ. And John says, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."

What truth? That in Christ *all* sins are forgiven and forgotten. If you honestly believe that all *your* sins have been atoned for by Jesus, that the wrath of God no longer remains upon you, then you must believe the same is true for all believers in Christ. How can you demand payment for sins that Christ has already paid for? You can't. To deny anyone your forgiveness, is to deny God's forgiveness for you. You're in the dark, back with the disciples in fear, not yet understanding what Jesus' resurrection means.

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." Walking in the light of Christ, that is, understanding what Christ's resurrection means for *you* necessarily entails seeing what it means for fellow believers, and there can be no walls of separation. If such a wall exists, if there is a professed believer with whom your fellowship is disturbed or broken, then one or both of you is to some extent walking in the dark. And rather than point the finger of blame at the other guy (which is an inherently judgmental action that betrays your unchristian attitude) it's best to examine yourself to ensure that on your part there is no obstacle to fellowship; and if there is, to repent and confess it.

The goal, of course, is to attain among ourselves perfect Christian fellowship and harmony – like that enjoyed by the early Christians in today's first reading from the book of Acts. They are described as being of one heart and soul, freely sharing their possessions with those among them in need. They were like one, big, happy family. As indeed they were one family by walking in the Light of Christ as the Apostles with great power continued to give their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. The same grace of God in Christ Jesus is upon us as we receive the same testimony of the Apostles to the resurrection of Jesus and what it means for our lives. Therefore, because we have fellowship with God we must have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. The Lord grant us the grace both to believe and to live it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!