

7TH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER - MEMORIAL DAY - 5.24.20

“One Body, Focused on Christ” 1 Peter 4: 12-19; 5: 6-11

Listen closely! Our Lord is praying. It's the night of the Last Supper - Jesus is soon to be betrayed. But not yet; He and His disciples have not even reached the Garden. They are in the Upper Room, and the Lord is praying - out loud. What's this? Jesus is praying for YOU. Does Jesus know - even in that wrenching hour what YOU are going through in this strange, unprecedented and dark time? **He does** - and even in the middle of it all, He wants you to remain as ONE BODY united to Him and to each other. May the grace, mercy and peace of God our Father enable us to be blessed as a church family united together in His Word. Amen. Dear People United as One in Christ:

On this Memorial Day weekend, our minds are scattered all over the place - we remember those who have gone before us - grandparents, parents, spouses; we also thank God for all those who have served our Country and given their lives on the altar of freedom; we are also considering barbeques and trips to the cemetery. We have so much to consider. And yet, the Scriptures reveal to us a sharply focused Savior who is praying for our lives as children of God - no matter what we face on this earth.

Many men and women have put their lives in extreme danger for their comrades in arms, and, in some cases gave their lives, in order that the others might live. It seems in every war, in every battle, even in this one we're fighting against the coronavirus, almost without exception, such heroic actions occur, sometimes from individuals you would least expect. Right now, it's doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, restraint owners. I have no doubt that each time, in the days and weeks that followed, the recipients of such unselfishness were inspired to fight for their wounded or fallen comrades, perhaps with a greater zeal than ever before.

In Peter's epistle, he is talking about a war against the evil foe. He writes: "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" **If the righteous is scarcely saved?!** That's a sobering verse for us to consider this morning, this last Sunday of the Easter season.

For seven weeks now, we have been rejoicing in the resurrection of our Lord - His atonement for our sin on the cross and His great victory over death in His resurrection. As we should. Easter is the queen of seasons; the most important season in the church's year; the season all the others revolve around. Without Easter, we are nothing and have nothing. Without the resurrection of Jesus, the church is only a fantasy. Therefore, we celebrate Easter long and loud.

And this week, in case you missed it because of the virus, we also celebrated the Ascension of our Lord, Jesus' coronation day. The fact that our brother and Savior is now sitting on the throne of David, at the Father's right hand, ruling all things for the good of His Church. Another reason to rejoice, which the disciples did after Jesus ascended. They weren't sad that Jesus had left, as we might expect; they returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Luke 24:52). They knew this was a good thing.

But they also knew the world was still a dangerous and dark place. That there would be, as we heard from Peter today, fiery trials; that Christians would suffer for their faith; that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion. Usually, today, when we say something like the world is a dangerous place, we think of terrorism. But not anymore. Now we think of a virus - of the asymptomatic spreading of a deadly illness through little droplets that attach to anything and everything.

But today with these words we are reminded that there is a greater threat than even that. Greater both because its consequences are greater, and because it often happens without our even knowing it - **and that is the threat to our faith.** Jesus said: Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matt 20:28). But honestly, we're usually the opposite, aren't we?

So maybe it's not pleasant, but it's good for us to hear and consider Peter's words today, as hard as they may be. If the righteous are scarcely saved . . . If those righteous - those made righteous by grace through faith - are scarcely saved - saved with great difficulty . . . we should pay attention.

And we heard of the danger today, also from Peter, in the first reading from Acts as we heard about Judas. You know his story, **but don't rush past his story**, as I believe we usually do because we're used to hearing it, just lumping him together with other famous betrayers like Benedict Arnold.

But I don't think it was like that in that Upper Room where those 120 Christians were together. Judas was their friend. He had been their companion for three years. They had done everything together. They relied on him and he on them. He was one of the twelve pillars, the twelve disciples, Jesus' inner circle. They were brothers, they were close, they would have taken a bullet for Judas. And then suddenly, without any warning, he turned the gun on them. And they probably wondered how? What happened? It was earth-shaking.

And so as they gathered in that Upper Room, and they were praying, **they were also, mourning**. Not Jesus - they were joyful because of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, but at the same time mourning the loss of their friend. This was a tragedy. Scripture had to be fulfilled, Peter sadly said. True. But that didn't make it any easier. Jesus was crucified, but He rose from the dead. Their friend wasn't coming back.

Danger, all around. Threats greater than the threat to your life. . . . If the righteous is scarcely saved . . .

How does it happen? How does a Judas happen? Well, there's probably lots of ways, but often, it's the devil, the world, and your own sinful nature chipping away. Slowly eroding your foundation. Little by little luring you away. So that you don't even notice. What you once thought unthinkable, now you find yourself thinking about. Places you would never go, you start to go. You're acting different . . . you're priorities have shifted . . . why? Because we're inundated with the messages (although quite confusing) that lead us toward death, not life. Things like new fears, depression, feeling as though there are no certainties in the world in which we live. And yet, there is one certainty: Life in Christ.

So Peter says: be sober-minded! or clear thinking about these things. Be watchful! or, don't let down your guard.

These are good words coming from Peter. For he not only knew the sting of losing his friend, Judas - maybe he was also thinking of how close he had come to being in that very place. He was the one who had denied Jesus three times. He was the one who tried to walk on the water but sank like a stone. He was the one to whom Jesus said: Get behind me satan (Matthew 16:23)! If the righteous is scarcely saved . . . when Peter wrote that, I believe he was talking about himself.

Danger, all around. We rejoice in Christ's resurrection and ascension, but the world is still a dangerous and dark place. **So what about you?** Are you in less danger? Are you less susceptible to the temptations of satan and the allures of sin? Are you stronger than Peter . . . and maybe think, I would never be a Judas?

Pretty heavy stuff, I know. And not very easterly, Pastor! Give us some good news, will ya'!

Well Peter does. For he also writes this: Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.

Humble yourselves. Know yourself. Take a realistic look at yourself. How do you do that? By repenting. By acknowledging not just the danger, but that you've given in; you've been taken in; you've turned away; you, too, have gone your own way. You thought you were strong, you thought you could do it all by yourself, you're good . . . Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And He does. Cast all your anxieties on Him - cast 'em all on Him! Cast all your sin and guilt and shame and failure and all that weakness on Him - because He cares for you. He wants it. He cares. **You're not on your own.**

The reason He came down from heaven is because He cares. The reason He went to the cross is because He cares. And the reason He is here is His Word and Sacrament for you is because He cares. He cares, and so He says: I forgive you. For all of it. That sin you're thinking of right now, I forgive you! That you've drifted away from Me, I forgive you! Your taking Me for granted, I forgive you!

And that's not just words. Here, I give you My Body and Blood. Most holy things to make you holy. To restore you, confirm you, strengthen you, and establish you. To make you My own and keep you close to Me. For you are My child. I baptized you! How could I leave you? How could I not forgive you? Hear My Absolution. Eat My Body and drink My Blood. I forgive you! And I will tomorrow, too.

That doesn't mean your sin doesn't matter. It does, of course. **But it means that the love and mercy of Jesus is greater than your sin.** You see, Jesus knows how hard life is. He lived it! Life here in this world as a person like you. Under the assault of satan, facing the ridicule of the world, being tempted and lured. He knows. That's why He's here for you. That your future may not be an Akeldama - a field of your own blood, but yours be in the pasture of your Good Shepherd, washed in His Blood.

Jesus knows how hard life is, and that's why He also prays for you. We heard some of those words in the Gospel today, culminating with these words: Holy Father, keep them in Your name, which You have given Me, that they may be one, even as We are One.

You know how that happens? That you are kept as one with God? That we can be one with each other? You know: forgiveness. For when you have forgiveness, though we may not realize it, **when you have forgiveness, you have everything.** For you have Christ. You are a son, a daughter, of the Father. And you have the Spirit who has given you such faith to believe. And in a world where life is hard and dangerous and dark and the righteous is scarcely saved, that is good to know. That you have Christ. You have a Father. You have the Spirit. You have someone you can rely on, who will not let you down.

That confidence is what turned Peter the denier into Peter the martyr. Peter didn't suddenly become strong - Christ and His Spirit were strong in Him. And they are strong in you as well. His Word, His water, His food, His forgiveness, strong in you.

That knowing how great the danger, you know how great your Savior. That knowing how great your sin, you know how great His forgiveness. And that knowing how great your weakness and fear, you know how great His strength and courage to face any thing - no matter what.

And that is our joy this Easter season. Even though we have been isolated, forced to stay home - you have had God's resurrection Word each week with the bulletin, the sermon and now, with Holy Communion.

Though you may suffer as a Christian, though fiery trials may test you, though sin still lurks, the devil still prowls, and the world still attacks, you have a Savior. A risen one! An ascended one! who cares for you. And whose care for you will never end. And though humble now, He will exalt you at the proper time, raising you from the dead to live and reign with Him in eternity.

For while Matthias was chosen to take Judas' place, Jesus was chosen to take your place - on the cross. And you were chosen to take His place in heaven. That's our Easter joy. All the promises of Scripture fulfilled. For you. So, yes, the world in a dangerous and dark place. The things we face are unprecedented and cause us to face some uncertainty in our finances, our health and every other struggle in this world. And, yes, the righteous is scarcely saved. **But saved you are.**

As we go forth into this Memorial Day week, let me encourage you to remember those who have served and made the sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy today. At the same time, give thanks to God, also, for Jesus Christ, and HIS willingness to serve, His commitment to our spiritual freedom and our eternal salvation. And then, be confident in your daily "faith battles," knowing that you are equipped by God to be that faithful warrior that makes a difference in the world around you.

The need for a military force will more than likely never disappear. We will need a protectorate and every day heroes from the forces around the globe to guarantee the rights and privileges we can express today. It's through our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines - and now doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, essential employees that we have the luxury of unprecedented freedoms on Earth. But, only Christ can grant the freedom from sin that His sacrifice has granted us.

So therefore, we proclaim it loudly again on this last Sunday in the Easter Season: Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!! Christ is ascended! He is ascended, indeed!! All for your salvation - and the salvation of the dangerous and dark world around us that needs, more than ever, the Word of Truth and Hope found in being focused on Christ. Amen.