

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 19, 2015

Text: Luke 24:36–49

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“You are witnesses of these things” says Jesus to the frightened disciples (vs. 48). What things did they see? Quite simple...the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. They saw what Jesus did throughout His ministry. They saw how He raised the widow's son at Nain. They heard Jesus speak to Lazarus, who had been lying dead in the tomb for 4 days. They saw Lazarus, raised from the dead, obey the voice of Jesus and come forth from his premature grave. The disciples heard the Lord Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount. They saw Him forgive the sins of a woman caught in adultery. Any and everything we know about the life of the Lord Jesus, these disciples saw and experienced. They are eye witnesses.

Most especially they are eye witnesses of His death. They know that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus requested Jesus' dead body from Pontius Pilate and buried Him just a few hours before the Passover Sabbath. And yes, they saw the Lord's empty tomb. They heard the women tell their experience of meeting the resurrected Lord early Easter morning. They saw the Lord Jesus on Easter evening as He showed them the scars from the crucifixion. And He did the same for Thomas the week following.

And now, dear saints of God, you are witnesses of these things. To be sure, you are not eye witnesses but you are witnesses nonetheless. Each and every Christian has received the testimony of the apostolic witness to the life, deeds, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus. Jude writes these stirring words of exhortation to the Holy Christian Church, “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (vs. 3). This faith, delivered to the saints in the preaching and teaching of the apostles, is handed down to each and every Christian, to every congregation that remains true to God's holy Word.

Yes, dear saints of God, you are witnesses of these things. In order to know better what has been entrusted to us, let us consider briefly “these things” as described in today’s Luke’s gospel reading.

It begins with the evidence of the resurrection. Vs. 36–43 describe the sad condition the disciples were in after the events of Good Friday and the bewildering tales of the women. They claimed to have seen Jesus. Vs. 36, “As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you!’” Peace is one of the things we witness to. God’s peace, the peace that surpasses understanding, is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus and cannot be found anywhere other than in Jesus. His resurrection secures forgiveness of sins, life over death, hope over despair; Jesus restores us to a peaceful relationship with our heavenly Father. Once we are at peace with the Father through Jesus, we can strive to be a peace with one another. Such peace is, in fact, ours as a gift of the Holy Spirit according to Galatians 5:22.

In vs. 39–43, Jesus goes to some length to assure the disciples that it is in fact Himself risen from the dead. He shows them the scars in His hands and feet. He commands them to touch Him in order to show that He is real flesh and blood, no hallucinations, no spirit-only resurrection. This is the crucified Jesus of Nazareth raised in flesh and blood, never to taste death again. And just in case they miss the point, Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish. Ghosts and spirits don’t eat real food; a real Jesus with a real resurrected body does. There can be no mistaking what and who this is. Jesus is alive from the dead. He has forever conquered death, hell, evil, and the devil.

We are witnesses of these things, saints of God.

You might, however, be puzzled, wondering from where your witness arises. What is its source, its authority, its content? Jesus answers that for us beginning in vs. 44, “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’” Your witness arises from the Word of God which you have received beginning with your baptism in God’s Trinitarian name. That witness continued and yet continues to be handed over to you as you worship the Lord in the Divine Service, as you received instruction in catechism classes and Bible studies, as you receive Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion, as you confess every week the Apostles’, Nicene, or Athanasian Creeds, as you pray the Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer daily. Day after day, week after week you are receiving the witness from Holy Scripture that all things concerning Jesus must be fulfilled.

But you are not alone in your reception of this divine witness to the things of Jesus. Vs. 45–47, “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’” I find it most amazing that after 3 or so years of being with Jesus, the disciples still had closed minds to the things of God.

It is no exaggeration to say that without divine illumination, the truths of Holy Scripture remain closed. Certainly, unbelievers – those who have not received the witness of these holy things in faith – can understand the events recorded in Scripture. Anyone can read the Bible and understand its teachings, its implications and conclusions. But no one can receive the witness that Jesus had to suffer, rise from the dead for the world’s salvation, and that repentance and forgiveness can only be received in His name, and that this message must be preached in every nook and cranny of this world – none of that can be received in faith and trust unto salvation without the Lord Jesus opening their minds through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

You are witnesses to these things because the Lord has opened your mind to understand them. And your growth in these things continues, day after day, week after week, year after year.

That brings us to where we began, “You are witnesses of these things” (vs. 48). Yet, the Lord gives a promise in the next verse, “And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you...power from on high.” That promised power is the Holy Spirit. All of this is the work of God the Trinity in your life. You never witness alone.

In these final moments, I want to give you a brief encouragement. The task of witnessing to the things of Jesus belongs to us, Christians whose minds have been illuminated by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. While this task has always been part and parcel of the Church’s work in the world, it is most evidently true needed today. No longer can we assume that we live in a generally Christianized culture which will not hinder our witness to Christ and the things of God.

Some things we must witness to no matter what the cost or opposition. I’ve already mentioned the witness to Christ and His resurrection which must be held regardless of its denial by liberalized forms of Christianity. But there’s more. In general, the Church, and we Christians who make up the Church, must witness to the sanctity of life in all its stages from conception to natural death. Only the Church is able to maintain the

witness that all life, regardless of age, capacity, skill, or any other external measure of value, is not only precious but holy. The universal expectation for abortion on demand in all countries of the world, the growing acceptance of euthanasia and other forms of state-sanctioned suicide, and the rise of terrorism and its willingness to destroy life indiscriminately are evidence of how cheap life is considered in our day. We must witness that every human being is created in God's image and is sacred.

We must witness to the God created distinctions of male and female and that venerable institution built upon such a distinction: the family made up of a father and mother and their children. A generation or two has been raised with easily accessible divorce, the normalization of cohabitation, the wide-spread acceptance of pornography and its debasing effects, and the wholesale assault on fatherhood and masculinity. The last ten years has seen the staggering success of so-called gay marriage in our country and around the world. It is but the latest result of our world's war against the family in general, and the distinction of male and female in particular.

We must witness to the truth of these things of God. For the Gospel of the Lord Jesus is established upon these very things. The Bible teaches that humanity's God-given image was distorted after Adam and Eve's original sin. Jesus' ministry is described, at least in part, as God's work to restore that image. But if life is cheap and disposable, the gospel of victory over sin, death, and the grave is muted.

And the very drama of redemption is described as a marriage between Jesus and His Church. That male/female distinction is the foundational structure upon which all Christianity is built. Loss that, as we are doing today, you loss the witness of the Gospel.

Much more could be said about our witness to Christ and the things of God. I do not want you leaving disheartened. Quite the opposite, remember what Jesus promised: illumination and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. Our task is great. But greater still is the Lord Jesus. You are witnesses to these powerful things. It is not without reason that we rejoice in victory when we say:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.