

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE

Easter Vigil (members of Immanuel, Burns; Zion, Grover; Grace, Pine Bluffs also present)

March 26, 2016

Text: Vigil Readings & Matthew 27:57–66

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

Last night we heard Jesus' triumphal preaching from the cross, "It is finished!" We remembered, in joyful solemnity, that Jesus died as God's Lamb who took away all the sins of the world. Indeed, to take away our sins as well. To be sure, Jesus was buried. That fact cannot be overlooked or what we celebrate tonight and tomorrow morning will make no sense.

After declaring all things finished for the salvation of the world, Jesus breathed His last and died. Joseph of Arimethea, a disciple of Jesus, went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' dead body. He and Nicodemus, the same Nicodemus whom Jesus said you must be born again of water and spirit, and several women hastily buried Jesus late Friday evening. It was the only thing they could do. And then they went home to observe the Saturday Sabbath. In their sad hearts and minds, they knew Jesus was resting in His tomb. He had been buried.

Tonight, we heard that the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and asked for a guard to watch over Jesus' tomb. They remembered what Jesus had said. After three days He will rise from the dead. So guards must be set around Jesus' tomb lest His disciples steal the body away and perpetrate one of the greatest frauds in human history. The body of Jesus was buried; He must be left there undisturbed. Pilate gave his consent. A guard was set, the tomb sealed. Any who tampered with a Roman seal faced Rome's wrath. All the Jewish leaders had to do was wait for the three days to pass, and all this Jesus-rising-from-the-dead nonsense would become a faint memory.

On this Saturday night, we gather in prayerful vigil in remembrance of what Jesus did on Good Friday and (we gather) in eager anticipation for the joyous celebration of Christ's victory over death and the grave. But we mustn't be too hasty.

What was Jesus, the Lamb of God, doing while He rested in the tomb on Saturday? The Scriptures declare that He descended into hell. Listen to I Peter 3:18–20a:

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey...

In the spirit, Christ descended into hell to proclaim His Good Friday sermon, "It is finished." Not much more can be said about what Jesus was doing on the Saturday before His resurrection. The Scriptures tell us (Psalm 16, Acts 2 & 13) that His body remained in the tomb but it did not suffer any corruption or decay. In the spirit, Jesus preached victory. He did not suffer. Perish the thought. Remember what He said on the cross, "It is finished!" The Good Friday suffering ended on Good Friday. Saturday is the time of preaching victory in anticipation of Sunday's forthcoming resurrection.

So tonight, we follow the pattern of Jesus' descent into hell. We rejoice in a time of victory preached and proclaimed from God's Word. This is the night of nights in which Jesus proclaimed His victory. And we also know, that sometime between Saturday evening and early Sunday morning, before dawn, Jesus, God's perfected Lamb rose from the dead, never to taste sin and death again.

Our proclamation of Jesus' victory was traced through the great redemptive acts of Scripture. Jesus took them all and elevated them to new heights. In the beginning, God the Holy Trinity created the heavens and the earth. Because of human sin and rebellion, it is passing away. But the new creation is established in the undying life and vitality of the resurrected Jesus. It can never face corruption or sorrow. In the new heavens and the new earth, the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together without fear of death and carnage for the old things have passed away. And we mustn't forget the promise of Jesus: I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also.

After man's heart was given over to evil upon evil, the Lord cleansed the world with the waters of Noah's flood. Those waters gave way to baptismal waters administered unto salvation in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Church of Jesus Christ is now the new ark of salvation. All who enter through the new birth of water and spirit are saved unto eternal life. Now Christ's people are justified in the Father's sight and made temples of the Holy Spirit.

After Egypt had been destroyed by 10 plagues executed through the Lord's mighty right hand, Pharaoh's army pursued Israel in order to wreck vengeance through death, slaughter, and re-enslavement. The Lord blew upon the waters of the Red Sea and

divided them so that Israel could cross through in safety on dry land. Pharaoh's army attempted to follow the same path only to be destroyed in the waters of judgment. Now, the Holy Spirit blows upon our baptismal waters thus destroying our old, fallen nature and bringing to life our new, redeemed nature that is created after the image of Jesus. In baptism, we follow Jesus and have passed from death to life.

The prophets of old, including Zephaniah looked forward to a day when the Lord Himself would rejoice over His redeemed people and gather them together in festive celebration. Now that Jesus has proclaimed "It is finished", God the Holy Trinity and all the hosts of heaven rejoice when we repent and return back to the Father's love. Every Lord's Supper, Jesus gathers His holy people to feed them with His festive food: His body and blood given and shed so that we might share in His forgiveness, life, and salvation. When Jesus returns again, He shall gather, once and for all, His beloved people. The marriage feast of the Lamb shall continue into the ages of ages.

The three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, went through the fiery furnace in defiance of the king's edict and in fear and trust of God's protection. They signaled the hope that all of God's people have in the resurrection of the just. God will deliver His people – from death, through death, in spite of death. It makes no difference to God's saints. Jesus will deliver His people for He has paved the way unto victory. And bring them to their eternal inheritance with resurrection joy and glory.

We may not have that original Holy Saturday sermon Jesus preached to the spirits held in prison. But we have His finished work of love, salvation, and grace. Roman guards and Roman seals could not keep our Lord in His borrowed tomb. Our Lord did not stay buried. His tomb was borrowed, and only for a short while at that! Death is defeated. Sin and Satan fell victim to our Lord's triumph. All that Jesus is and does, He gives to us. Glory be to Jesus! The living King of kings and Lord of lords!

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.