

Sermon Easter 2 2021

April 11, 2021

John 21:19-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” The doors were locked. Why? For fear of the Jews. The doors were locked for fear. Put yourself in their shoes. Of what were they afraid? They were afraid that the people who had crucified Jesus would come and attack them and harm them and kill them too. They were afraid because it appeared that their hope in Jesus was misplaced. They were afraid because it looked like the teachings against Jesus were going to win out. They were afraid because it looked like death had the final word over Jesus. This Jesus who had called Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life, death at the hands of this crowd had appeared to have won. And so they were afraid. They were afraid of death. They were afraid of the death of their church. They were afraid of the death of their culture. They were afraid of death to their bodies. They were afraid of death.

And as we see them alone in that room, we can understand that they're not alone, are they? We, too, fear death. Don't we? Some of us fear death in that we fear what's beyond this life, and what it will be like when we stand before the Lord. I've certainly had those moments where my mortality struck me, and I feared. I feared because I reflected on all that I'm called to by my Lord, and how I haven't done it. There is a real fear there for many of us.

Some of us maybe aren't afraid of actually dying, but are afraid of the pain that could come beforehand. If you've ever been with someone going through the process of dying, it's very hard. If you see the pain they're enduring, you can see their discomfort and frustration. You maybe know the sleeplessness as they can't rest. And there is a real fear to experience that firsthand. Or even if it's not pain that comes immediately before death. All pain is a manifestation of death in some way. As the world has fallen into sin and death has entered into the world with it, death manifests itself in various and sundry ways. Pain is one of those ways, illness is one of those ways, suffering is one of those ways. And some of us fear all of those. We fear death.

Some of us fear that pain and bodily death not so much for themselves, but for their loved ones. In the midst of the pandemic, many people have expressed not their own fear of getting the coronavirus, but the fear that they might get it and transmit it to a loved one. They fear, then, that the loved one might suffer from it or die. There is a fear there.

Or some of us look around at the world and we see the crumbling of the beauty of Western Culture. We fear the death of that culture, of a way of life that has brought so much value to so many people. It's not perfect, but no way ever can be in this world. But it seems fleeting, and the consequence could easily be extremely harmful and destructive. And so, there is fear of the death of the culture.

And along with it, some of fear the death of the Church. We look around at how many people used to line our pews. We see how many churches had to be established because there was such a great need for new congregations and a great need for more pastors. But now it's the opposite. Now you see congregations closing left and right. You see pastors having to serve two or three congregations because those congregations can't afford their own pastor. And you see the effect this has on people altogether. There is a fleeing from the faith, and it seems to be increasing in its volume. If it keeps on this way, the Church could die. We fear death.

We fear death, and to be fair, there's some appropriateness to fearing death. Death isn't what God wanted for the world when He created it. Death is called an enemy by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. On last Sunday, we heard the reading from Isaiah which called death the **"covering cast over all peoples, the veil spread over all nations."** Death isn't good. So it's understandable that we fear death, just like those disciples feared death. But yet, what do we hear Jesus saying to them? **"Peace be with you."** "You who fear, who fear death, peace be with you." How could they have peace? How could this Jesus speak peace? Because He had been raised from the dead. And being raised from the dead meant what about death? It meant that death had been overcome. It meant that death had become a defeated enemy, death no longer had power. It meant that death had met its death, and now it has become a servant to the One who has mastery over it. That's the peace that this Jesus could speak.

As Jesus had been crucified for sin, the cause of death had been forgiven, and He overcame that enemy of death. So, Christians, that peace be with you. Don't be afraid of death. Don't be afraid of the death of your body. Don't be afraid of the death of the Church. Don't be afraid of the death of the culture. Don't be afraid of the death.

Now as I say that, what thoughts are running through your mind? “Easy to say, Pastor! How should I not?” But as I say that, if I could take a second and apply Law and Gospel to this—you know those old trusty Lutheran words, Law and Gospel. The Law telling us what we are to do and how we deserve condemnation and hell from God because we haven’t done it. The Gospel telling us what God has done for you in Christ, that He has forgiven your sins, and won for you life and salvation in Him. Why do we respond that way? Because we hear it as Law. You hear it as me telling you to do something. You hear it in the same vein as the First Commandment—which is where this falls. Think about that commandment. *What is the First Commandment? You shall have no other gods. And what does mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.* So, on the one hand we think, “I can’t do this!” Like I said, “How should I not?!” But I don’t want you to hear this that way. Of course, ultimately I can’t control how you hear it, but I want you to hear it as an invitation of the Gospel. Trust in Jesus, don’t be afraid of death.

You see, there is Gospel here. Trust and believe in Him. Trust and believe in the fact that He has overcome death. Trust and believe in the fact that if your body dies, it will be raised again by Him on the Last Day to eternal glory. That’s His promise to you in your baptism. You were buried with Him into death—you already died!—and were raised in His resurrection. And that resurrection will be to live with Him, where there will be no more death. Don’t be afraid of the death of this Culture. Christ sits at the Right Hand of God the Father. He reigns there. If what we call Western Culture burns to the ground, He can raise up some other shell equally or even more suitable for carrying the message of His Word to the coming generations. He got it to us, and He’ll keep it going. In the same way, don’t fear the death of the Church. Christ will sustain it. It’s never been up to you to do it anyway. He is the One who, in fact, has promised that the gates of hell will never prevail against it. Don’t be afraid of this death.

Now, as I preach that Gospel, it’s interesting how there is often a response to this. As I proclaim the message that this relies upon God and not us, just as we proclaim that message that Christ has won our salvation, we haven’t earned it, we haven’t worked for it, we haven’t deserved it, as we say all of these things about God, what’s our natural human response? “But are you saying I shouldn’t do anything about this? That I should just let myself die, or I should just let the culture go to hell in a handbasket, or that I should just stop telling people about Jesus and let the Church fall by the wayside?”

Absolutely not! No, you have a call from God to love your neighbor as yourself. As you do that then, you ought to be faithful in telling your neighbor about Jesus. Not to get

points with God—after all, Jesus did all you need to be saved—but because your neighbor needs to hear of the love of God for him or her too. And you should voice the confession of the church in our culture because this creation is constructed in the frame of His will for it, in the structure of what His commands and Law tell us. It's best for the world if it lives according to that Law. And care for your neighbor. As we look at something like the pandemic, socially distance, understand how you can try to do things to prevent unintentionally contaminating them with the virus. And take care of your body—don't neglect your neighbor in the midst of it, don't neglect what is necessary for your faith—but do care for the gift that it is. You know, don't throw yourself in front of a figurative bus or harm yourself intentionally. All of that is instructed by God. And all of it can be hard to know how to do exactly in a way that is most faithful.

But when you take it seriously, it will eventually crush you in the fear that you haven't done enough. Why? Because you never can. It finally isn't in your ability and control. And so, God has desired you to know that He has done it for you. So, I'm not telling you to do nothing. The preaching of the Gospel is often mistaken for that. But what it does, what I am trying to do is to comfort you in the midst of your fears. What I'm trying to do is helping you to see that as Christ stood in the room with those weary and afraid disciples and spoke His peace to them, He wants you to know that peace too. If He didn't, He wouldn't have died for your sins. He wouldn't have been raised defeating death for you. He wouldn't give His body and His blood for you to eat and drink. If He didn't, He wouldn't have given you a pastor to proclaim all of this into your hearing. If He didn't, He wouldn't have given John to write down what we heard this morning.

And think about those words that John wrote. **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** Jesus gave John that you would believe. Jesus gave John that you would hear of His work of overcoming death for you. And He overcame death for you so that by believing, by fearing, loving, and trusting in Him above all things, you would have life in His Name. Not by your work of believing, but by His work on the cross, proclaimed into your ears, poured over your body in baptism, and fed to you in His Holy Supper creating faith in your heart in the knowledge of His victory, His trustworthiness, and His resurrection life for you. Amen.