May 24th, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

This Sunday is the 43rd day of Easter.

Last Thursday, on the 40th day of Easter, the Ascension of Our Lord is remembered in the calendar of the church. Next Sunday, on the 50th day of Easter, we gather with the disciples in the upper room, waiting for the Spirit to transform the church around the world. In today’s gospel Jesus prays for his followers and for their mission in his name. And in the midst of religious, social, and economic divisions, we seek the unity that Jesus had with his Father. Made one in baptism, we live our faith through the course of all the circumstances of the world – including the one we are living through right now. In the oneness of baptism that continues to bring us together across all distances, we can remain eager for the unity that God intends for the whole human family.

***Let Us Be Gathered***

**Song**

Our gathering song today is “In Christ There Is No East or West” (ELW #650) Organist Robert Morehead leads us from Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Vienna, Virginia – one of our sister congregations in the ELCA. Robert helpfully provides some very interesting background information about our gathering hymn and how, even musically, it represent the breaking down of walls. If you want to hear about the song, click the video link here: <https://youtu.be/If9-AA72ECM>.

If you’d rather skip the background and jump straight to the music, use this link: <https://youtu.be/If9-AA72ECM?t=245>

**Prayer of the Day**

Let us pray.

O God of glory, your Son Jesus Christ suffered for us and ascended to your right hand.
Unite us with Christ and each other in suffering and in joy,
that all the world may be drawn into your bountiful presence,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.

***Let Us Hear God’s Word***

*A reading from Acts:*

   6When [the apostles] had come together, they asked [Jesus], “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”
  12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1)

*The Word of the Lord.*

*Thanks be to God.*

*A reading from the Psalms:*

 1Let God arise, and let God’s enemies be scattered;
  let those who hate God flee.
 2As smoke is driven away, so you should drive them away;
  as the wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.
 3But let the righteous be glad and rejoice before God;
  let them also be merry and joyful.
 4Sing to God, sing praises to God’s name; exalt the one who rides the clouds;
  I Am is that name, rejoice before God!
 5In your holy habitation, O God,
  you are a father to orphans, defender of widows;
 6you give the solitary a home and bring forth prisoners into freedom;
  but the rebels shall live in desert places.
 7O God, when you went forth before your people,
  when you marched through the wilderness,
 8the earth quaked, and the skies poured down rain, at the presence of God, the God of Sinai,
  at the presence of God, the God of Israel.
 9You sent a bountiful rain, O God;
  you restored your inheritance when it languished.
 10Your people found their home in it;
  in your goodness, O God, you have made provision for the poor.
 32Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth;
  sing praises to the Lord.
 33You ride in the heavens, O God, in the ancient heavens;
  you send forth your voice, your mighty voice.
 34Ascribe power to God,
  whose majesty is over Israel; whose strength is in the skies.
 35How wonderful you are in your holy places, O God of Israel,
  giving strength and power to your people! Blessed be God! (Psalm 68)

*A reading from First Peter:*

   12Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. 14If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.
 5:6Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 10And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. 11To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4-5)

*Word of God. Word of life.*

*Thanks be to God.*

*The holy gospel according to John.*

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

  1After Jesus had spoken these words [to his disciples], he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, 2since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. 5So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.
  6“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” (John 17)

*The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.*

**Reflection on the Readings**

The reading from First Peter really hits the target today. Right from the opening verse, it seems like Peter might have been writing to our current pandemic-stricken world:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

I am no longer surprised when I see unreasoned and obstinate resistance to face masks. The ordeal of this new disease burns on like worst kind of fire. More than 339,026 dead. More than 5,260,624 infected. Quite likely far, far more than show up in official counts. And selfish politicians with no humility test churches with unhealthy propositions and sloganeering. Yes, indeed, something strange is happening to us.

Peter goes on to acknowledge the suffering that is taking place among God’s people. For the first community to which Peter wrote, suffering may have looked like being mocked in the wider public. It may have been isolation from families due to their decisions to join the church. It may have been outright persecution under the rule of the government.

All of those themes of suffering are ones that continue in our world. And, of course, the church and the world have experienced even more types of suffering: war, terrorism, hate, genocide, crime, natural disaster, revolution, and racism are just a few. And, yes, there has also been suffering from pestilence, disease, and pandemics.

During the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919 that resulted in 50-100 million deaths, church communities around the country and around the world suffered in similar ways to our own day as many church buildings were closed for months. Christians were encouraged to engage in “home worship” and “read sermons in newspapers.” In some cities and places, church officials tried to bargain ways to hold in-person worship by offering to “have their edifices fumigated between meetings, cut the services to 45 minutes, employ special ushers, who would eject persons who coughed or sneezed, and to require all worshipers entering a church to wear masks.” The descriptions of the church’s struggles no longer seem foreign and unfamiliar – like something from 100 years ago.

During the Black Death Plague of the 1300s and following centuries, suffering was immense and immeasurable. As many as one-half to two-thirds of the people in various regions across Europe and Asia died from the disease. Churches closed their doors to in-person worship then, too, for extended periods of time. It was during one of the later spikes of this same disease, in 1527, that Martin Luther wrote his now famous pamphlet on “Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague.” In his writing, Luther offered advice that is still worth our attention. Here are just a few of the things he observed:

* “He who has contracted the disease and recovered should keep away from others and not admit them into his presence unless it be necessary.”
* “If some are too panicky and desert their neighbors in their plight, and if some are so foolish as not to take precautions but aggravate the contagion, then the devil has a heyday and many will die.”
* “Some are even worse than that. They keep it secret that they have the disease and go among others in the belief that by contaminating and poisoning others they can rid themselves of the plague and so recover.”
* “I have been told that some are so incredibly vicious that they circulate among people and enter homes because they are sorry that the plague has not reached that far and wish to carry it in, as though it were a prank like putting lice into fur garments or flies into someone’s living room.”

Instead of such irresponsible deeds, Luther commended people to saner courses of action. He advised, “Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body?”

Luther wasn’t quoting from First Peter here, but he nevertheless brings us back to the fiery ordeal that Peter references and the sense of suffering that was present in the world.

For Peter, the fiery ordeal of such suffering was bearable because it shrinks to nothing in comparison to God’s salvations and God’s grace. Peter writes, “God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever.” This grace of God isn’t just enough to make it bearable. It’s everything. It is our protection against evil and it is forever. Amen. (Remember, “Amen” is variation on the word for “truth” and a short-hand way of saying beginning, middle, and end.)

Peter packs his letter to the church, and today’s passage, with solid instruction on how to live out the vocation of God’s new people in the midst of a world that suffers. We should refrain from obvious transgressions such as murder, theft, and miscellaneous wrong-doing. We should vest our hopes in God alone, but not to the exclusion of serving others; rather, we should humbly and eagerly seek opportunities to do good.”

What does this “doing good” look like during a pandemic or a plague? Luther described it in this way: “I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.”

I know it seems like it has been among us a long time now, but the COVID-19 disease is not yet in our past. It is still very active and very dangerous. Local cases continue to proliferate in our region. In the past week alone, 21 new cases were identified right in our local Joplin region. The week ahead will bring more. It is not yet time to let down care and caution for the health of our community. People are still getting sick. People are still dying. Luther’s instructions still apply to our world.

Keep washing your hands. Keep wearing your face masks. Keep asking, “Is it necessary that I go out? Am I needed here?” Be responsible to the community to which you belong. Be responsible to your calling as a child of God. It’s not a matter of protecting yourself or your own choices; it’s a matter of not infecting others in case you are a carrier of the disease and don’t yet know it. It’s a matter of not being negligent. It’s a matter of not being selfish. To do otherwise is to step away from God’s protection and the Christian humility in which we are invited to live as a result of God’s grace.

At the end of today’s gospel reading, Jesus prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Perhaps Luther had that verse in mind when he wrote the prayerful words, “I shall ask God mercifully to protect us.” Like Luther, we should trust in the promise of God’s protection. It is this protection that continues to join us across distance, join us in the face of ongoing suffering and exhaustion, join us in continuing ministry, join us in unselfish acts of humble mission, join us in responsibility to neighbor and community, join us as one body in Christ.

With the protection of God’s salvation assured by Jesus, we can find faith to continue in the trust and hope that we are not on our own. We are claimed by God. “Your are mine,” is how Jesus says. Under that protection, God will be with us, Jesus will be leading us, and the Holy Spirit will be at our side. And we will be gathered not just “again,” but entirely anew! Alleluia!

**Hymn of the Day**

Our hymn of the day this week is “You Are Mine” (ELW #581). The hymn echoes Jesus’ gospel promise for today: “I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine.”

One of the families from another of our sister ELCA congregation – St. Paul Lutheran Church in Edison, New Jersey – leads us in singing today. Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/JTpBJRxZbms>

**Prayers of Intercession**

On this seventh Sunday of Easter, we gather in our homes and yet together as one, praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need. Our response to each petition is, “Your mercy is great.”

*A brief silence.*

In this time of troubling separation, we pray to you, triune God, for the unity of your churches. Bind us together in the truth of your gospel. Make us witnesses of your mysterious might. As you blessed the early disciples for their unfolding ministry, bless those who lead and serve our local congregation.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

Nurture the life of your creation. Support those who explore the mysteries of your universe. We praise you for Nicholas Copernicus, whom we commemorate today, and for all the scientists who have enriched our understanding of creation. Help all online teachers to instruct our children in the ways of nature.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

As we prepare for Memorial Day, we pray for peace around the world. Protect all soldiers, and assure them of your never-failing strength. Shield the vulnerable who live in paths of violence. We pray especially for the people of Afghanistan and Syria.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

Come to the aid of all who suffer. We pray for those who are laden with grief, overwhelmed by anxiety, or struggling without medical care. Uphold all health-care workers who attend to coronavirus patients. Comfort all families and friends who cannot embrace their loved ones at the time of death. We give into your care all the sick, especially Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, Marlene, and all those we name before you now.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

Again we pray: give the world a vaccine.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

Grant your oneness to humankind, so marked by isolation and division. Bring harmony to families, rival gangs, distraught citizens, racial groupings, and members of our legislatures. Give to each individual a wholeness that is birthed in you.  Make us one, as you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are one.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

Make us steadfast in the faith, and graciously receive our personal petitions:

*A longer time of silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

To know you is to have eternal life. We praise you for the lives of all who have died in the faith and who now live in you. At the end, bring us with all your saints into your presence.

*A brief silence.*

God of unity, hear us: Your mercy is great.

With bold confidence in your love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God of our past, our present, and our future, we place all for whom we pray into your circle of love, now and forever.
Amen.

Please continue to remember and support the ongoing ministries of our church during this time. In the breaking of familiar routines and patterns, out sense of time is easily lost, but the mission of the church continues. The month of May is nearly over. If you are able to support the ministry of our congregation, our Synod, and the ELCA, please send your offering to Peace Lutheran Church, 3100 N St Louis Ave, Joplin MO 64801.

**Offering Prayer**

Merciful God,
our ordinary gifts seem small,
but you make of them an abundance,
just as you do with our lives.
Feed us again at your table
for service in your name,
in the strength of the risen Christ.
**Amen.**

***Let Us Be Sent in Service***

**Song**

“Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (ELW #656) is our sending song this week. Bryan Odeen from Our Savior Lutheran Church in Osage, Iowa, is back this week to lead our singing.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/GfxZAb0lFzE?t=76>.

**Lord’s Prayer**

Let us pray.

*A brief silence is kept before the prayer.*

Almighty God, you give us the joy of celebrating our Lord’s resurrection. Give us also the joys of life in your service, and bring us at last to the full joy of life eternal, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

**Blessing**

The God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The God of all grace  ☩ bless us now and forever. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

***For the Week Ahead***

As we move through the last days of the Easter season in the coming week and toward the Day of Pentecost, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect people everywhere with terrible impact on all. As scientists, medical professionals, and people willing to test potential new vaccines do their work, and as governments and politicians willing to lead with positive action take steps to build factories and distribution channels in preparation for the day when a vaccine will be ready, we – the baptized children of God – continue to pray for God’s Holy Spirit to bring healing throughout this world. Even though we are tired and exhausted, may those prayers bring us to positions of advocacy and enduring support for the work still ahead.

Led by the assembly of St. Mark Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, Canada, let this song for the healing of the nations be with you in your prayers this week: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKNkPInsa_w>