

**John 20:19-31**

What would you think of a husband who, on the night of his wedding, locked himself, on purpose, inside the bathroom and refused to come out? Wouldn't you wonder if he really understood the concept of marriage? You might question whether or not he had spoken his vows honestly and truthfully earlier that day; for had he been sincere he would not be hiding in fear from his wife; he would desire to be with her. Jesus' disciples were doing that very thing on Easter evening. Earlier that day they heard the glorious message that Christ had risen from the dead. But now, toward nightfall, they locked themselves in. Hadn't the good news of the resurrection meant anything to them? It seems like that joyful news had fallen upon deaf ears. Nothing really had changed. Jesus was alive, but they were cowering in fear. Didn't they understand the concept of the Christian Faith?

We find a similar reaction to Easter in our day. Why is it that churches are full on Easter Sunday, but one week later the pews are half empty? It should be the other way around. Upon hearing the good news of Christ's resurrection, worshippers should have the desire to come back again and again to hear, and be with, the Risen Lord. If Easter means something to us, why would we not want to show that with our lives? It seems that we are not grasping the concept of what it means to be a Christian. The Christian Faith is about Christ; about hearing His Word of Life and receiving His body and blood...faithfully. It's about living the life to which we were called in our baptism—doing good works, supporting the pure preaching of the Word of God, being committed to Christ and His Church.

Where is that commitment here? Where is that support here? Where is that faithfulness here? Shamefully, what we see here in Augusta, Missouri is the same thing we see in our text: Jesus' disciples living as if there never was an Easter; living in the shadows of life; not willing to commit themselves to the Risen Lord because they are all wrapped up in their own fears and hang-ups.

A church sign in Washington, Missouri has recently displayed this message: "A church alive is worth the drive." If that sign is true then no wonder our church isn't growing. Why would anyone want to drive, at \$3.19 for a gallon of gas, to a little church where the pastor and members are only half-way committed? Where the pastor and members are not willing to give what it takes to pay the bills? Where faithfulness and loyalty to God's Word appears to be on the way out the door?

That same church sign would have shamed the disciples on Easter evening, for their little gathering was dead as a doornail. What visitor would have knocked on the door where they had locked themselves in and pleaded, "Can I join this congregation?" Thankfully Jesus pays no attention to such ridiculous church signs. He came to them, and it wasn't because they were alive, it's because they were dead. For Jesus, it was worth the "drive" to suddenly appear in the midst of that little group of disciples. He knew they were afraid of their own shadows. He knew how dead they were within their hearts. That's why He came. He came to give them life. "Peace be with you," He said. He had not come to condemn them. He was not there to scold them. He had come to forgive them.

Friends, that's why Jesus is here today. You heard the accusing Law, now hear the good news. Jesus is here in your midst. He is here just as He was there with His disciples on Easter evening. And the same word that He gave to them He gives to you today. "Peace be

with you.” He forgives you. He is not here to condemn you for how you have lived. He is not here to punish you for being less than loyal to Him; for being less than faithful; less than committed. The only word He gives you—the word that He sends with you as you leave this place—is the clear word of pardon and peace. God is at peace with you. He harbors no anger toward you.

Look at your hands. Do you see any nail marks there? No, you don’t. The nail marks are in the hands of Jesus. He was crucified for you. He was nailed to a cross for you. He suffered hell for you. He took the punishment that you deserved for your sins. Today, here in this place, because Christ is here for you—the same Jesus who died for you—He gives you life and salvation.

Armed with such pardon and peace, are you ready to take on the world? Ready to face your fears? Are you ready to be a loyal, committed disciple of Jesus? One week later those disciples were right back behind their locked doors. It’s true. Even after seeing the nail marks in Jesus’ hands and hearing His word of forgiveness, those disciples crawled back into their shell.

What’s their problem? The same as ours, isn’t it? Perhaps we leave this place on Sundays feeling like we’re really getting ahead. We feel good about ourself. We feel more committed, more loyal. But through the week we fall back. Our weaknesses show up. Our sinful flesh takes over. By the next Sunday we’re back to where we started.

We need Jesus. And that’s why He comes to us again. The following Sunday He appeared again to His disciples, and again He did not condemn them. His words were not, “What! You’re here again behind locked doors? What’s the matter with you!” No...rather, from His mouth came the words, “Peace be with you.” And every week after that as His disciples would get together, not always behind locked doors, but to hear His preached Word and receive His body and blood, Christ’s word of peace gave them strength.

A church where Christ Jesus is faithfully preached is worth the drive. Now that’s a sign that speaks the truth. You and I may be the weakest sinners on earth. We may appear here to be dead as that little group behind locked doors. Our commitment level may be pretty low. Do not lose hope. All is well, for Jesus is here. He is here in the pure preaching of His Word—His word of peace and pardon. He is here in His blessed Sacraments. He is here for you. And where Christ is, there is peace with God; there is forgiveness, and life, and salvation; there is the door into heaven.

I don’t care what the world thinks of Christ Lutheran Church, nor should you. It doesn’t matter how dead or alive we appear to be. What matters is Christ. He is the reason you make the drive. He is the reason you come back again and again. He forgives you. That’s what the Christian Faith is all about. Did the disciples finally get it? Yes, but it took a while. It took God working in their hearts and lives. Rejoice, friend. Christ is risen. He is here for you. It is God who is at work in you who believe. Amen.