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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Second Sunday of Easter – Quasimodo Geniti

April 7, 2024

Text: Ezekiel 37:1–14; John 20:19–31

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.

The Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 37 is one of the most dramatic prophetic visions in the Bible. The nation of Israel was in shambles. The northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrian empire in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah was completely conquered in 586 B.C. Solomon's Temple, which had stood as the icon of God's presence among His people for over 400 years, had been plundered of all valuables and burned to the ground by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. Judah's nobility, tradesmen, and prophets were carried off into Babylon. By all appearances, the nation of Israel was destroyed with no hope of rising again.

But then the Lord gave Ezekiel, a captive himself in Babylon, the vision recorded in chapter 37. This chapter is a prophetic vision of Israel's restoration; her resurrection from the dead. The Valley of Dry Bones became a Valley of living, resurrected souls. The Jews in Babylon eventually returned to Judea and Jerusalem. God's people had been brought back from the dead.

But this was only an initial fulfilment. On Easter morning, more than 500 years later, the resurrected Jesus burst open the seal of the grave. Matthew's gospel records that many saints were also raised from the dead and seen by some in Jerusalem on Easter morning (Matt. 27:52-53). Ezekiel's Vision of the dead rising to life is only made possible in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Listen to Ezekiel's description of Easter morning, "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live,

and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord” (Ez. 37:13-14).

The Lord Jesus is the firstfruit from the dead. His death to atone for the sins of all sinners and His resurrection from the dead is the fountain and source of all saving faith in God the Father. Christian believers enjoy new life in the Holy Spirit in and through the crucified and resurrected Jesus. The promise and hope we have to rise again from the dead on the Last Day is only based upon Jesus’ death and resurrection. That dramatic vision of the Valley of Dry bones ought to fill our hearts and souls with wonder and awe. Let that inspired prophecy fill your imagination as you hear and consider Christ’s gospel ministry in His Church. In this very congregation.

To that New Testament, gospel ministry of bringing life to dry, dead souls, let us give attention, from John 20. On that first Easter evening, the disciples were gathered together under the cover of darkness in fear of the Jews (vs. 19). Their world had come crashing down around them when Jesus was betrayed, flogged, and crucified to death. Fear can create monsters from nothing and everything. It paralyzes the stoutest of hearts.

Into this despair and guilt, Jesus appeared suddenly, “Peace be with you” (vs. 19). There could not have been a more needed, kindlier word. And so that the disciples might know that true, divine peace is established only upon Jesus’ death and resurrection, He shows the disciples His hands and side. This *is* the crucified Jesus risen from the dead. Sin, death, the grave, and fear are conquered. Peace is given so that “all troubled, frightened, and fearful hearts ... may hope for all good things and every kindness from (Jesus)” (Luther).

Saints of God, Ezekiel’s prophecy and that first Easter evening teaches us what you should expect to receive from Jesus: love, kindness, salvation, and new life in the Spirit. We learn to call upon Him in all perils of body and soul and during all assaults on our faith. In the hour of trouble, in the moment of greatest need, the peace-giving, risen Lord Jesus calls you to Himself, to strengthen you, to uplift you, to give you His peace.

And yet we learn more about this risen Savior. Jesus sends His disciples to proclaim His message of peace to the world. Listen again to Jesus as He establishes the gospel ministry of peace in vs. 21–23, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when (Jesus) had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.’” This is where Ezekiel’s prophecy comes into sharper focus. The giving of the Spirit to bring life to dry, dead souls born in sin and held in bondage to the demonic kingdom of darkness.

This risen Lord is so concerned that sinners receive real, powerful words of peace that He commissions His Church’s ministers to speak with His authority by the grace of the Spirit. As Jesus forgave sinners during His earthly ministry so sinners today receive peace and forgiveness until the end of time through His apostolic ministry. “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.” Dear saints, your sins are forgiven and Christ’s peace is given to you.

And yet, Christ also authorizes His Church to withhold forgiveness. But only when unbelief borne out of a refusal to repent and believe the gospel is openly manifested. Then the Church is to withhold peace and forgiveness. Anyone who does not believe in Jesus or any Christian who refuses to turn from their sin in repentance and faith, is to hear that their sins are not forgiven. Forgiveness is withheld only for the purpose of leading the sinner back to repentance and faith.

Real words of peace are spoken through flesh and blood men authorized to speak in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. “It is a great and excellent thing for the mouth of every honest preacher to be Christ’s mouth, and his word of forgiveness to be Christ’s word of forgiveness” (Luther). The great heritage of Christ’s Church is the preaching of God’s Word of peace and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Real words with real authority to give forgiveness; new life in the Spirit is possible as dead souls are made alive resulting in real Christian fruits of obedience, virtue, and love.

Thomas, however, was not present when Jesus appeared on Easter evening (vs. 24). In Thomas, we see the Gospel ministry at work. During the week after Jesus' first appearance, the disciples found Thomas and told him they had seen Jesus alive and heard His word of peace; the Lord had shown them His crucifixion scars (vs. 25).

But Thomas, that good, honest Thomas, saw his Master die. "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (vs. 25). They preached the death and resurrection of Jesus! On the following Sunday, Jesus appears again and calls Thomas to Himself so that He might bring him out of doubt and fear into faith and peace. And our Lord speaks the same word of peace to Thomas that He did to the other disciples the week before, "Peace be with you" (vs. 26). That's the message we still preach to this day! Such is the gospel ministry of this congregation in all levels. Giving people Christ's peace so that they may rise to live in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus brought Thomas back into the safety of faith and trust. "My Lord and my God!" (vs. 28). Those words form the heart and core of our Christian faith to this day. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, our dead, dry souls have been made alive through faith in Jesus. We sing, pray, live, and die confessing, "Jesus is Lord." In this great hope, we know that our mortal bodies will be raised from the dead. For Jesus Himself, to borrow Ezekiel's words, "will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people." Even death itself cannot harm us. Dear Christian saints, be filled with Christ's Spirit. The peace of Jesus be with you.

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.