

St. John's Lutheran Church
March 30, 2008

"Death Has Lost It's Power!"
Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our crucified and risen Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. And a very blessed Easter to you and to yours from the entire family of believers in Christ, here at St. John's Church. Amen.

I hope you had a good Easter! Wherever you were and whatever you did, I hope you had a good Easter. It was the opinion of St. John's Council, meeting the Monday evening after Easter that Easter was good at St. John's Church. The Easter message was lifted high, we had great music and the sacrament of Holy Communion was celebrated. It was a good Easter.

I hope whatever you did Easter afternoon and evening was good for you as well. The day for Debbie and me was relatively quiet. We had our youngest son, Corey with us in church and we took him out for an early afternoon Easter brunch. And then it was home for a great nap. Four or five weeks ago, when we first printed the Easter morning schedule, I included in that schedule, with my tongue firmly in my cheek, a scheduled 1:00 Easter afternoon nap. I thought I might get a few comments. In part, I wanted to see how many of you were reading our stuff! But the truth is that the scheduled Easter afternoon nap happened in the Helland house, and it happened with gusto.

Monday morning, the church office was closed, but most people went back to work. For most of the world, Easter was over. And it was time to get back to the routine. So it seems a little redundant this morning, perhaps, to look at the top of your bulletin and see that the name of the day today is "The Second Sunday of Easter". It may seem a little redundant this morning for us to be singing Easter songs. And it may seem a little redundant this morning that our readings have an Easter theme.

The fact is, of course, that Easter lasts for 50 days. There are seven Sundays of Easter followed by the Sunday of Easter that is the festival of Pentecost. So, technically, you can expect to hear Easter themes in our worship at least through the first Sunday in May and maybe even a little bit more on the next Sunday, the second Sunday in May, Mother's Day, the Festival of Pentecost.

And this ongoing emphasis on Easter has been understood in the history of the church to be a good thing. For that which is celebrated by the Church on Holy Week and Easter is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is too rich and powerful a theme to accent on one day only and then return to "normal church" if you will. So we will continue to celebrate Easter throughout April and the first part of May. It isn't all bad that we got such an early start on Easter in 2008! We have much celebrating yet to do!

This emphasis on the theme of Easter as the heart of Christian faith can be seen in many ways in the Bible. It can be seen in our first reading for this Second Sunday of Easter, from Acts, the second chapter. What is happening in this chapter of the Bible is that the very first Christian sermon is being preached. It is being preached by one of the disciples, Peter. And the very first Christian sermon turns out to be an Easter sermon, even though it is preached many months prior to the first anniversary of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

The verses of our first reading this morning actually only contain part of Peter's sermon. Peter's sermon is quite lengthy. But in this portion of the sermon, Peter runs through the points he wants to make quite quickly. First, he points out that the wonder of Jesus' ministry during his earthly life was well known. "Jesus of Nazareth," declares Peter "was a man attested, to those who knew of him, by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him, among them, as they themselves knew."

Secondly, Peter points out that this Jesus was handed over to the Jews according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge. And it is this second point that Peter drives home in much of the rest of the portion of the sermon that makes up our reading, by quoting part of Psalm 16 which was the Psalm we read this morning. This psalm is attributed to King David and speaks of not being abandoned to Hades, the place of the dead, and not being allowed to experience corruption. Peter sees in David's words a prophecy of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection which, at the time of David still waited way out in the future.

But it is Peter's way of making the point that Jesus' resurrection was no fluke. It was no accident. It was no random event. Even centuries before Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus' death and resurrection was God's plan. God knew that it was going to happen and God planned that it was going to happen.

And then, thirdly, Peter makes the point that Jesus was crucified. Jesus was killed. Jesus was betrayed.

And then, finally, Peter brings to a climax this portion of his sermon, proclaiming Jesus' resurrection

and the result of Jesus' resurrection. "God raised him up," declares Peter, "having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in death's power."

"It was impossible for him to be held in death's power." What are we to make of this climax to Peter's sermon? "It was impossible for him to be held in death's power." One possible conclusion we might draw is that the power of death is weak. And that it was impossible for Jesus to be held in death's power because the power of death is weak.

But most of us would say that from personal experience we know this not to be true. The power of death is, in fact very strong. The first really important person in my life to die was Debbie's dad. And I can still remember standing at his open casket and looking at him and thinking that I could see him take a breath. My desire for him not to be dead was so strong that my eyes and brain seemed to make him alive. But he wasn't alive. He was dead. The fact that he was dead and was not going to return to earthly life became more and more of a reality to me as life went on without him. Death had taken him. There was no denying the power of death.

What, then, of Peter's proclamation of Jesus, "It was impossible for him to be held in death's power?" The meaning is, of course, that there is yet a greater power. The reason it was impossible for Jesus to be held in death's power is because God's power is greater yet. God's power is even greater than the power of death, although the power of death is, except for the power of God, the greatest power there is in this earthly life.

In Jesus' death and resurrection, we are to understand, there was a great battle between two great powers. On the one hand there was the power of death. And on the other hand there was the power of God. And in the sun that refused to shine and the earthquake that shook the earth and the participation of angels, we are to understand that the truth of Easter is that the power of God has won the victory in Christ, over the power of death.

And the church came to believe that this victory was not a victory reserved for Christ alone. But rather, through Christ, this victory is extended to all who would believe. Such that even though it may seem that the power of death has its way in this earthly life, the fact is that we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the live everlasting. For, in Christ, it is true also for you and for me: "It is impossible for us to be held in death's power." Amen.