



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

5th Sunday of Easter: May 10, 2020

Sermon Title: "The Way"

Gospel Text: John 14:1-14

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! But if that's true, why do we all feel so lousy, so weary, so tired, and so frustrated? The short answer of course is that we're living in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. We *know* that quarantine is giving us *cabin fever*. We *worry* that shopping might give us a *fatal virus*. Some days it doesn't really feel like we're in the Easter season. Some days it feels like we're stuck in a perpetual Lent, on a long and dismal walk to a lonely cross.

And so I guess it's fitting *this year*, in the middle of the Easter season, that our assigned Gospel lesson transports us back to the Last Supper, to a reading we're more accustomed to hearing at a funeral. It is indeed a most suitable text for a funeral, because in it Jesus promises that there *is* a place in heaven for our loved ones, and that one day there will be a place for *us* as well. Jesus shared that blessed assurance with his disciples on their last night together. He was preparing them for the terrifying and confusing events that were about to unfold. He needed them to know that his crucifixion would not be the end of *his* story or *theirs*.

I don't worry about what will happen when I die. I *cling* to Christ, *hope* in Christ, and *trust* in Christ. *Solely* by the grace of God, I believe my future in heaven is secure, and I *believe* yours is too. But I wonder, as the disciples wondered, and as you wonder, how we're supposed to live until that day when we close our eyes for the very last time and Jesus calls us home to our heavenly dwelling. As Christians, what is our *path* in this lifetime? As followers of Jesus Christ, what is our *way* during our mortality?

This is sometimes a challenging question for Lutherans, because we quite rightly emphasize that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Our salvation is the work of Jesus. It's not something *we* earn. We *cannot* work our way to heaven. But in our zeal to guard against "works righteousness" we often lapse into a *passive* form of Christianity which makes no claims on us. Fundamental faith practices like praying, worshiping, serving, and giving become mere options. That brand of Christianity convinces us that we can sit back, relax, and pursue whatever pleasures we desire, because Jesus took care of everything.

Martin Luther addressed this in what I believe is one of the most important things he ever wrote. Listen carefully; it's just two short sentences. "A Christian is a perfectly free *lord* of all, subject to *none*. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful *servant* of all, subject to *all*."¹

Luther's *first* sentence celebrates the fact that we Christians have been freed from sin, death, and the devil by Jesus Christ. Likewise, we've been freed from the obligation to work

ourselves to heaven. By his grace, love, and mercy, our liberator, Jesus has made eternal life possible for us. And so, as Christians we are perfectly free lords of all, subject to none.

But while on this earth, how should we live? That's where Luther's *second* sentence comes into play. Freed from the burden of being our own savior, we have the time and liberty, just as we promise at baptism, "to care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."² Our salvation frees us to build a world based upon forgiveness and love, not hate and revenge; to reach out to one another in kindness, not fear; and to share with others out of a belief in God's abundance, not human scarcity. This freedom is one of the greatest blessings of being a Christian!

But what exactly does this look like? Sometimes I wish I had a checklist or formula. I feel like Thomas in our Gospel lesson, who blurted out what everyone was probably thinking: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas wanted a detailed turn-by-turn map. Instead, Jesus responded by saying: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." I think this confused the disciples even more. They, just like us, *want* to follow the Way and go where Jesus goes. But how do we do that if we don't know exactly *where* to go, *what* to do and *when* to do it?

After some more give-and-take with the disciples, Jesus finally boiled it all down to three words: "Believe in me." That *sounds* easy, but in reality *it isn't*. We live in a rational, knowledge-based world in which *believing* is an *intellectual undertaking*. We believe that Grace Lutheran exists because we can touch the walls. We believe in stuff we can see, smell, taste, touch, understand, explain, decode, and deconstruct.

But for Jesus, believing is not *understanding*. Believing is not *mastery*. And believing is not *perfection*. Instead, for Jesus, believing is *trusting, following, submitting, and surrendering*. That's a tall order for us, especially in this midst of this pandemic. In such chaotic times, we crave a little control. Submitting and surrendering to *anything* – science, the government, even Jesus – is not something we embrace. But trusting, following, submitting and surrendering need not be scary. It can be joyful. Let me explain with a story.

When I was in college I took some military science courses with the ROTC. It was a blast. We studied history, flew in helicopters, and even cross-country skied. But then came the rappelling tower. My task was to jump off a 300' foot tower and trust that a couple ropes would keep me alive. When it was my turn, the training officer strapped a harness on me, quickly adjusted the ropes, gave me a 20 second lesson, and shouted "jump!" It was a vulnerable moment. I had *no real idea what I was doing*. But I believed that *the officer* knew what *he was doing*. And so I trusted. I followed. I submitted. I surrendered. And I took that leap. Flying through the air and bouncing gently off the rappelling tower was one of the most marvelous and liberating experiences of my life. I couldn't wait to re-climb the tower so I could make that leap again.

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks us to make a similar leap of faith that's grounded not so much in our *intellect* but in our *heart*. He's calling us to trust that he has done the hard work of salvation for us so that we can follow his Way by focusing our lives on two simple things: loving

God and loving our neighbor. As I've said to you time-and-again, in the midst of this pandemic God has given us opportunities. Today's Gospel highlights the opportunity to obsess less about *our* appetites, wants, desires, and insecurities, and glory in the freedom, salvation, and security Jesus has given to us, a freedom we can use to love and serve our neighbors.

So is this where I give you specifics on *what* to do, *where* to go, and *when* to do it? No. The Spirit knows best of all. Simply ask God to make *you* the answer to someone's prayer. Countless people are lonely, scared, and frustrated. So seize this opportunity. Change direction. Trust Jesus and walk his Way of love and service. Love him by loving your neighbor.

Friends, I know this isn't easy. We've still got a long ways to go in this crisis, and some days are going to feel much more like Good Friday than Easter Sunday. Christians aren't immune from suffering, as Stephen's martyrdom in today's first lesson reminds us. Easter doesn't make the world safe. But Easter begins the process of healing a sin-sick world, one heart at a time, and Jesus, our Great Physician, is calling us to roll up our sleeves and participate in that work. This crisis won't last forever. But the love of Jesus *will!* So allow your heart to rejoice. Trust Jesus. And keep following the Way of Jesus, even when it seems stormy and visibility is limited. *You've been blessed!* Now go *be* a blessing. Amen.

Citations:

¹ The Freedom of a Christian (from Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings, Second Ed., 2005), p. 393.

² Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 228.