

EXPERIENCE YOUR “CHRIST IS ALIVE, HALLELUJAH” TODAY!

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Bethlehem Lutheran Church

St. Mark’s Lutheran Church

St. Timothy Lutheran Church

Hallandale, FL

Coral Gables, FL

Miami Gardens, FL

April 15, 2018 – 3rd Sunday of Easter

Children’s Message: *Last Words Spoken*

Object: a pair of mittens.

Scripture: Luke 24:35-48

Hymns: Pro: *All Heaven Declares* **Rec:** *Love Crucified Arose!*

This morning we’re going to talk about last-minute words. Do your parents ever give you last-minute advice or instructions? Just before you get out of the car to go into school, do your parents ever say, “*Behave and be good.*” Or, when you go to a friend’s house, do your parents ever say, “*Now, be nice while you are at your friend’s house.*” Or, when you are going to sing in the Christmas musical at church, might the last words your parents say to you be, “*Now, sing really loud.*” And, what is the last-minute thing that your parents say to you before you go to bed? “*I love you.*” Those are nice last words. We know that our Mommy’s or Daddy’s last-minute instructions are very important. They save these words for last because they want us to remember them.

Jesus said some very important last-minute words too that he wanted his disciples to remember. Just before Jesus went to heaven, he told his disciples 2 very important things: #1, that he is the savior of the whole world, and #2, that they needed to go out and tell people about him. Jesus said that it was their job to continue to believe in him with their whole heart and tell as many people about him as they could. Since these were Jesus’ very last words to his disciples, we know they are very important.

Jesus wants us also to believe in him with our whole heart and to tell others about him. So Jesus’ last words are just as important today as they were back years ago. Let’s remember this week to love Jesus and live for him every day. Amen.

DEAR LORD: Help us to always to believe your last-minute words to love you and tell others about you. Amen.

AND, MAY THE PEACE OF GOD WHICH PASSES ALL HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS THROUGH CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD, AMEN.

A little girl asked her mother 1 day, “*Mom, how did the human race appear?*” The mother answered, “*Well, 1st God made Adam and Eve and then they had children, and so on.*” Two days later the little girl asked her father the same question. The father answered, “*Many years ago there were monkeys from which the human race evolved.*” The confused girl returned to her mother and said, “*Mom, how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Dad said human beings developed from monkeys?*” The mother answered, “*Well, dear, it’s very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his side of the family.*” Well, today’s Gospel is about what we believe, but we’ll get to that in a minute.

There’s another wonderful story told about Pr. Spark’s grandmother whom she and the rest of the family called Ganny. Ganny lived in a tiny town in South Carolina, says Pr. Sparks, and when they’d go to visit, the aroma of all kinds of good things cooking would float through her screened-in porch and out into the yard: delicious Southern dishes like creamed corn, collard greens, and hopefully cornbread. She says “*hopefully, cornbread*” because the 1 thing Ganny could not cook was biscuits. Now, as some of you may know, this is a sin for a grandmother in the South to not be able to make good home-baked biscuits. Ganny, Rev. Sparks says, was just not a big believer in things like baking soda or baking powder. On those ominous days when she would decide to bake biscuits, she would open the door of her wood stove and pull out what looked like a tray of toasty hot shot-puts. Pr. Sparks’ uncle used to joke that if you dropped those biscuits on the floor, they would wake up the dead. Thus, the family gave Granny’s biscuits a nickname: resurrection biscuits. What else would you call biscuits that could wake the dead besides resurrection biscuits?

Obviously, it wasn’t one of Ganny’s “*resurrection biscuits*” that brought Jesus from the tomb that first Easter over 2000 years ago. It was the power of the living God, but, as we talked about last week, it was almost more than Jesus’ disciples and others who loved him could process. The disciples thought their journey with their Lord was over. They had seen him crucified and laid in a borrowed tomb. On the Sunday after his burial, however, the disciples began hearing reports that Jesus was alive. That morning some of the women had taken spices to his tomb to anoint his body. Strangely, they found the stone rolled away from his tomb. And, when they entered the tomb, they did not find Christ’s body. While they were standing there wondering about this, suddenly 2 men in shining white garments stood beside them. The frightened women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the 3rd day be raised again.’*” They remembered his words, but it was still quite incredible.

When they came back from the tomb, the women told the disciples and those who were with them what they had seen and heard. And, Luke reports, “*But, they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*” Was it a hoax? Perhaps it was some kind of ghost. Then, suddenly it happened as is told in our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus himself stood among them. The disciples were startled and frightened. Jesus said to them, “*Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your*

minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I me.” The response of the disciples is a sermon in itself. Luke tells us that *“they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement.”* In other words, it was simply too wonderful to be true. It was like an event that had never happened in human history. No wonder they had difficulty believing. Some persons still have that problem today. Many desperately want to believe but something holds them back. *“Look at my hands and my feet,”* says Christ. *“It is me...!”* Why do you suppose some of us have a problem believing that Christ has risen from the grave?

Do you suppose that some of us have difficulty believing that God really loves us that much - that God sent his Son to suffer and die and then became resurrected on our behalf? Some of us are more comfortable with an impersonal God who we might want to call him the First Cause of the universe, the Ground of Being, or the Source of life and Power, but we’re not prepared to receive him as our personal Lord and Savior. The idea of a God with nail prints in his hands and feet because of his great love for us is an idea we are not quite ready for. This concept was even difficult for people to believe back in the day. So many had the idea that the God of whom the prophets foretold was to be feared, God was to be obeyed, God was to be approached with trembling and awe. To think that God could be more loving than one’s own most loving parent was beyond their understanding. But, that’s the outrageous claim of our faith.

In trying to deal with the meaning of the cross on which Christ died, the early church came to understand that those nail prints in the hands and feet of should have been in our hands and feet. But, God so loved the world that he sent his own Son to bear the burden brought about by the iniquity of us all. The question is, do you believe that? Can you believe God really cares about you that much?

Bishop William Willimon tells of once visiting a man with only a couple of days left to live. He asked the man whether he was fearful. To Willimon’s surprise the man replied, *“Fear? No! I’m not fearful because of my faith in Jesus.”* The man continued, explaining, *“I look back over my life, all the mistakes I’ve made, all the times I’ve turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed and gotten lost. And, time and time again, he found a way to get to me and looked for me when I wasn’t looking for him. I don’t think he will let something like my dying defeat his love for me.”* There’s a man who knew how much God loves him. Can you believe God loves you that much? That’s one reason some people have difficulty believing in the resurrection: they have a problem believing that God really loves them that much.

There are others of us who have difficulty believing that life really goes on beyond the tomb. I like the way the Rev. Dennis Marquardt explains it. He says, *“Most people have a hard time believing in a resurrection because it just seems too incredible! But, only a couple hundred years ago if you had told your great, great, great, great grandfather that you could fly from New York City to Los Angeles in a little over 5 hours on a vehicle that weighed hundreds of thousands of pounds with over 300 people on board 5 miles high in sky, he would have laughed in your face; he could not believe this because it had never been done! If you told that same relative from a couple hundred years ago that men would walk on the moon, or that*

messages could be flashed to England or China in less than a second, or that a machine called a computer could do a billion math calculations in a matter of seconds or milliseconds, he or she would not believe it! We easily believe it because we take it for granted, having witnessed and even experienced these things over and over again...” Some day when we are resurrected with Christ, some of us will see how foolish we were not to have believed. So many reliable witnesses have reported what they saw on that Easter Sunday and for weeks after that. Yes, I get it - it sometimes must be too wonderful to believe that there is a world beyond this one - another existence in which that which dies here is resurrected to new life there. Yet, such a conviction is at the heart of our faith. I hope that in this Easter season you will at least entertain the possibility that this, the greatest news that the world has ever received, is worth investigating. And, not only acknowledge the possibility that it is true, but believe it is true, AMEN!

Some of us have difficulty accepting that **1) God loves us that much.** Others of us have difficulty accepting the reality that **2) life goes on beyond the grave.** But, 3^{rdly}, **and even more significantly, many of us do not want to deal with the implications of those two truths.** What does it mean if there really is a God who loves us without reservation? What would that really mean for our lives if life goes on beyond the grave? Respected theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, once put it this way, *“The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: **First**, it is a very unusual event. And, **second**, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”* Did you hear that? *“If you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”* That happened in the lives of those first disciples. Their lives were changed in a matter of days or a few weeks after their encounter with the risen Christ. From frightened and uncertain men marked by doubt and envy, they became apostles of great courage and self-giving. How about you? What difference has been made in your life seeing the hands and feet of the risen Christ in your life? That is the question put before you and me this morning. Have you encountered the risen Christ in your life experience? And, if you have, has it caused you to take more seriously your walk with this Lord we call our Savior from Galilee? Has it had some effect on the goals you have set for your life?

Those who have seen the hands and feet of the risen Christ and live their lives in the light of eternity never run out of a purpose for living. God really does love us that much. Life really does go on beyond the tomb. But, again, what is your response to those two great truths? *“See my hands and my feet...!”* For the Christian, the enheartening truth is that Christ defeated humankind’s last enemy and still lives, the conqueror over pain and sin and death. This leads the Christian to believe that evil does not have the last word, and that we will find unspeakable joy at the end of our journey with all that seems hostile to us in this lifetime but becomes so magnificent in the life that yet awaits us. Yes, sisters and brothers, God really does love you and me that much. Life really does go on beyond the grave. Know Jesus is alive and see how that belief can change your life – I truly mean how that belief can really change your life forever. Open your heart to God’s love and the good news of the Risen Lord, and experience *your “Christ is alive, hallelujah”* today, now, and forever more. Amen.

