

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (dual parish w/Immanuel, Burns, WY)

Maundy Thursday

April 1, 2021

Text: John 13:1–13; 31b–35

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Lenten devotion began on Ash Wednesday with ash smeared across our foreheads with the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Those are humbling words. Genesis records that God made man, the first Adam, from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Every human being conceived and born since bears the same nature as Adam, not pure spirits like the angels, but flesh and blood born from the earth as well as soul. For God breathed into Adam's nostrils and Adam became a living soul. Every human being, from the moment of his or her conception, is fearfully and wonderfully made, as Psalm 139:14 says. Body and soul you are. Enlivened dust that is body and flesh with an immortal soul. So, the next time you stand outside, look down to the ground and “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Both phrases tend to trouble us human beings. Human beings, the pinnacle of God's creative work, find their origins in the dust of the ground. Hardly the exalted material we might wish for ourselves. Why not the material of stars? Or something supernatural with all kinds of special qualities? Almost anything more exalted than dust. The idea offends our sensibilities, dare I say it, our pride. Have you noticed the number of movies and stories about people seeking to transcend the limitations of the natural body? Human consciences uploaded into computers. Or evolving into a purely spiritual existence without the bounds and limitations of this finite, circumscribed body. And, it seems, we have a love-hate relationship with our bodies. Aren't we constantly trying to change it? As if we're discontent with it. But we also give it a great deal of attention as we spend enormous amounts of resources on it, as evidenced this past year with Covid-19.

But the second half of that phrase bothers us even more, “To dust you shall return.” That's the sentence of death, the judgment of God spoken against sin from the beginning. Genesis 3:19, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This too offends our sensibilities, that primal, natural desire to live. Have you noticed the tendency of our society to gloss over the harsh truth of death? People are

hesitant to say a person has died. Instead, they've passed away or gone home or have gone to a better place. But the truth is, the life that animated a person is gone. He or she has died. God's Word tells us that death is God's just judgment against sin. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The Bible teaches how to understand the meaning of our origins in the dust and our return to the dust. Such wisdom is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. The wonder and marvel of the Christian Gospel is the revelation that God Himself became man; the eternal Son of God, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Holy Trinity, became the dust of the earth. The Lord Jesus Christ is fully and completely God with all the divine attributes and qualities of divinity, equal to the Father and the Spirit, in all respects. At the same time, He is fully and truly man, born of his mother Mary in this age with all the attributes and qualities of our human nature except without sin. Isn't it a true wonder that God did not think it below His nature and dignity to become one of us, to become dust of the earth with a full complete human nature, a body and soul united with God in one person, our Lord Jesus Christ.

I mentioned earlier that we humans seem to have a love-hate relationship with our bodies. We're constantly caring for it, nurturing it, fussing over it one way or another. But then we're always trying to change it. Make it thinner, heavier, stronger, faster, this shape as opposed to that shape, younger, older. Now, many are wanting to change their gender or to refuse gender altogether. Further discontentment with their human nature. While we nurture and care for it, we wish it were something more or at least different. But the Son of God, the Lord Jesus did not consider our human nature with all its limitations and finitude to be something that needed changing. Our creation from the dust of the earth is perfectly good as God intended it from the beginning. God is our creator.

Jesus didn't become man in order to make us super-humans like all the superhero stories of ancient and modern times. No, he became the dust of the earth like us so that the power and sting of "and to dust you shall return" may be nullified and brought to nothing. The Son of God became one of us in order to give answer to the problem of sin leading to death. Because of Jesus, death is transformed from "to dust you shall return" to the hope of the resurrection unto life everlasting.

When God's Son became man in the person of Jesus, God the Son humbled himself by taking on the form of a servant, says Paul in Philippians 2:7. And both Matthew and Mark described Jesus' ministry as the Lord coming "not to be served but to serve,

and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). The Lord Jesus did not consider it below His divine dignity to become dust of the earth like us nor did He consider it unfitting to become the servant of all that He might redeem the world from the devastation of sin and death leading to “dust you shall return.”

On the very night of our Lord’s betrayal, Jesus served His squabbling, glory-hungering disciples. From John 13 we learn that Jesus laid aside “His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (vs. 4–5). God in human flesh, the perfection of humanity, became the servant of all. He willingly and lovingly took upon Himself the menial task of washing dirty feet. In their pride, the disciples thought it below them; they did not serve one another in love, not even the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s humility in service initially offended Peter who said to Jesus, “You shall never wash my feet’ (vs. 8a).

The Lord Jesus turns all of our sinful, human pride on its head and teaches us the truth of how things really are. Being dust of the earth is good; your human nature consisting of body and soul is good and beautiful in God’s eyes. We would do well to transform our thinking and living to conform to the Lord’s teaching and receive what He has given us graciously with joy and thanksgiving. We ought to be careful and wary of attempts to change the very fabric of our human nature. Rather, let us by the grace of the Holy Spirit confirm our lives and thinking to follow the path of the Lord Jesus. For He not only became human like us but He is the perfection of humanity, the dust of the earth perfected. True God and true man.

In the beginning, we were created in God’s glorious image which was broken by man’s original and actual sin. That image has been restored and perfected in us through Christ Jesus who took upon Himself our nature and also, at the same time, became the servant of the world to ransom every human being from sin and death. Christ Jesus came to this earth, took upon Himself our human nature in order to destroy the work of him who has the power of death, that is, the devil. The manner in which Jesus did this great work not only included Him becoming perfect man but also the perfect servant.

God the Father’s way of redeeming us from the power of death and Satan is through the humble, loving servitude of His beloved Son, Jesus. As the servant of servants, Jesus bore our sins. Healed our diseases. Touched and cleansed lepers. Washed the dirty feet of His disciples. Suffered and died for the world. Salvation from death and

the grave can only come through the humble Son of God washing our dirty bodies and souls with His own blood. At first, Peter was too proud to receive such humble service from His Lord and Master. Until Jesus said, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (vs. 8). Then, thanks be to God, Peter wanted everything Jesus was offering, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head” (vs. 9).

The options are clear. Rescue from death, the grave, and hell only comes through the humble service of Christ’s death and resurrection. The question for every person since...will you receive Christ’s loving service or seek something else? Jesus chooses to give His redemptive love through His Word – read, heard, studied, and preached, and through His Sacraments – baptism poured over sinners, words of forgiveness spoken to broken consciences, and Christ’s very body and blood given under bread and wine in Holy Communion. These are the means of rescuing us dust born creatures from returning back to dust with no hope of resurrection unto eternal life. Either receive them, as Peter enthusiastically did, or have no share in the salvation promised in the Lord Jesus.

Tonight, we especially commemorate Christ instituting the Lord’s Supper for us and for our salvation. In this way, Christ Jesus continues to serve us even though His is risen from the dead and rules and reigns over the entire creation from the glory of the Father’s right hand in the heavens. Because of Christ’s humble service, we no longer fear death, hell, and the grave. For Jesus is resurrection and life. Everyone who believes in Christ Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in Christ shall never die (John 11:26–26). Christ Jesus has transformed death so that death, must now serve us when, where, and how Christ chooses. Christ Jesus is death’s master. Now risen from the dead, death must serve Jesus, the Lord of life.

Remember that you are dust. And that is a very good thing. Christ became dust too. Through Him our human nature is redeemed and restored. Remember that to dust you shall return. But now with the hope and promise of resurrection unto eternal life. Tonight’s meal is the divine feast of life. Christ’s divine life served to us by the Lord Jesus Himself. “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.”

✠ 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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars  
Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY  
Good Friday  
April 2, 2021  
Text: John 18–19

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Tonight's reading from John 18–19 begins with a question spoken by Jesus to a band of soldiers sent from the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Him, "Whom do you seek?" It's a question worth pondering. All of you have chosen to gather at 203 Washington Avenue in Burns, Wyoming, on a gorgeous spring evening. Some of you have traveled a good distance to be here. What or whom are you all seeking? Like most things, all of us may have various reasons and motivations for being here tonight. The liturgy for Good Friday's Tenebrae service provides us with the true answer to our question about Jesus. Later in this service, we will hear it during the "Solemn Respect for the Cross." Three times we will say in responsive conversation. I will say, "Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world." You will respond collectively, "Oh, come, let us worship him." The true reason for gathering tonight is to behold, to look at through saving faith born in us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world. And then, having seen Him, we worship. Tonight, we come to see Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, the King of truth and love, crucified for the life of the world.

That's not the answer the soldiers gave when Jesus asked them whom they were seeking. The soldiers' answer was correct and accurate as far as it goes, "Jesus of Nazareth." Though born in Bethlehem's manger some 6 miles southwest of Jerusalem, He grew up in Joseph and Mary's hometown of Nazareth in northern Galilee. But they don't know and believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It's quite likely they are simply soldiers obeying the orders of their superiors. "Go arrest Jesus of Nazareth. Judas Iscariot, one of His close disciples, will point Him out. Jesus of Nazareth is a menace to our Jewish laws and customs. He must be stopped. Bind Him and bring Him back to Annas and Caiaphas." As far as the soldiers were concerned, they were looking for a criminal named Jesus of Nazareth, no more, no less.

But they found more than they expected. Twice, Jesus asked, "Whom do you seek?" After each question, the soldiers responded with "Jesus of Nazareth." Each time, our

Lord identified Himself as, “I am he.” But something curious happened the first time Jesus said, “I am he.” The soldiers “drew back and fell to the ground.” They came looking for a criminal. What they found was a man speaking with the authority and dignity of the Lord God almighty. For it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel who identified Himself as the “I am” in Exodus 3. The powers of darkness were coming for Jesus. But He, the light of world, has shined into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. They fell back and submitted to the God come in human flesh. They could not arrest Jesus without His consent. The darkness could not overcome Him.

Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested only after He declared “I am he” the second time and commanded the soldiers to let His disciples go. Even here, we see the substitutionary work of Jesus on behalf of the world. He gives Himself up freely to inferior powers so that His people can be set free forever. The soldiers expected to find a man named Jesus from Nazareth. What they found was the divine Savior of the world willingly giving Himself over to betrayal, arrest, and eventually to death by crucifixion. We gather tonight to “behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world.”

In the course of time, Jesus was taken to the governor’s headquarters for interrogation before Pontius Pilate. He too seeks to learn more about this man causing such concern among the Jewish leadership. It’s unclear what Pilate may have thought about Jesus before his interview with the Lord. Being a politician and a governmental authority, it makes sense that Pilate’s first question was political in nature, “Are you the king of the Jews?” From Pilate’s perspective, there could only be one answer to that question. No, you are not the king of the Jews. Even the Jews arrayed against Jesus confessed, “We have no king but Caesar.” Jesus cannot be the King of the Jews. No sane person would say otherwise.

Pilate did not expect to find a man speaking with an authority and depth of truth never before encountered, not even among the highest authorities of the Roman imperial government. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world.” So, says Pilate, “you are a king?” Once again Jesus confesses, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

Jesus is a king, for this purpose He was born and came into the world. But He is not like any king ever in human history, past or present. His kingdom is established upon truth. Not truths, plural, as if there can be multiple, competing, equally valid truth claims. That's the nonsense common in our day; your truth is your truth, my truth is my truth and they don't have to agree. Christ's kingdom, by contrast, is established upon the truth. And Jesus is that truth for he is the King of truth. All other kingdoms and governments of the world come and go with the changing currents of time, history, and circumstances. But not this kingdom. It is eternal for it is built upon King Jesus, the truth.

But the lies and falsehoods of this world cannot tolerate the truth. So, it must be destroyed. Pilate tried to stop the injustice, at least, to a certain extent. He told the Jews Jesus had done nothing to deserve death. So I will release Him for that is my custom, to release a criminal during the Passover. Strange justice, trying to release an innocent man due to custom rather than truth. But the Jews wouldn't stand for it; they were interested in everything but the truth. So give us the criminal Barabbas. Yet again, we see the substitutionary work of Jesus on behalf of the world. The world's justice, represented by Pontius Pilate, stands before the King of truth and can't manage to engage Him with truth and justice. But Jesus faces error and political gamesmanship with love and grace. Let Barabbas go free even though in truth he desires to die for his crime. On the cross, the King of truth dies so that the world, which deserves death and judgment, can go free. Each of us is represented by Barabbas. Guilty. Condemned. But rescued by Him who is the King of truth crucified for us all. "Behold, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world."

"So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha...Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'"

The soldiers sought for Jesus of Nazareth in the Garden of Gethsemane. Pontius Pilate interrogated the King of the Jews. Both found more than they expected. The soldiers met the divine Son of God protecting His disciples and giving Himself over to betrayal and death for the world. Pilate met the truth, divine eternal truth in the King of the Jews; His kingdom is not of this world. But now He is crucified for the world. Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.

Everyone comes to Jesus looking for something. What are you looking for in Jesus? The truth is He is the salvation of the world, your salvation, hung upon the life-giving cross. His cross gives life. That should cause us to pause. Didn't Jesus suffer and die? Isn't Golgotha a place of the skull? The place of dead, dry bones. Indeed it was. But Jesus of Nazareth, the King of Jews brought life and immortality to that dry, barren place. For He is life and light. Darkness, death, and deceit did not and cannot overcome Him. Nor can it overcome us who come to Jesus looking to Him for life and salvation. Moments before Jesus died, He cried out, "It is finished." The salvation of the world is finished, brought to its completion. Nothing more need be done. "Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world."

There are only two responses to the life-giving cross. Absolute adoration or rejection. Rejection may seem to be the most normal and natural. Golgotha's cross was a brutal, bloody instrument of torture and death. But adoration and worship are the true and right responses. On the cross hung the salvation of the world. "Oh, come, let us worship Him." The cross gives life now only because of who hung on it. Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. He is the King of truth, love, and goodness. He is life and resurrection. Therefore, we no longer fear death, hell, and the grave. Everyone who believes in Christ Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in Christ shall never die (John 11:26–26). The apostle Paul, in words of rich, deep devotion declared his desire to know Christ and Him crucified so that by any means, he may participate in Christ's resurrection (Phil. 3:10). As we look to the cross in worship, devotion, and love, we proclaim before heaven and earth, "I have been crucified with Christ...And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

The cross of Jesus is precious to us. For on the cross, the love of God was being demonstrated for all the world. It is the true symbol of divine, perfect love. God in Christ loving us eternally. That is reason enough to gather on a beautiful Spring day or any day to worship Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. "Behold, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world. Oh, come, let us worship Him."

✠ 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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (dual parish w/Immanuel, Burns, WY)

Easter Vigil

April 3, 2021

Theme: This Is the Passover of the Lord

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“Beloved in the Lord, on this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life, we are gathered here in vigil and prayer. This is the Passover of the Lord in which, by hearing His Word and celebrating His sacraments, we share in His victory over death.” Our service tonight began with those majestic, joyous words of triumph and joy. This night is shrouded in divine mystery and wonder. The Lord Jesus passed over from death to life during these hours in which we wait in prayer and anticipation. God's inspired Word teaches us that Christ's resurrection from the dead was a work of the Holy Trinity. The Father raised Christ from the dead by the power of the Spirit. As the resurrected Lord of glory, He lives and reigns to all eternity over all creation for the benefit and glorification of His beloved Church. By the same Spirit of holiness, we believers in Christ are raised to newness of life, having the hope of an inheritance that is imperishable, unfading, and established in the heavens. Thus, we gather tonight in vigil and prayer. This is the Passover of the Lord in which we share in His victory over death.

Yesterday evening, we commemorated with great solemnity that upon the life-giving cross was hung the salvation of the world. Christ the Savior was crucified unto death and buried in a borrowed tomb. The stark truth is that Jesus suffered and died; the joy and wonder of Christ's death, however, is that His death is the means of the Father reconciling the world unto Himself. Because Christ Jesus shed His blood, God the Father is now our Father who art in heaven. We seek to live in His kingdom and according to His will in all things. For Christ's blood washes away all our sins while the Holy Spirit gives us the pure righteousness of faith in Christ Jesus. The reverential solemnity of last night's service was permeated with joy and victory. We left in the sure and certain hope of Christ's resurrection.

Such godly hope continues on this Passover night. The Bible doesn't really tell us what happened when that first Easter Sunday arrived. We must remember that in the Biblical reckoning of time, the new day began at 6 pm, not midnight as we consider it. The Bible doesn't describe what took place between the beginning of Sunday, roughly

6 pm, and the early dawn when the women went to the tomb, found the stone rolled away, and Jesus already risen from the dead. Scripture tells us a little of what took place over Holy Saturday when Jesus descended into hell. The Lord Jesus declared, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). While in the heart of the earth, the Lord proclaimed His victory over death, the grave, Satan, and hell to the spirits held in prison. For those spirits condemned to eternal judgment in the torments of hell, Christ’s proclamation surely brought dismay and shame. But for the spirits of the just, not suffering torment, but resting in peace for the resurrection of the Last Day, Christ’s proclamation was pure joy and triumph.

This night, which is the beginning of Easter for us, is the Passover of our Lord in which He passed over from death into life. His pure, perfect body came back to life again without seeing any corruption or decay. The night of death came to end. And I do not mean here merely those hours when it is dark outside. The night of death, that is, the entire rule and reign that death illegitimately claimed over this world, is over. The resurrected Lord Jesus has passed over from death to life. The light of life has dawned, piercing the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death. By His resurrection glory, Christ Jesus has abolished the power and dominion of death. Everyone who believes in Christ Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in Christ shall never die (John 11:26–26).

The purpose of tonight’s prayer vigil is to hear God’s Word, to rejoice in Christ’s life-giving sacraments, and to be renewed in the Spirit of holiness. Ezekiel foresaw this new age of light and life in the Holy Spirit when he prophesied, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you....And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my just decrees” (Ezek. 36:26, 27). In the strength of Christ and the grace of the Spirit of holiness, we rejoice in living according to the Father’s just decrees with a new heart. Holiness of life is our joy and our goal. For this is the Passover of the Lord in which, by hearing His word and celebrating His sacraments, we share in His victory over death.

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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Festival of the Resurrection

April 4, 2021

Text: Mark 16:1–8

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Just a week ago, Palm Sunday, I preached it was the beginning of the Church's week of weeks. Holy Week, the most important week in the liturgical life of the Church. And here we are, at the end of Holy Week. Finally, Easter has arrived. Our full celebration of Christ's atoning death on the cross and His glorious triumph over death and grave can now begin with full vigor. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and now lives and reigns for all eternity from the Father's right hand in majesty for the glorification of His beloved Church. All the liturgical elements have returned to our services. The Gloria in Excelsis, the song of the angels sung at Jesus' birth is back in its place. As are those joyous alleluias we haven't sung since before Ash Wednesday. Every doxological stanza can be sung in full strength.

Dear saints of God, we need hold nothing back. The Lord Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Atonement for sin is made. Death lies under the resurrected feet of Jesus in abject dismay. Death was its own undoing. For it seized upon the Lord Jesus on the cross when He was weakest, most vulnerable. And death killed Jesus. All the witnesses of the time, both friend and foe, testified to that singular fact. Jesus died. And was buried in a borrowed tomb whose opening was covered with a large stone. Jewish authorities requested Pontius Pilate to seal the stone with a Roman imperial seal indicating anyone tampering with it was subject to the full wrath and fury of the Roman Empire. On top of all that, professional Roman guards were set on sentry duty to guard the entrance into the tomb. Every human precaution was taken to ensure that Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews was killed, buried, and sealed in a tomb until Judgment Day.

But then came Easter Sunday and the power of God broke through the puny schemes and petty might of man. Sometime before the break of day, early in the morning, an angel of God descended from heaven to roll back the stone from the tomb. The guards became like dead men; they fainted in fear because of the holy presence of God's

mighty angel. Certain women, followers of Jesus, went to the tomb carrying anointing spices. It was to be their last act of devotion to the one they believed was the Christ of God. But things had gone so wrong, they thought. Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and preached love and forgiveness to all men, women, and children. No one ever preached and acted like Him. How could the week have started out, on Palm Sunday, with such joy and celebration only to end in such a catastrophe? Betrayal by Judas Iscariot, one of the Lord's 12 apostles, leading to scourging and death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. How could things have gone so wrong? Not two weeks ago, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He told Martha that He is the "resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:24–26). He promised life to all believers. But now He's dead. What went wrong?

The beginning of this service gave answer to that bitter, honest question of what went wrong. "Beloved in the Lord, on this most holy morning our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life... This is the Passover of our Lord in which, by hearing His Word and eating His Supper, we share in His victory over death." Nothing went wrong in our Lord's death. Everything happened according to God's determined purposes in saving the world from its own demise and self-inflicted misery. The Lord Jesus passed over from death to life. He is resurrection and life. Because He willingly bore the sins of the world and gave Himself over unto the inferior power of death, whoever believes in Him will never taste the full bitterness of death. We share in Christ's victory over death. Even though we die physically, as Jesus did, yet shall we live. We shall never die because Christ Jesus is resurrection and life. By hearing and believing His Word and receiving His life through the sacraments of baptism, absolution, and Holy Supper, we participate in His resurrection life.

Today, we sing and rejoice and pray and love God and one another in the sure and certain hope that flows from Christ's victory over sin and death. Not merely sin, death, and evil in general. But the sins, evil, and death that come to each of you. Christ Jesus died for your sins. He washes them away with His precious blood. The evil that stalks us by day and night cannot overcome you. For the resurrected Christ sends His Spirit of holiness to live and reside in your heart and mind. The menacing specter of death. It will seek to rob you of life and joy. But Christ Jesus is resurrection and life. Whoever believes in Jesus, even though he dies, yet shall he live. Christ Jesus has transformed death so that it must serve His purposes in our lives. He is death's Lord and Master and must obey Christ's will and command knowing that in the end, on the Last Day, even Death itself shall be cast in the lake of burning fire.

This morning, we come to these worship services seeking to find Jesus as the women of Mark's gospel did so long ago. The difference is that they expected to find Jesus' lifeless body still in His tomb. Instead, they met the angel who proclaimed the first sermon of Easter, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee (Mark 16:6–7). We come to find Jesus in the power of the Spirit by means of His blessed Word and Sacraments. The risen Jesus is here among us! He is the One who speaks on your behalf to His heavenly Father, interceding for you. These are my dear children Father, redeemed and reconciled back to you through My passion, death, and resurrection. They are now Your children, dear Father in heaven. I will keep them safely in my nail-scarred hands throughout their earthly journey until the resurrection of the just on the Last Day. We gather on this beautiful morning to find the resurrected Jesus. In His glorious presence, we fall before His feet and rejoice with joy unspeakable and filled with glory.

The Son of God became one of us, taking upon Himself our flesh and blood human nature. Died for our sins and evils, the ones we have committed, and the ones committed against us. He did not shrink away from us in our desperate need. Rather, taking on the form of a servant, He humbled Himself to the point of death upon a cross and died in our place. Oh, wondrous love. That our Lord and Master should become sin for us on the cross so that would could live in His divine life and participate in His divine nature (II Peter 1:4). On the life-giving cross was hung the salvation of the world. But Death could not hold Jesus. Our Lord passed over from death to life according to the work and power of His heavenly Father who raised Him from the dead by the Holy Spirit. And now He lives and reigns from the Father' right hand for the purpose of glorifying His beloved Church.

Dear saints of God, this is the glorious truth revealed on that first Easter morning when Christ destroyed him who has the power of death, the devil. Into this divine life you have been baptized. Christ Jesus gives His very body and blood under bread and wine in the Holy Supper in order to feed and nourish us week after week with His divine life. But Satan seeks to bring us back under the darkness of his lies. We must resist the devil and his deceits. But we can only do so through the grace and mercy of Jesus. For He is resurrection, life, and truth. The apostle Paul encouraged the Christians living in the very evil, wicked city of Corinth to live according to the truth. From today's epistle reading we heard Paul's admonition, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and

truth” (I Cor. 5:8). Evil and sin are compared to leaven, yeast which slowly permeates the entire dough. The devil would seek to bring us back into fear and bondage. His chief weapon is the lie. We must cast out those lies with the truth that is Jesus. In Christ Jesus, our Passover lamb, we live according to the truth. Evil is not fun or good or expedient or necessary. The truth, and living according to the truth, is where true joy and pleasure are found. People of God, renew your commitment to live according to the truth. Church and worship are primary. Along with loving your family and friends. Honesty in all of life. Love and forgiveness for friends and foes. The truth and love of Jesus are our foundations for life in this world and the world to come. This Easter and every Sunday, yea every day of our lives, we live in the joy that is found in the life, light, and truth of Christ Jesus.

Nothing went wrong after the first Palm Sunday. Our Lord and master, Jesus of Nazareth is our King and God, went willingly to Jerusalem and Golgotha’s cross in order to redeem us from sin, evil, sorrow, and misery. This is our day of days. Christ has passed over from death to life. We sing and confess like Job so many centuries ago, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

This is the Passover of our Lord in which we share in His victory over death.

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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Quasimodo Geniti (Second Sunday of Easter)

April 11, 2021

Text: 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 apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome some of the most important words ever written. They are life-changing and world-changing. Romans 1:16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is God the Father's power for the salvation of believers. The Gospel works the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel gives hope, courage, and strength which transcend the trials and struggles of this world. The Gospel overcomes the devil's temptations and makes his demons flee. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit creates and sustains Christ's holy Church. On and on I could go. The Gospel is God's power for salvation. It is the most powerful force in the universe for it is established in the saving work of God Himself.

We Christians use that word a great deal. The Gospel. But do we know what we're talking about when we say "Gospel"? If a stranger on the street asked you what the Gospel is, what would you tell him? If the Gospel is, in fact, the power of God unto salvation – what I have said is the most powerful force in the universe – then we should know what the Gospel is!

Let's start by laying a good foundation. First, the word "Gospel" literally means "good news." The gospel in its broadest sense is basically an announcement of good news. When the Bible and Christians use the word Gospel, we are saying that we have good news, a good announcement to make about Jesus of Nazareth. Second, we also use the word Gospel to refer to four specific documents included in the New Testament. They are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There are other ancient documents called gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Barnabas. But they do not qualify as Biblical gospels because they weren't written

under apostolic supervision and authority and, in most cases, they contain egregious doctrinal errors that are contrary to the Biblical Gospel of Christ Jesus. The Church has always known about them and rejected them for their errors. So, there are only four Gospels that the Church holds to be authoritative announcements of Good News about the birth, life, deeds, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. The word Gospel basically means good news and we have four documents that we call Gospels because they tell us about Jesus. So, what do we tell our hypothetical stranger what the Gospel is? I want to answer that question by using the appointed Gospel reading for today's service, John 20:19–31. The disciples of Jesus have gone through quite a roller coaster ride the past several days. Palm Sunday began with such excitement and fervor. It looked like Jesus might actually be recognized as Israel's king, at least by the citizens of Jerusalem. But then came the Passover celebration. Jesus changed it! Almost unthinkable. He took bread and said it was His body given for the forgiveness of sins. And then He took a cup of wine and said it was His blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. He commanded His disciples to eat and drink His body and blood often in remembrance of Him. A few hours later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas Iscariot returned with soldiers. They arrested Jesus; Judas had betrayed Jesus. And all of the other disciples fled in terror for their lives. Eventually, Jesus was examined by both Jewish and Roman authorities resulting in His scourging. And horror of horrors, Jesus was crucified unto death and buried. The disciples all watched these things unfold. Only John managed to pluck up enough courage to go Golgotha with Mary, the Lord's mother. They saw and heard Jesus' last breath. Joseph of Arimathea got Jesus' body from Pontius Pilate. He and Nicodemus hastily buried Jesus late Friday evening. Then came Sunday, Mary Magdalene and other women went to the tomb to give their last act of devotion of anointing Jesus body for permanent burial. But when the women arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning, they did not find the body of Jesus. And now they are saying His is risen from the dead! They've seen Him with their own eyes! Heard His voice! All of these things happened within a week's time, most of it, over three days, Friday through Sunday.

These details must be known if we are to understand what the Gospel is. And it explanation as to why the disciples were locked behind closed doors for fear of the Jews (John 20:19). They had witnessed strange events. Jesus was unjustly murdered. The Jewish authorities might come after the disciples next. And then, what to make of

the strange reports from the women who say Jesus is risen from the dead! Lots of fear on that first Easter evening.

Not unlike our day. Lots of fear on every hand. Many have noted that we are living in a glut of fearmongering. People from all walks and stations of life, from all political perspectives, rich and poor are spewing out constant messages of fear. Fear of this. Fear of that. Fear of them, those people, whoever they may be. Fear of one another. Fear of sickness, poverty, death. It's everywhere. As your pastor, it is my duty and responsibility to tell you that this outpouring of fear is demonic. The Lord Jesus taught that because of lawlessness the love of many will grow cold (Matt. 24:12). And the writer to the Hebrews proclaimed that Jesus died on the cross "that through death he (i.e., Jesus) might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who *through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*" The Lord came to release us from demonic fear that leads to lifelong slavery. Such deliverance from fear only comes through the Gospel. This is why we must know it and believe it.

Suddenly, according to vs. 19, Jesus stood in the midst of His fearful disciples and preached the Gospel to them, "Peace be with you." Vs. 20, "When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord." Did you notice what brought joy? What dispelled fear and gave peace? The presence of the crucified yet living, resurrected Jesus! The Gospel has something to do with both the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Our Lord directed His disciples' attention to the wounds in His hands and side. Those marks aren't reminders of shame but of glory and love and salvation. They are marks of the Gospel which dispels fear and gives peace beyond human understanding.

Vs. 21–23, "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he 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.'" Yet again, Jesus announces, preaches the good news of peace, the reception of the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins. The disciples, having been received those very gifts, the Holy Spirit, peace, and forgiveness, are now to go out into the world and preach the same message of peace, forgiveness, and the reception of the Holy Spirit unto salvation.

The Gospel, in its strictest, most basic and important sense, is the message, the good news that Jesus Christ, Son of God, came to this earth by taking upon Himself our

human nature for the purpose of saving sinners from sin, fear, death, the devil, and all evil by dying on the cross to atone for humanity's sins and rising from the dead to destroy the power of death. The Gospel is the message that God loves this world in and through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus. The Gospel is the message that because of Jesus God loves you and forgives you your sins and releases you from the fear and shame sin and death have brought to your lives.

This Gospel, that Jesus died and rose again to forgive and save sinners, is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. This Gospel gives peace and courage. It's why Christians throughout the ages have refused to bow their knees before the false gods of this world. The false gods that seek to subject us to the dominion of fear and shame. Christ Jesus has set us free by His life, death, and resurrection and we will not compromise or change this beautiful, powerful message. We proclaim what the prophet Isaiah saw through prophetic inspiration, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation" (12:2).

Dear saints of God, this Easter season is a joyous proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus died and rose again! Proclaim that message to friend, family and foe. It's God's power of salvation. Jesus came into this world to save sinners by dying and rising again. This is God's love. Come to Church and bring your family, friends, and neighbors so that they too may receive His forgiveness, His love, His peace, and His Spirit. Come to receive and rejoice in the Gospel given to us in Word and Sacrament. The resurrected Jesus is here to give peace just as He did on that first Easter Evening! Baptism, preaching, Supper, absolution are the means of receiving the Gospel. Our hymns and liturgies set the Gospel to music. Our prayers are empowered by the Gospel. It is our joy and strength. The crucified and resurrected Jesus is the source and content of the Gospel. Fear not dear saints. Believe the Gospel of Jesus. And live in His divine, eternal peace.

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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Misericordias Domini (Third Sunday of Easter)

April 18, 2021

Text: John 10:11–16; I Peter 2:21–25

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.

Good Shepherd Sunday and last Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter, are beautifully linked together through the imagery of shepherds. This is certainly true for today's service. All three readings appointed for today use the imagery of shepherds clearly and powerfully. But what about last Sunday and the reading from John 20? It was about the fearful disciples locked behind closed doors on the evening of the first Easter Sunday. And who could forget about Thomas and his need to see Jesus with his own eyes and touch the crucifixion marks in the Lord's hands and side. What does John 20 have to do with shepherds? They aren't mention even once! Nor is there mention of shepherds in last week's Old Testament and Epistle readings.

The issue is more of a language problem surrounding the word shepherd. The word pastor is the Latin word for shepherd. In John 20, the resurrected Jesus established the pastoral office, the shepherding office, when our Lord appeared to the disciples.

Listen John 20:19b–23:

[Jesus said:]<sup>19b</sup>“Peace be with you.”<sup>20</sup>When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”<sup>22</sup>And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

The pastoral office, the shepherding office, was established by the risen Christ for the purpose of gathering His precious, blood-bought sheep around the preaching of the forgiveness of sins. Every church service is a gathering of Christ's sheep around our Lord's gifts of inspired Scriptures, prayers, worship, Holy Supper, and mutual encouragement. The Lord Jesus established the pastoral office, the shepherding office

so that all that the victory of His resurrection would continue to come among His people.

When you call me “pastor”, you are saying at least two things. First, you, Pr. Mars are my shepherd placed in my life by Christ the Good Shepherd. And when I hear that word, I am reminded that Jesus is the chief shepherd who cares and nourishes His flock. Every pastor is in truth an under-shepherd. A man placed into the shepherding office by the Good Shepherd and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The sheep, you Christians belong to Jesus. That is a most important fact that none of dare forget. We belong to Jesus because He purchased us from the domain of darkness, death, and sin by His own precious blood.

Second, Pastor, your primary task is to preach the holy and precious gospel of the forgiveness of sins. For through it, we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd saying, Peace be with you. Whenever you call me pastor you are reminding me what I am to be about: preaching Jesus and His gospel. Keep that front and center, pastor. Preach, live, model, and talk about Jesus as His is revealed in His Holy Word. Stay focused on who Jesus is and what He did to save us, His beloved sheep.

So let’s clear the air once and for all about why you guys call me pastor rather than reverend or something like that. It’s not because I deserve special recognition or honor. Quite the contrary, I am to be your servant, your under-shepherd. You calling me pastor is reminder to me and to yourselves that says, Kenneth, be who Christ the Good Shepherd called you to be and do what Christ has called you to do. That’s why you’re here. Preach the gospel in season, out of season; when you’re tired and when rested, encouraged or discouraged. During epidemics and recessions, prosperity and boom years, times of peace or war, in times of persecution or quietness. Pastor, be like Jesus who gave His life for the sheep. You can’t atone for our sins, only Jesus can do that. But you are to preach the Good Shepherd’s gospel. Pray for and intercede on our behalf. Call us by name with the living voice of the Savior. Baptize us and our children. Feeds us the body and blood of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. For that is what He commanded in His last will and testament to be done until He comes again. Lead us in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Constantly speak the wholesome words of Christ’s gospel. And by all means, don’t be a hireling who runs away at the slightest sign of adversity, trouble, or spiritual oppression. Even if we ourselves are part of the trouble. We are sheep after all. The prophet Ezekiel, in chapter 34, described God’s sheep as lost, straying, injured, weak, jostling about against one another, poking and prodding each other. Call us to repentance. Work so that peace, love, and

reconciliation abound in the congregation. This, and much more, is what you are saying when you call me “Pastor.”

There is one thing that we need to keep straight, however. The Lord Jesus Christ is your Good Shepherd, your Good Pastor. This is the claim He makes in John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Do you notice what criterion is for Jesus being the good shepherd, the good pastor? He lays His life down for His sheep. Jesus didn’t run away when opposition from Jewish leaders and authorities grew. As they were arresting Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus did not abandon His sheep. Let them go, He said to the soldiers. I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you seek. Even before Pontius Pilate, Jesus did not turn aside from the crucifixion being threatened against Him. Never once did He deny who He was, the Son of God, the King of Israel, come to redeem His people. Nor did He despise the suffering, the scourging, the mockery, or finally, even His Father’s wrath He had to endure on the cross to make atonement for our sins. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He laid down His life for the sheep.

Such is the apostle Peter’s reflections upon what Jesus accomplished in His Passion and death. From today’s epistle reading, I Peter 2:22–25:

<sup>22</sup>He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten ...<sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Christ Jesus Himself bore our sins because He loves you, His sheep. He is the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (vs. 25). This too, we must always remember. Jesus carried your sins to His cross and made atonement for them. Why, for heaven’s sake, do we try to carry around our sins? It’s as if we are trying to snatch them away from Jesus and say I’ll take care of that. What I’m describing is the guilt and shame we carry around for the sins we have committed and those committed against us. To be sure, we remember our failures. And we mourn because we are sinners. And we sinners do really crazy bad things that don’t make any sense. And yet, the Lord Jesus has taken all of those sins and carried them to His cross. His blood covers them all, every last one of them! By that cleansing blood, we are healed, says the apostle Peter (vs. 24), who is really quoting the prophet Isaiah 53:5.

Healing is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. That certainly includes spiritual healing. Once we were dead, but now are we alive in Christ Jesus. The life we live now in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God. But the healing also includes emotional, mental, and physical healing. The entire person, body and soul, is healed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter wrote that Jesus died on the tree “that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (vs. 24). The purpose of Christ’s death was to bring healing to the sheep. Dead to sin. Alive to God in righteousness. By His wounds we have been healed.

On this side of eternity, we continue to struggle against the devastating effects of sin in our lives. The day-to-day experiences of life are always trying to drive us away the healing we have in Christ Jesus. The pain, the lies, bitterness, disappointment, suffering. They all try to silence the healing voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. But Jesus will not allow it. Come unto Me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. The Lord Jesus has already done the heavy work of atoning for your sins. He’s the Good Shepherd. Because He gives us healing from sin, we, by His grace, run away from sin. Sin brings death and evil. We are now alive to God in righteousness.

This is why we need the public gathering of God’s flock around Word and Sacraments. Remember John 20 from last Sunday and which began this sermon? As the Father sent Jesus to atone for the sins of the world by dying and rising again, so now the resurrected Jesus sends forth His under-shepherds to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in His name until the end of time. The Lord Jesus knows you, His sheep. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (vs. 14–15).

Dear saints of God, you are the precious sheep and little lambs of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the good shepherd. Tune your ears and your hearts to His voice. To you, He speaks words of truth and love authenticated by His death and resurrection. You belong to Jesus! He is the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

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.