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

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

March 28, 2021

Text: John 12:12–19

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

Today begins our week of weeks. Holy Week. The single most important week in the liturgical life of the Christian Church. All of salvation history finds its focus and touchstone with these days and events in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. The past was moving forward to Holy Week. Our present finds its meaning in Holy Week. The future has no significance without Holy Week. To be blunt, I am struggling for words to describe adequately the importance of these days in the life of Jesus and for His Church.

It's not that these calendar days, in themselves, are more holy than other days. That's true of Easter Sunday too. Next Sunday's celebration of the resurrection of Jesus is not somehow more holy than any other Sunday. We don't get more of Jesus on Easter or more of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. Good Friday doesn't give us more forgiveness than any-o-given Monday from the rest of the year. Rather, the faith we have in Jesus, the on-going presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the peace of forgiveness that we received day after day, the daily victories we have in Christ Jesus, and the love we receive from God the Father are all made available to us and to the entire world because of the events we are celebrating this week. The past, the present, and the future all coalesce, or meld together, in the glorious events of this week. Heaven and earth rejoices because of this week. Let us rejoice in it too.

And I can't help but add a comment comparing this Holy Week with last year's Holy Week. Last year, we had restricted church services without Holy Communion. Our dual parish was not able to gather publicly for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil service. They were offered only on-line. Immanuel didn't have an Easter Sunday service last year because of the combined concerns of the weather and the pandemic; that fact still haunts me to this day. Easter morning, St. John's had two non-communion worship services, no special music, no Easter breakfast or Egg Hunt for children. It just wasn't the same. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying, the Lord Jesus hadn't abandoned His Church. As I've already said, we didn't have less of Jesus.

If I may be so bold! From our human perspective, the Lord Jesus may have been more active! Holding us, supporting us, calming our fears and doubts. A year ago, our needs were somewhat different than they are today. On the other hand, they remain the same. We still need our Savior Jesus as much then as now. The devil hasn't stopped his onslaught against faith and goodness in the Church or the world. Our personal lives are filled with fears, doubts, uncertainties mixed with joys and hopes. I share this reverie in order to remind us that during this forthcoming week, the most precious and eternal gifts of God are celebrated with greater pageantry. Participate in as many services as you can remembering that in them and through them we are celebrating our past, present, and future. The truth of who we are as God's people and the glory that awaits us in the Father's eternal kingdom will be celebrated with great joy and fervency. The God alone be glory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The life and ministry of the Lord Jesus had been building up for this climatic week. All of the miracles, the teaching in town after town in Israel, the promises of hope and forgiveness pointed forward to something greater to come. The people in Jerusalem and the surrounding regions knew they were on the cusp of something really big. A few days earlier, in the town of Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Nothing like it had been heard of before! The Old Testament Scriptures recorded a few resurrections from the dead but not someone who had been dead for 4 days. And yet, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, commanding him to come forth from death back to life with the voice and authority of God Himself. Before that great event happened, Jesus said remarkable, powerful words that have been informing everything I've been saying about the importance of this week.

Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:23–24). Martha believed in the bodily resurrection. But that was still in the future. Now, Martha was right in her theology. On the Last Day, all the dead will be raised back to life. Believers to eternal joy and glory, unbelievers to eternal shame and punishment. Martha believed in Jesus, but she didn't understand completely who He was and what He came to do. So "Jesus said to her, 'I am 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 11:25–26). Jesus and Martha are, almost quite literally, standing in the face of Lazarus' death. And Jesus proclaims that everyone who believes in Him as Lord and Savior will never die because He Himself is the resurrection and the life. These are staggering words. Jesus isn't simply saying that He

can raise the dead, Old Testament prophets had done that, but He is the resurrection. Jesus isn't merely alive; He is life itself. There is no life, no resurrection from the dead apart from Jesus. Because He is resurrection and life, the Lord Jesus can rightly declare to Martha and to everyone of us here and every Christian believe past, present, future, that even though we may die physically, we will not experience death itself. We are forever alive in Christ Jesus who is resurrection and life.

After making this bold claim, the Lord Jesus asked Martha if she believed this (vs. 26b). In response and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Martha confessed her faith and trust in Jesus with words Christians have been using ever since. Vs. 27, "She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'"

Shortly after these great events, Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem on the Sunday before the Passover. We call this Sunday, Palm Sunday. John's gospel teaches us that a large crowd heard that Jesus was going to Jerusalem (12:12). In John 12:17–18, we learn the large crowd is there following Jesus because they knew He had raised Lazarus from the dead! Palm Sunday must be understood in the light of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Because of that miracle and everything that had been happening in Jesus' ministry for the previous three years, the crowd gathered palm branches and went out to meet Jesus while shouting Psalm 118:25–26, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel!" (vs. 13). Palm branches were symbols of victory, waved when Israel's kings returned triumphant from battle. Added to all of this, Jesus borrowed a young donkey and began riding it into Jerusalem in fulfillment of OT prophecy, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (vs. 15).

Imagine the scene!! Jesus, the miracle worker and great teacher from Nazareth who raised Lazarus from the dead just a few days earlier, rides into the holy city of God according to Zechariah's OT prophesy while hundreds, maybe thousands of people, were shouting prophetic words from Psalm 118, a psalm of David, as they waved palm branches in joyous triumph. This entire scene is dripping with Messianic expectations. Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior, the King of Israel.

Dear saints of God, everything that has been described is absolutely true. Jesus is the fulfillment of OT prophecy. He is the triumphant King of kings and Lord of lords come to Jerusalem to claim David's throne. We mustn't forget what Jesus told Martha

moments before He raised Lazarus from the dead, lest we get distracted in all the glory and triumphant of the shouting crowds. “I am 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.” He who is resurrection and life is riding on that donkey into Jerusalem. He knows when and where He will ascend upon David’s throne to rule and reign forever. This, the crowds did not know.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem to be crucified on a Roman cross for the sins of the world. Above His thorn-encircled brow, a placard will be nailed which says, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The cross is the throne from which rules and reigns over God’s kingdom. Even after His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday, Jesus is known and worshipped as the crucified, yet living Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The pageantry of this service, with our youth waving palm branches and the extended Passion reading with three different readers, is but one liturgical means teaching us something extraordinary is happening among us.

From the very beginning of this sermon, I have been asserting that Jesus is the Messianic King and Savior promised in the OT, that He is the resurrection and life, that every Christian believer never truly dies. I have asserted these things because the Bible asserts them. But there is proof undergirding these assertions: Jesus’ death on Good Friday and Easter. He suffered our judgment on the cross. He drank the bitter cup of our sufferings on Golgotha’s tree. He tasted and endured our death. Having taken the judgment of the entire world upon Himself, He died to save us. And rose again to open His Father’s kingdom to all forgiven believers. This is how Jesus can tell Martha and all His people whoever believes in Me (i.e., Jesus) will never die. Palm Sunday is the beginning of this great celebration. Jesus is life and resurrection. Not only because He said so. But because He died and rose again for us.

Let us celebrate this week, on the one hand as Christians have always celebrated it: with prayer, praise, hymns, songs, sacrament, feasting, and joy. On the other, let us celebrate it anew as we never have before. In the newness and freshness of Christ’s divine resurrection life given to us by gracious presence of the Holy Spirit. This is our week of weeks. The joy and victory of Christ be with you all....

✠ 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.