

+ John 14:15-21 + Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice + 6th Sunday of Easter + 13 May 2012 +

So are you still celebrating Easter? You might be wondering if Pastor Gumm forgot to look at the calendar this morning. Yes, I know it says May 13 and right after the date in italics I see the words "Mother's Day". Don't worry! I didn't forget, yet even today, we're still celebrating Easter. With the exception of how our church is decorated and a couple Easter hymns and responses in our service, you'd think that by day 36 of the Easter season our celebrations would finally be winding down or even non-existent.

If you'd look at the world around us, you'd be right. You'd be lucky to even find Easter candy in the clearance aisle at Wal-Mart this late in May. Right now stores are gearing up for Memorial Day and even July 4th. Most people aren't even thinking about Easter. Perhaps the same could be said about you and me. We're in late spring/early summer/can't-wait-for-school-to-end mode. So why bother celebrating Easter now when everyone's moved on?

We continue celebrating because of Christ's love for you and me. Today Jesus reminds us of what his love has done for each and every one of us. We live in a world that doesn't understand what Easter joy is or why it's not just for Easter Sunday, but as Jesus encourages his disciples, he encourages our Easter joy to continue no matter the time of year. In the words of Martin Luther, who penned the hymn we just sang, **DEAR CHRISTIANS, ONE AND ALL, REJOICE!** (*Christian Worship* 377:1)

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus' disciples were in no mood to rejoice. They didn't realize the great wonders God was going to accomplish starting that night, so they were discouraged. Jesus was speaking of the suffering and death he would soon endure. For good reason, this troubled his disciples, but Jesus gave them comfort. ***"I am going...to prepare a place for you...I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*** (John 14:2-3) He taught them to find in him the only Way to the only Truth that alone gives Life. He wanted them to realize he was there to do much more than be their teacher and friend. He was there to save them.

Jesus told his disciples, ***"If you love me, you will obey what I command."*** Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yes, until you consider what each and every disciple was and what each and every one of us is by nature. On your own such a command is actually impossible. In fact, by nature, every one of us has done the exact opposite. By nature, you and I refuse to obey God's holy will whether through willful disobedience or lack of obedience. With the rest of humanity, you and I prefer to reject God's holy will in favor of our own. None of those disciples in the Upper Room deserved a Savior from their hostile disobedience, and neither does any disciple sitting here today, yet you and I still desperately need a Savior, whether we want him or not.

Our natural hostility and disobedience towards the Lord only show how truly enslaved we are by nature. Like a prisoner shackled in a deep, dark dungeon, Satan holds you captive as he torments you with temptations like lust or envy or greed or arrogance, and then tortures you with guilt when you give in to his temptations. At the same time, Death, the dark executioner, broods nearby ever ready to snatch away your life forever.

Of course, any attempts to polish your spiritual appearance before God—to hide the shackles of sin with outward gestures that look good to all except the all-knowing God—only do one of two things. They either delude you with self-righteousness or overwhelm you with despair. Ultimately such slavery to sin and Satan will plunge you headfirst into eternal separation from God's love in hell. That is your rightful lot, because your sins only earn death. We deserve to be cast away from God's holy presence forever.

In his hymn, Luther describes what we are by nature with stark clarity. ***"Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; Death brooded darkly o'er me. Sin was my torment night and day... Yet deep and deeper still I fell; Life had become a living hell, so firmly sin possessed me... My will against God's judgment fought, no hope for me remaining. My fears increased till sheer despair left naught but death to be my share and hell to be my sentence."*** (*Christian Worship* 377:2-3) Yes, you and I deserve nothing, but wrath, but God saw your awful situation and responded. Why did Jesus come to earth at all? Why do you find him lying in a lowly manger bed? Why do you find him growing up in the home of a poor, outcast family? Why do you find him enduring great temptation from Satan himself, hostility from the religious leaders who should've followed him, and abandonment from his own followers? Why do you find Jesus leaving that Upper Room to endure betrayal, extreme suffering and ridicule, rejection by his heavenly Father, a criminal's death, and burial in a borrowed tomb? Why do you find him enduring your death?

Was it to be a great moral example? Was it to be a great teacher on the subject of humiliation and suffering for the greater good? Or did Jesus come to live in perfection for you and me who can't even get through a worship

service perfectly? Why did he come to suffer the excruciating hell of separation from God's love that we, his mortal enemies, deserve? He came to die so you might live. He rose from the dead so you might abandon your own grave. The Apostle John explains, ***"This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."*** (1 John 4:9-10)

As we sang before, the Father gave his ***"dearest treasure"***—his own Son—for you and me. Jesus set you free from that slavery of Satan, sin and death. He fulfilled the Father's holy will by taking on your human flesh. He became your brother and your servant. He lived to be your Substitute. He died that you might live, and lives again that you might enjoy his love forever.

That night in the Upper Room, Jesus knew why he had come—to show you the extent of his everlasting love. He knew what he was going to do and what he was going to endure, yet he also knew what the outcome would be. With that in mind, he reassured the troubled hearts of his disciples, ***"I will not leave you as orphans..."*** Jesus wanted them to have that heavenly assurance. Within a couple hours, they would lose their Lord and would seem to be abandoned like orphans, so to comfort them Jesus pointed them to Easter four days early. ***"I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."*** Yes, within a couple days, Jesus' public appearances would come to an end, but his disciples would see him alive on Easter and for forty days thereafter. There would be no doubt of his resurrection and no doubt of theirs either!

So what comfort does that give you and me? How does that fill you with joy as we near the end of the Easter season? Jesus promised to make it possible for you to ***"see"*** him even after he visibly departed to heaven. Jesus promised to ***"give another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth."*** After his visible return to heaven, Jesus promised to pour out his Holy Spirit on his faithful followers. The Holy Spirit now brings Christ's counsel and encouragement, comfort and peace through his Word. The Holy Spirit provides forgiveness of sins, new life, and the assurance of eternal life as he brings new life to dead souls in the waters of Holy Baptism connected with his almighty Word, and as Jesus gives his own body and blood with bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins in his Holy Supper.

Through that good news of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit imparts heavenly wisdom to you and all who follow Christ. As Jesus promised, the Spirit is your source for comfort and help. The Spirit teaches you to know and follow Jesus. Only with the Spirit's help can anyone follow and serve Christ.

With the Spirit's help, you respond with loving obedience. Jesus told his disciples, ***"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father and I too will love him and show myself to him."*** Only after the Spirit works in your heart through the Gospel can you love Jesus. With the Spirit's help through the Word, you can know what the will of Christ is and can obey that will. He doesn't force you to do so nor make you do it out of fear. No, in loving response to what Christ has done for you, you willingly obey God's will.

That means that what Jesus lived and taught becomes your life, your teaching, and the basis for your faith. With the Spirit's help, you can have a self-sacrificing, Christ-like love for everyone, even people very different than yourself. With the Spirit's help, you can look at every person as a soul for whom Jesus died as he did for you. With the Spirit's help, you can have the boldness to share the good news of Jesus with a friend or a loved one or a neighbor or a co-worker or a classmate, and tell them why Christ's love is so important to you. With the Spirit's help, you can stand up for the truth of God's Word in its entirety when others oppose or try to twist what God has to say. You can even stand up to ridicule and rejection from family or friends or others, and you can submit to God's Word when what it teaches is hard for your own ears to hear. With the Spirit's help through the Word, you can grow in the grace and knowledge of your Lord Jesus and live each day not for yourself, but for him. With the Spirit's help, Christ's will becomes yours.

Yes, it's been 36 days since Easter and the church season of Easter comes to a close this coming week. Even so, your Easter joy, your Easter celebration goes on. Because of the wonders God has done through your Savior Jesus, you have a new relationship with God. You have every reason to rejoice. God in his undying love for you has provided the Savior you so desperately need. What else can you do than live that joy in Christ every day assured of heaven itself? ***"Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice!"*** Amen.