

Second Sunday of Easter
Hope Lutheran Church
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Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, NC

April 27/28, 2019
Acts 5:23

“The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia!

THERE’S “NO ONE INSIDE!”

“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

In recent years, Lana and I have had the freedom and flexibility to take several trips, some of them notable, first time adventures like Hawaii and Europe, while others were short excursions to places we have been before, like New York City and Washington, DC. In reflecting on those travels, some of the most powerful moments and memories are related to visits to national memorials, like the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* at Arlington National Cemetery. It was just so moving to witness again the awe and ritual of the changing of the guard, or seeing the eternal flame that marks the grave of John F. Kennedy, or simply being quieted by rows and rows and rows of white memorials marking the graves of those who served our country.

In New York City, even with all its glitter and glamour and seeing a “wicked” musical, the highlight of our trip was visiting the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, commemorating the 2001 attacks which killed 2,977 people. Looking over the reflecting pools and seeing all of the names, we knew were standing on holy ground, paying respect to innocent lives lost. And in Hawaii, I can’t even begin to describe the feeling when standing over the waters of the USS Arizona Memorial, marking the

resting place of over 1,000 sailors and Marines entombed in that vessel during the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

All across this land we visit famous memorials and burial places, or we search our ancestry, now able to see the grave markers of distant relative's right on our computer screens. Many of us make personal pilgrimages to stand on the very soil where family is laid to rest; paying our respects at columbarium's and grave sites, shedding a few tears of love and remembrance, stories and memories emerging as we read the family name, the dates of birth and death inscribed right before our eyes.

But you know; when it comes to Jesus Christ, the Son of God - the most important Person in my life - and hopefully yours as well - there is no grave to visit; no tombstone to read, no lifeless body that yet lies in the ground! While many Christians make pilgrimage to the Holy Land and visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem which contains a marble slab supposedly marking the traditional place where Jesus was buried in a borrowed grave – in reality, the actual tomb cannot be found - and even if it were, there would be “*no one inside!*” The grave was empty, as the angels declared on that first Easter morn: “*Why do you seek 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?*” (Luke 24:5-6)

The Good Friday “*victim*” has become the “*victor*” paying the price of sin on Calvary's Cross, rising to give everlasting life to all who believe! The stone rolled away from the door of the empty tomb is like that of the open vista and arch of the *Arc de Triomphe*, in Paris, France - proclaiming victory over the enemy – sin, Satan and death defeated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! It is the Biblical truth we so boldly

declared last week on Easter Sunday: *“Jesus Christ is alive...Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!”* It is the hope we so joyfully proclaim, lifting up our voices in song: *“Because He lives, we can face tomorrow; Because He lives, all fear is gone; and because we know who holds the future, life is worth the living just because He lives!”*

The foundation of the Christian faith, you see, and our hope for the future, unlike all other world religions, does not abide in some great teacher, person, martyr, guru, rabbi, spiritualist, philosopher or revolutionary leader who died for a just cause and whose bones yet decay in a borrowed tomb! No, as Scriptures teaches us: *“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain...for if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”* (1 Corinthians 15:14-17) But we believe, teach and confess, affirming every week in the Apostles or Nicene Creed, that *“For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures!”*

Now, if you yet doubt that truth, consider what the shaken, sorrowful and doubtful disciples discovered *“on the evening of that [first Easter] day”* when the Risen Christ *“came and stood among them, even though the doors were locked, saying, ‘Peace be with you!’”* Jesus showed them his hands and his side, and said to them [again], *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”* They still didn’t quite get it yet, so eight days later, his disciples were *“inside”* [again], and the doors were locked [again!], and Jesus came and stood among them [again] - saying even to a doubting Thomas, *“Peace be with you.”* (John 20:19-26) Finally, after Pentecost, they embraced the Holy Spirit’s sending power, and then ended up being *“arrested and put in public prison for the many signs and*

wonders they were regularly doing” in the name of Jesus! (Acts 5:12-17)

But Easter’s victory wasn’t finished nor defeated by jailing His followers and telling them to be quiet, because just as a stone rolled over the tomb could not hold Jesus; so His disciples could not be detained or deterred from their mission by a locked jail cell! The Book of Acts sounds to me today like a mini-Easter Sunday, as their captors had to report to their leaders: *“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found **no one inside.**”* (Acts 5:23) And here’s the neatest, most powerful tidbit I gleaned from this text: *Where were they: “**Outside!**”* Doing exactly what the angel told them to do: *“Standing in the temple and speaking to the people all the words of this Life.”* (Acts 5:20)

So, what’s my response and yours in these days of our lives following Easter? A lot of people, a lot of us, I think, just stay huddled *“inside”* behind locked doors, cowering and timid about our faith, robbed of peace and joy by life’s circumstances, imprisoned by fears or failures; sin yet overwhelming and defeating us; unwilling to allow faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ to make a difference in daily life. I think the message of Easter that needs to be heralded this morning is that *“we can’t stay inside!”* Jesus didn’t remain *“inside”* the tomb; the disciples could not remain *“cloistered”* nor held captive *“inside”* a locked jail cell! The fact that we come *“inside”* this church today does not provide *“sanctuary”* from the privilege and responsibility of going *“outside”* these walls and fulfilling our mission to *“proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ!”*

It’s kind of like parents telling their children, when all of their playful zeal and energy is cooped up in the house: *“Won’t you please take it outside!”* It’s like God in today’s lesson is

telling His children and followers of the Risen Christ: “*Won’t you please take it outside!*” “*Outside, out there,*” when friends deny and doubt, questioning Biblical authority; we stand firm, giving a positive and winsome witness of our faith in Jesus! “*Outside, out there,*” when sin and death do their thing; we hold fast to our hope in the resurrected and ascended Lord who declares in Revelation: “*Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one!*” (Revelation 1:17-18) “*Outside, out there,*” when relationships draw us close to those who are suffering and hurting, sorrowing, and dying; crying out for meaning and purpose, we share words of comfort, peace and life in the name of Christ! “*Outside, out there,*” we take what is “*inside*” here, trusting and believing by God’s grace through faith that the Risen Lord, as promised, will be “*with us always*” no matter what’s “*out there!*”

“*Inside*” this church, every week, we share through Word and Sacrament the good news of Jesus Christ, the Crucified Lord and Risen Savior, offering forgiveness of sins and life everlasting to all who believe. If there’s anyone here today who does not know and believe in this Jesus, I pray the Holy Spirit will touch your heart and lead you to faith and trust by God’s grace through faith. And, “*inside*” this church, every week, we depart with the sending message: *Go in peace and serve the Lord!*” In other words, my friends, “*won’t you please take it outside*” and *serve the Risen Lord!*”

AMEN

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