

John 10:15-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series C)

Lessons for the Day: Acts 20:17-35; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Our Exalted Lord: Risen and Life-Giving

May 12, 2019

“I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

We have had several conversations at the office recently about downsizing; about the things we accumulate and all the things we somehow end up storing away in boxes in the basement. While we were doing some spring cleaning, I came upon a box that had belonged to my mother. I inherited most of the things from my parents which had spiritual significance; I have my father’s baptismal and confirmation certificates, my parents’ wedding certificate, and so on. Among these things was a plaque that had been presented to my mother many years ago, in recognition of her service as a Sunday School teacher. The plaque was never hung up in our house, because my mother, who appreciated the thankfulness of the congregation, never really liked the plaque. You see, it had a crucifix on it. A crucifix is a cross with Christ on the cross. Mom never liked the crucifix. She always said, “I serve a living Saviour. I don’t want to leave Him on the cross.”

Maybe Mothers’ Day isn’t the best time to point this out, but I think my mom was wrong. I understand her feelings. I’ve heard them from many people over the years. She was right in saying that we serve a living Saviour. We rejoice in these ongoing Easter days that the Lord who gave Himself for us on the cross has risen again from the dead. But talking of the crucifixion, and the Saviour who died can never be separated from the resurrection. Like the two sides of a coin, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are just two sides to the same thing. You really can’t speak of one without speaking of the other. Good Friday and Easter belong together. One theologian has said we always speak of the crucifixion-resurrection, as if it were one word. The crucifixion is not a defeat that has to be remedied by the resurrection, but the crucifixion was the atonement for our sins, which is assured beyond all doubt in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. My mom may not have liked the crucifix, but it does help us remember the truth of what Jesus says in our text today—that He lays down His life, but He will take it back. He has the authority to do so. He does it in accordance with God’s plan for our salvation.

Read through the book of Acts. You will quickly see that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were key to the life of the church. Over and over the apostles and the evangelists witness to the resurrection—and if you are going to speak of a Lord who came to life, you have to talk about a Saviour who died. Read 1 Corinthians 15, the great *resurrection chapter*. Paul makes it clear just how important the resurrection is for our world and for our faith. The resurrection is the key to the promise that Jesus made in our Gospel lesson today when He said: **“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”** (John 10:27–28, ESV) It is the truth of the resurrection that enables that joyous praise in heaven in our Epistle lesson today: **“behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”**” (Revelation 7:9–10, ESV)

When we confess in the creed that “on the third day, He rose again from the dead”, we are doing much more than simply making a passing remark to an historical event, as certain as that event is. Rather, we are stating the heart and core of our faith: that Jesus died to take away our sins, and rose again, just as He promised (or, to say it in the words of the Nicene Creed, “on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures). Both the Old Testament and the New Testament make it clear that the resurrection will come, for this is God’s plan for our salvation.

As we were discussing this sermon series on the *Steps of Exaltation*, Pastor Eric and I mused over whether we need to have another sermon, so close to Easter, which focusses on the idea that Christ rose from the dead. Wouldn’t it be repetitive? Isn’t that just Easter all over again? Our focus on this step of exaltation from the creed falls on Good Shepherd Sunday. We could talk about the Good Shepherd. It is also Mother’s Day. We can, and do, give thanks to God for the gift of mothers. Yet the most amazing news of all is still that Christ, crucified for us, has risen just as He said He would. I would suggest that we can never rejoice in this news too much, or hear that message too often.

Of course, that shouldn’t be a hard sell for the faithful members of God’s church. In these post-Easter weeks, as we remember

the resurrection appearances of our Lord, we assure ourselves over and over that Alleluia! Christ is risen! Every Sunday is a little Easter. That is why, already in the times of the apostles, Sunday was known as *“the Lord’s day”* (Revelation 1:10, ESV), in honour of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the key reason why Christians chose Sunday as their day of worship, rather than the Jewish Sabbath, familiar to many of those early Christians.

And so, we rejoice today to know that Jesus Christ rose on the third day. The Good Shepherd says to us in our text today: *“I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

We are so blessed in the care of the Good Shepherd, who gives His life for the sheep. If Christ had not taken our place on the cross to suffer and die for our sins, there would be no forgiveness, no hope, no comfort in the face of death. Again, this isn’t a mistake. It isn’t an accident. The Good Shepherd deliberately, willingly, and lovingly lays down His life for the sheep. While the chief priests may have thought that they were the ones ending Jesus’ life, He makes it clear that no one takes His life. Rather, He gives us for you, for me, and for the whole world. But the same Jesus who gives His life is the One who has the power and authority to take it up again. His authority is greater than death. It is the declaration that He is God and Lord.

The earliest creed or confession the church was simply, “Jesus Christ is Lord!”. After the Lord’s Prayer, it is the oldest part of the liturgy of the Christian Church. Paul speaks of this confession, but he also adds to it the importance of the resurrection. He writes, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: *“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* (Romans 10:9, ESV)

The term, “Lord” was the confession that Jesus was truly God. The proof, if you will, of that divinity was found in the undeniable fact that Jesus rose again on the third day. There are four very comforting assurances we have from the resurrection. The resurrection declares that Jesus is the Son of God. It shows beyond doubt that His teaching is true. It is the declaration that the Father has accepted Christ’s sacrifice for the reconciliation of the world. And it assures all who believe in Christ that they, too will rise to eternal life. This *step of exaltation* seems to be such a tiny thing in the creed, that “on the third day He rose again from the dead”. Yet, again, everything we believe is tied to the assurance of these words. It is also the only source of real and lasting hope in our world.

And how we need that hope! We are Easter people, living in a Good Friday world. We see the problems, cares, sinfulness, uncertainty, helplessness, and death of this world. This past week, 10 years after the school shooting in Columbine, two students in Colorado attacked their classmates with guns. One student was killed as he lunged at a shooter, giving his classmates time to take cover. Two other students then helped subdue one of the gunmen. This is thought to be the 115th mass shooting in the US in 2019. We’ve seen some similar craziness here in Canada. We wonder what can drive people to such evil acts. We wonder the same thing when we see the persecution of Christians around the world. There were those Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, but there are so many like them day after day. In fact, a study sponsored by the British government has found that religious persecution around the world is taking place on a scale and intensity that few people have realized. According to the report, “one third of the world’s population suffers from religious persecution in some form, with Christians being the most persecuted group.”

How do we face the future in this anti-Christian world? How do we deal with the violence and evil we see around us? For that matter, how do we help people to see that there is hope in a world that can seem to hopeless?

The answer is in the exalted Lord; in that Saviour who died, but who lives: the crucified-resurrected one. Our loving Good Shepherd leads us through the struggles of life. He assures us that He lays down His life, as He pays the whole punishment for our sins. But He takes back His life. He rises again from the dead. *“He lives to silence all my fears, He lives to wipe away my tears; He lives to calm my troubled heart, He lives all blessings to impart.”* (LSB 461, st. 5)

The exalted, risen Lord also gives us that life. *“He lives and grants me daily breath; He lives, and I shall conquer death: He lives my mansion to prepare; He lives to bring me safely there.”* (LSB 461, st. 7)

What a joyous hope we confess in the creed. We rejoice in the exalted Lord. He is living and life-giving. Praise be to our Shepherd, who is with us and in whom we will live forevermore! Amen.