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Easter 6 Series C 2019

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Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 26

He is risen! The world is scratching its head at us right now for still saying that, but we are marching to the beat of a very different drummer. Delight in that and don't deny it. We are Christ's people on his calendar and every Sunday is an Easter celebration. He has not called us to be like the world but to be his presence in the world. Being folks who in faith anticipate and long for resurrection is just one way we do that.



The readings of this Sunday ask us to think about the resurrection in some very interesting ways.

Our first reading from Acts has Paul, some decades after the resurrection of Jesus, obeying a summons by some fellow in a vision to visit Europe with the Gospel. This is our story, folks, when the Gospel comes to our forebears! There he meets a wealthy woman who, moved by the Gospel, does something really beautiful and generous. She supports Paul and his companions and offers them hospitality. I really think this is a resurrection moment. The kingdom comes to her and she is never again the same. A new life begins that day she hears Paul preach on the banks of the river outside of Philippi.

In the second reading, from the final chapters of Revelation, we are confronted with the sheer enormity and beauty of heaven itself. John describes a place which is overwhelming his language resources. He tells of gold as clear as glass, gates made of a single pearl, and foundations of precious stones with apostolic names. Resurrection is big. Resurrection is beautiful. Like a city with gates made of a single pearl, it boggles the mind and exceeds our wildest expectations. No fiction writer would ever think up something this wild.

Then, in two Gospel readings Jesus speaks and acts, but both of them, the words and the deeds, really accomplish much the same thing. Cripples are given to walk. The healing miracle entails a paralytic whom Jesus simply commands to get up. He does. The other miracle is perhaps a little more subtle. Jesus addresses his disciples on that Thursday of his betrayal and speaks of their impending desertion and abandonment of their Lord. He knows it is coming, but his eyes are already on what will need to come next, their healing, so they too may walk again, the same healing he performed for Saul of Tarsus on that road to Damascus that eventually took a long detour to Philippi.

As I looked back on prior notes for this Sunday, years ago we were contending with the unfolding horror of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the gulf. After that we were talking about Boston bombings and Newtown school shooting. What is on our plate today? Elections and

convention? Do we focus on earthquakes, storms, flooding, or tragedy in other places or tragedies much closer to home? God's Word is amazing in that it always has something to say.

Collect of the Day

O God, giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Isn't this another interesting prayer? God gives all things good; that by itself is a radical position to take for much of the world. They look for good things from all sorts of places, nature, money, etc. But isn't that the very nature of worship? One's God is always the thing you believe will deliver "good" to you. You worship that "god" no matter what it is. You bring it your best and look longingly for that "god's" favor.

We want this good giving God, by the in-breathing of the Spirit, to give us to think right things and by his guiding to get those right things done.

What are the right things we are supposed to think?

Right Doctrine?

Proper Relationship?

Forgiveness?

Just what is the right thinking that we are praying for here? This is a tough question. Is it perhaps all of the choices above? We are admonished to take every thought captive and to set our mind on heavenly things. Paul urges us in Philippians 4:8 to think about the noble, true, beautiful, right, good, excellent things. Does the prayer urge us then to think the things that are born of love and not fear, they build and edify, they don't tear down and hurt.

To what do you point when you would say to your people, "Look, the merciful guidance of the Lord?" Just what does merciful guidance look like? What are the right things we are supposed to do, or "accomplish" as the prayer requests because we have had the right thinking?

Social justice?

Kingdom Growth?

Relational harmony?

Generosity? Sharing of our material things/goods "goods"

Evangelism?

What are the right deed or deeds we are to accomplish?

I believe that how we answer this will say as much about us as it will say about the prayer itself

So is this a stewardship sermon? We live lives of gratitude. Or is it something else? The preacher might really like to read the book by Brother Lawrence entitled "Practicing the Presence of Christ"

Notice to that there is no result of this. Usually there is a "so that your church may grow..." sort of line at the end. Not here, the result is so obvious we don't need to say it. Thinking and doing the right things is end in of itself.

Readings

Acts 16:9-15 The opening words of the paragraph seemed necessary for this. Paul was struggling to find the right direction when he has this vision. Are we in a similar struggle in North American Christianity?

⁶ And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Another vision. As we asked last week can any of us imagine that we might stand up in front of our congregations and suggest that we had a vision and should therefore change our plans? Yet, how often are not biblical narratives predicated upon someone's vision?

Paul sees a Macedonian man, probably identified by peculiar dress. I have read somewhere that Mayans can tell you what village someone is from by the pattern of the blankets they weave and wear. Perhaps it was his accent. We would immediately be able to tell a Scotsman or an Australian by their accent. However Paul identifies the fellow, the man wants Paul to come and help them.

Paul's response is "immediate." They are going to Macedonia in response to this vision. What does that tell you about Paul? How did he reach that conclusion? I wish I had that certainty sometimes.

Luke gives the itinerary, mostly through port towns and highway stops through northern Asia Minor, the Aegean Sea and northern Greece. (This is, interestingly enough, almost the exact route of the refugees who were coming from Turkey - Asia Minor - to Greece a few years ago.) Paul and his companions work their way up to Philippi. This is actually a very important place. This is where Augustus and Marc Antony finally tracked down Brutus and the rest of the assassins of Julius Caesar and defeated the republican forces who had gathered around them in a very important battle. This is sort of the Bunker Hill or Gettysburg of the Roman Empire.

The Romans had memorialized these events by establishing a large colony here of retired military men. To live in Philippi was the equivalent of living on the Italian peninsula in their minds and it conferred on the inhabitants a status and certain rights which citizens of conquered lands did not share. The city is also a major center on the Via Egnatia, a principle overland trade route which linked the wealthy area around Byzantium with the ports of Macedonia. It was an important regional center in the economy of that part of the Empire. Paul has chosen a central location here. He is not just blindly following this vision but he has read his demographic study from the ancient version of the LCEF and made some wise decisions here.

Paul's usual modus operandi was to head to the Synagogue, but there does not appear to be one. In the absence of the Synagogue they head to the river, which seems to be the place where the small Jewish communities would often meet to pray if they found themselves in a community whose population of Jews was too small to support a self-standing synagogue.

They run into Lydia, a woman who sells purple cloth. The dyes for purple were extremely expensive and thus the cloth was highly valued. She may be hawking shirts and clothes, but this woman is not in a stall or on the street corner, she is in Macy's or Nordstrom's or Saks 5th Avenue. This is a luxury product which meant she was rubbing elbows with very wealthy and upper crust people.

She is described as one who worshipped God, but clearly had not heard of Jesus. There is a great debate which rages within current scholarship about just how much the general population knew about Jews and they thought of them. It seems that the knowledge was fairly wide spread. Horace can joke about Romans who pretend to be Jews to get out of work ("I can't help you, it's a Sabbath!") in a hilarious scene set in Rome in Sermon 9 about 70 years before Paul shows up in Philippi. The modern debate is about how many and who were the god fearing/worshipping non-Jews, as Lydia seems to be one. They were not likely full converts but folks who honored the Jewish faith and worshipped God and may have to some extent observed some of the dietary and other restrictions. It was an age when people were clearly seeking meaning and spiritual comfort. Many found it in Judaism which was very different from their own and other religions. Today she might be like that spiritual seeker who goes on a retreat at a local monastery or comes to church but never actually joins.

Is this a text to build upon the text from last week? Peter was led to break through a barrier to the gentile community, and now another barrier is broken down – Paul brings this to Europe and to a woman. Last week, the Spirit worked hard on Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians, but

this week we see the same Spirit working both on Paul in the form of the vision and on Lydia. He opens her heart and she responds.

Paul was going somewhere – but he got direction from the Spirit.

Lydia was a God Worshiper and a full convert to Judaism because of the rigors of the Kosher and other rules? Was it hard to be a seller of purple cloth and not have ham sandwiches with clients? Do we set up the same barriers to people with our Germanic or other cultural issues?

The Lord opened her heart to hear what Paul said. This is the resurrected Jesus acting. He gives faith to people today too. She and her whole household were baptized. This might have been a considerable number of people if, as we surmise, she was a wealthy woman. Ancient Roman houses, a “domus” as they were called, were quite large. The atrium area in such a house might have easily contained over 100 people, so when Paul writes the church that meets in someone’s house, don’t think of a small group in your living room. There may have been dozens of people involved, but notice it says nothing about her husband. It is very unlikely that she was single. In the ancient world that sort of a successful woman did not often happen; she was most likely married, but these marriages were not romantic or emotional unions but most often about status and progeny. A woman in a wealthy home might be quite independent and only see her husband occasionally. She also would be granted virtual control of the home if the husband was frequently travelling. It is not at all surprising that this would not mention his name or his presence in all this. Who knows what he thought, he might not have even cared.

She “prevails” upon Paul and his companions to lodge at her house. This also was a frequent thing in the ancient world. There were not really inns or hotels like we think of them. Most large homes had guest quarters. In a very large house the slave quarters alone would have been pretty extensive.

I wonder if we have we let Madison Avenue and sociology define the religious experience for us? We tend to think of religion in the same sort of a model as we think of shopping, it all depends on what we want and desire. There are even whole church planting and growth schemes which are based on this idea. But does that really describe a person’s conversion? Lydia appears to have been listen and God opened her heart and life to what Paul was saying. This is a lot of fun to watch happen in a human being. Too many of our folks are discouraged and don’t think this actually happens. They think the reason people will come to church is if we do it right, if we present the right program or the right music or the right sort of church. We imagine that successful church is a church that is marketed properly, as if we somehow are the ones who make the Christians. But in truth, God is at work here.

This story is perhaps of great value to us simply because it is the conversion and sanctification of a woman who would fit reasonably well into any of our communities. Lydia is a woman who might be our neighbor. She is intelligent, she is business savvy, and she is part of the merchant class, about the closest thing the ancient Mediterranean basin saw to a middle class. She hears the Word and responds to it, generously. I really do believe that this sort of conversion

experience is something we see too little of and have imagined that somehow it doesn't happen anymore. Is that because we don't have our eyes open or is it because this sort of thing is not happening very often? What is more, deprived of seeing it, our ministry too often grows dreary and stale. We don't really know why we are doing this, we just do. We have forgotten the beautiful joy of seeing the light of Christ brighten the face of a sinner. It is a really delightful thing to see.

We thought there were three sermons in here.

- 1. Lydia is a woman – in the first century such people were largely invisible. Luke has her portrayed as an intelligent, decisive, proactive human being. He does not typecast her into one of the roles which were common in first century literature, but he really sees her.*
- 2. The conversion of Lydia – this happens by a very Lutheran sequence. The lord opens her heart, she believes, she is baptized, she then overflows with the work – she opens her house to Paul.*
- 3. The monergism of God in this. He opens her heart.*

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us, Selah
² that your way may be known on earth,
your saving power among all nations.
³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!
⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth. Selah
⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!
⁶ The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, shall bless us.
⁷ God shall bless us;
let all the ends of the earth fear him!

Revelation 21:9-14, 21-7 *I restored the verses which were elided.*

⁹ Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like

a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—
¹³ on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴ And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵ And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. ¹⁶ The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷ He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. ¹⁸ The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹ The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰ the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. ²¹ And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.

²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Just a random thought here: When people have one of the near death experiences they almost always involve light. What that means, I am not sure. But there it is. John sees a heaven in which there is no need for sun or moon. It is light all by itself.

I think that the persecuted people to whom John wrote this would have read this and had hope. Any Christian who has stood at the grave of a loved one knows a little of this hope. John describes a beautiful place and asks us to imagine it. For the persecuted Christians who were perhaps running for their lives, this might have seemed far away, but John asks them to imagine this and live there. That imagination is key – this is not an intellectual text which we understand as much as we experience. The preacher will want to remember that and will likely struggle to preach that way. We are very used to understanding sermons, not feeling them. But the intellect is only one way to reach someone, and it is not always the best way. John asks us to feel. If we are persecuted outcasts, mourning and afraid – does John simply invite us to take a look at home and feel like it is home, our home, my home, where I belong? How does that preach? How do I preach that sermon?

Last week, John saw the people of God coming down from the sky, adorned like bride for her groom. In this second element of the vision he sees the physical city itself. Mark Powell relates that Revelation needs to be experienced more than understood, and there is significant truth to

that. John vividly describes this in detail which can overwhelm the modern reader. This may be why the editors of the pericope omitted several verses. They may have also imagined the great pain on the faces of parishioners and lay readers alike when they thought of trying to pronounce all the gemstone names and work through all the cubits and measurements. If that is the case, it speaks simply to our fickleness and our feeble ability to listen.

I think these omitted things are actually rather important. Each foundational level, emblazoned with the name of an apostle is worth stopping and looking at. It is simply worth knowing the measurement not because we need to know, but because it is good to slow down and look closely here. I love that the gates are made of a singular massive pearl. Just what is gold as transparent as glass? I am not sure that this is really something I understand. I should stop and take a look at that.

The preacher will most likely want, however, to pay his closest attention to the paragraph that starts at verse 22. There is no temple in this city; that is because Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple. The purpose of a temple is to give access and focus to the relationship with God. A temple opens a door to God. There is no wall anymore, there is no need for a temple when you have constant and perfect relationship with God. Another way to say it is that the whole city is the temple.

There is also no sun nor moon in this city. The radiance of God and the Lamb supply its light. If you remember the description, this place is a perfect cube, but it is massive. Each side of this cube is 12,000 stadia and there are just under 9 stadia in a mile. I once computed this and discovered that if one corner was here in Portland, the other corner would be down around Phoenix, and remember, that is only one side, there are six equal sides, this is that high as well. You can fit a lot of people in that much space! But think how brightly God and the Lamb shine to supply light to that vast architecture.

The nations of the earth will walk by the light of this city, the light which is the Lamb and God. The kings will bring their treasures inside it. The gates will never close, for there will be no enemy who would attack this city. It is always day, never night. God will never leave it, the light of the Lamb will never grow dim. There is no waxing and waning of the moon, no cloudy days.

But the unclean and the destable, all that is false, will never pass those gates. Only the pure, only those whose names are written in the book of life pass through those gates. You really want your name written in that book. Remember back in chapter 5 when the book was first introduced to us and it had seven seals no one could open? John wept bitterly but was comforted when the Lamb who had been slain was able to break those seals. God wrote your name in that book on the day you were baptized. This is the book which Jesus opened when he took his place on the throne, looking like a lamb who had been slain, with all the power and the wisdom (seven horns and seven eyes.)

For the Christian I think the preacher really needs to examine the value of contemplating heaven. Asking a sinner to contemplate heaven can be an act of pure and vicious law. Heaven's

perfect attributes can be the white backdrop against which our sinful stain shows up all the more distinctly. When we speak of heaven's perfection the terrorized conscience can come to the conclusion that I don't belong there and have no hope of ever getting there. This is especially true of the last lines of this text when John tells us that nothing false will enter therein. Who doesn't gulp a little when he hears that? If you don't, you might be really good at lying to yourself.

But there is also a gospel way to do this. In a sense it gives the hearer vision and a hopeful expectation. This preaching of heaven sets their eyes on things above and when attached to the wholesome promise that this is where Jesus brings us, Christ gives us hope and peace and inexpressible joy in that contemplation.

Behind the altar at my second parish was a wonderful window. Its colors were incredibly bright and vibrant. But what I loved most about it was that it had no meaning other than beauty. It had been the bottom third of a massive stairway window in a sugar baron's mansion in San Francisco and had been built in the late 1800's when Tiffany was revolutionizing stained glass in North America. There was no symbol embedded in the window, there was no message or meaning to it. But when you looked toward that altar and the sacrament which was on it, when you looked through that altar and those elements, you saw something which existed solely because it was beautiful. When I went back to visit a few years ago, I was saddened to see that they had been bothered by this lack of clear symbolism and placed a large cross over the window. The window was still there, beautiful behind the cross, but we apparently needed the message imposed over the beauty. I am not sure that I agree.

Our age and culture have largely forgotten the whole concept of beauty and as a result we have lost the ability to contemplate it. I find myself churning through museums sometimes, in some misguided attempt to see as much as I can. I need to slow down and sit in front of a painting and drink it all in. Better to see a couple or three of them in a visit and come back, than to have skimmed the whole collection. We live in a utilitarian age when poetry is a dying art and children's books are filled with the miserable morality of Barney and his ilk. As long as it promotes some sort of agreed upon virtue like diversity and inclusion, you can publish insipid trash. But to be beautiful simply to be beautiful is hard to imagine and even harder to market. This affects even our churches and the art which covers our bulletins or the things we put in our chancels. It has to have some message in order to sell it to folks. But God simply is beautiful and his heaven is too.

Can we preach that?

Should we preach that? This side of heaven we only know that through the ugliness of the cross. These are not easy questions for the preacher but they are questions we must consider. There is room for much disagreement here.

John 16:23-33 There is a second reading provided as an option and it is discussed below

²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

²⁹ His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰ Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹ Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

There are alternate Gospel readings for today, I will briefly comment on them both. My personal draw is toward the second, but the first one continues the themes of last week.

Last week Jesus told us that he gives an unassailable joy, a joy which the world cannot take away. Today he speaks of a courage, a courage which is rooted not in our victory but in him. In truth, our victory may be far off. He speaks of us being scattered and even leaving Christ alone. He references his day of trial and death, but also this day. Jesus speaks to his feckless disciples not to chide, warn, or even condemn them, though they surely deserve it. He speaks to them to give them peace, because in the world they will have tribulation, but in him they have peace. Though they will each abandon him, some more spectacularly than others, He will not leave them, he will not abandon them, he will overcome the world. They will know his peace.

There are three places I think that the preacher may want to look here.

In the first paragraph Jesus exhorts his disciples to pray in his name, and promises them that those prayers are heard and answered. The fullness of their joy hangs on their prayers being answered in Christ. He is the high priest who connects God and the world, the gateway, the access point. In the verses which immediately follow this Jesus will pray for them and for us.

The second point comes at the end of the reading in which Jesus tells them that they will surely run away. But he tells them so they may have peace, not fear. He knows that you are a failure as a follower, that is why he came to seek and save the lost, that is why he came to die for this world's sin, all of it, even yours. He has overcome the world, even that world that has so frightened me and caused me to run away. He would that we take heart today, because he has

won the victory over my sin, the real thing that resides in my heart, which makes me afraid even of God. He has overcome the world. So now, even when I turn my eye inward and I see my own miserable self, I know that Jesus has overcome that too. Jesus speaks hours before his disciples will betray and abandon him, he is concerned that they will feel that they have lost their opportunity, their chance at heaven. He tells them that he knows this will happen, he loves them anyway, he has overcome even the fear and the deceit which resides at the heart of any of us.

The third might be a resonance with the

Verse 23 has occasioned some discussion in the past. Jesus seems to promise us that we get what we ask for. Yet, all of us have had the prayer denied. While mature faith has often wrestled through this, there are many who continue to struggle with these words of Jesus. What do we say about them? The wisdom of the group from years past was not an easy or a quick answer. This is hard.

We have to separate want from need.

God's time is not our time – he may be giving, but it seems like a long time to us. It is frustrating to us.

Is the request really in the name of Jesus? Indeed is the Ferrari a prayer made in faith? But what about the sincere and faithful request to see a congregation thrive or a sick person's health. Is this a matter of the alignment of our will with God's will? (See the discussion under the Collect.)

The struggle seems to be that Jesus promises God will give, but that is not our experience.

Other Scriptural places? Matthew 18 has a similar sentiment. Paul in II Corinthians says that in Christ all things belong to us. (My neighbors new Volvo?)

Ultimately we have a challenge in this text. How do we understand this promise? It seems that we have a promise which is not being fulfilled.

We thought that perhaps if we were not seeing our prayers answered, it may be that we are asking for something outside of God's will.

This is not a word which can be read in isolation. Paul prayed for healing, it did not happen. This is not a simple answer, and the desire for a simple answer may not be reasonable. God is quite willing to let us be uncomfortable sometimes.

OR John 5:1-9

After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

² Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. ³ In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One

man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” ⁷ The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” ⁹ And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath.

The faithful reader of the text will notice that there is an omission here. Where is the bit about the angel stirring the water? In fact, the careful reader might just wonder where verse 4 is! It is not in our best and oldest manuscripts so it is not in here. You may want to be aware of this and expect at least one old codger who has the KJV memorized to bring it up. It is one of the very few places in the NT where we suspect a serious textual corruption crept into the text over the 1500 years or so that the text was transmitted by manually copying texts. There are a couple of other ones. Remember, however, that for a text of this length and of this complexity, the manuscript evidence bears witness to the careful copying and Spirit driven love of this Word by the Christians who engaged in that task. They did very, very well.

It is a feast of the Jews – John wants you to know that. All these feasts of the Jews were pointing to the salvation of God’s OT people. They all had God’s great rescue at the center of their story. As one Jewish musical group summed up all Jewish festivals: “They tried to kills us, we got away, let’s eat.”

There is in Jerusalem...is there? John’s Gospel was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when much of the city was reduced to rubble, the temple burned and many of the inhabitants fled. Indeed, John’s own departure from Jerusalem may date to that time. Was there still this pool there? Did it still have five roofed colonnades? Today, of course, only in an archeologist’s reconstructed sense is this still there. But John asks us to imagine ourselves there. The enlightenment shut the door on imagination as a viable way to know. John’s words of course were written before the Enlightenment and crossing over that barrier would have us open our imagination again. John asks us to imagine a day when these things were still true.

There is a pool surrounded by invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed. The deal was that occasionally the water was stirred. Was it an imaginative scribe who described an angel stirring those waters? Was it really some sort of geological activity such as one might find at Yellowstone? Does it really matter? John asks us to remember this event with him, a place which is no longer really there, a pool in which no water is to be found today, but you can almost sense it with John as he retells this story.

He singles out a man who has lain by this pool in the hope that he might be healed for 38 years. Imagine that with John, what a testament to hope. What a testament to futility. Always, on the rare day that the water was stirred, his ailment kept him from the pool. No one had the time to

wait there with him, on the off chance that today was the day. And so he watched others reach those healing waters first.

The man by the pool has his eyes on the impossibly distant healing of that pool. He will probably die before it happens, but he comes every day. Always someone who is not quite so disabled gets there first and he misses out. Little does he realize that the health of the whole world is standing right there in front of him, talking to him. When Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed, he can only think of how he will get in the water. Jesus needs no water, he commands the invalid to rise, take his mat and head home.

Of course this is a Sabbath day. When you read the Gospels you sometimes have to wonder if Jesus did any miracles the other six days of the week. The teachers of the Law will grouse about this, but this is another of the signs of Jesus in John, a sign which points to Christ as the savior of the World. Those who have hoped long and fervently, those whose lives have seemed to be futility, those whose cases seem so forlorn find their prayers answered in the man who stands before this lame man this day.

The paralytic presents a very interesting contrast and way to analyze the human will. The man was ruled by circumstance. He wanted to walk. He wanted to get to the water and be healed. He was unable. The circumstances of his condition and the competition for that one healing meant he never made it. His will, no matter how strong, could not get him to the water. Now, in this text, the king stood before him and said he should get up, the very thing he wanted to do. And he did get up. It was not his will but the command of the Lord which made that happen. But notice that when Jesus asked if he wants to be healed, his gaze was still firmly fixed on the water. He was not looking at the one who has been healing through that water for years. How often are we not the same? We make our decisions prudently and reasonably, based on the facts we can see. We limit our world and our mission because we cannot imagine any more. And Jesus says, get up and walk! We turn our eyes to the bank accounts and the resources at hand and say it is impossible. We remember the many failures of our past and we lie forlornly upon our mat.

Do our congregations say the same thing as this man? We are crippled by age and lack of resources and wonder who is going to do something about it. But every Sunday we are confronted by this same Jesus who is our health. We eat him, we hear him, we experience him and we cast about looking for someone to help us. Are we just not getting it? Is Jesus telling us to get up, take up our bed, and walk? What would that look like today?

If you want an excellent reading of this or any section of John, you should pick up

Law and Gospel

1. Like the man in the second Gospel lesson, we often find ourselves looking for salvation in the wrong place, or at least in another place than the one to which Jesus points us. But

though our eyes are cast in the wrong direction, Jesus has ways of showing up right in front of us, with his healing and love.

2. We are not only lousy at seeing the salvation of Jesus, we have a terrible track record of following faithfully. Jesus knows that his disciples are about to betray and desert him in holy week. But he is most concerned about the guilt which will keep them away after they have repented. Before the event we see him reaching out in loving care and concern to the sinners they are. Jesus is not nearly so concerned about what we have done as he is about them and us.
3. Too few of us have known the joy which Paul saw in Philippi, the joy of watching the Gospel take hold in a person's heart and mind and life so that they generously and freely open up to the Kingdom of God like Lydia did. We might be tempted to think that the kingdom of God has lost its potency in our day and age. But God is still at work in this time and place as well. The same Spirit he poured out on the first generation of believers is poured out on us. Have we got a story of one person's life transformed which we can tell, a modern day Lydia whose new faith has delighted us to watch it grow? Can we share that joy and dispel the unbelief which says that God is done working such miracles?
4. John tells us that nothing unclean will ever enter the heavenly gates. One quick look at my life suggests that I have no place in that heavenly city with streets of gold. But this is to forget the promise of Christ, the good work begun in us he will bring to completion. He has overcome the world, in John's Gospel text today, even the world which works inside my heart.
5. God often seems distant, like the man in the second Gospel lesson who could see the healing water but never get there, like the heaven which John describes but seems to be so far from my life, like the experience of Paul with Lydia when we cannot get enough people to give even a little time to staff the nursery or teach a Sunday School class. But Jesus makes a promise to us, God is near – in the name of Jesus, so near that he makes the time to listen to our prayer, so near as to give us a fullness of joy.

Sermon Ideas *I was looking at all the Law/Gospel dynamics and they could each really stand as a sermon idea. Is there one there that you really want to develop or perhaps another section in the readings suggests another message?*

1. The Lamb is our Lamp (Revelation Sermon Series – that the Holy Spirit would tune the ears and turn the eyes of the hearer to focus on Christ as the solution to our deepest problems.)

Have you ever noticed how comfortable we can get with a problem? When a problem first arises it irritates and bothers us, but after a while it is like we have a callous built up in that spot and we don't really notice it anymore. Have we grown so used to the

inadequate 40 watt bulb which allows us to cope with life but doesn't really let us find the stuff we need, keep us stubbing our toe, etc? The Bible at times speaks of God fixing things I never thought of as a problem. There is no sun in heaven, Jesus is the lamp which illumines that place and those lives.

What's the problem with the sun? For an ancient dweller in the Mediterranean basin, the sun was actually a bit of a problem. They built their houses and arranged their days so they would not have to deal with the heat of the sun. It can be really hot in that part of the world. One can imagine that a cool, overcast day without the "sun" was a welcome respite. Being a north-westerer at the end of a long rainy winter, I am rather keen on getting some sun about now. But John's audience saw it differently.

What are the problems we have grown comfortable with? Do we arrange our lives around the greed and self-interest of humanity? If you have tried to sell or buy a car or home recently you realize just how such greed and self-interest distort our lives without us ever considering it. All those forms you have to sign at the title company are there because people have tried to take advantage of buyers and sellers. We think it is normal. Is it?

How many of our jobs are not really there only to content with the problems of sin. Police and medical workers are out of a job in heaven. There is no need for soldiers and firemen. We won't need Roundup to kill the weeds, will we need chemists? Will we need bankers to stash our cash when the streets are paved with gold? These temporary solutions to our current problems are often themselves very good things, but they are not really the solutions to those problems. They are often little better than coping mechanisms. After all, doctors eventually lose all their patients.

What about closer to home? We age and our bodies wear out. That is a pretty real and present problem which we might look forward to Jesus' fixing, but do we want the complete renovation that Jesus has in mind? Yes a body that was in better shape would be appreciated, but do we want him to address my pettiness, my self-interest, my grasping lust for things, or my carnal appetites? I might, in a moment of Lenten piety be given to see them as a problem, but do I really want Jesus to take that away? Can I even imagine a life without it?

John paints a picture for us today of heaven, and it is a strange and beautiful picture. The city is strangely massive. It has precious gems for foundations and pearls for gates. But most peculiar of all, it has no sun or moon for the Lamb is the lamp which illumines the lives of the people therein. John asks us to imagine a life made perfect in every way. Jesus will need to shine brightly in my life to do that. The preacher, may want to consider the second Gospel reading as a possible illustration here. The man by the pool was looking for his solution to the problem, but the real solution was standing right in front of him.

2. “My Cheatin’ Heart” (First Gospel Reading – That the hearer would take comfort and joy from the fact that Christ has long known my feckless heart, and he loves me anyway. Indeed, he so treasures the relationship with his disciples that he lays the groundwork for their return before they commit the sin he knows is coming.)

This sermon is a classic proclamation of Gospel to the terrified conscience. It may seem like we have done this before, but don’t lose sight of the fact that this is a message which bears repetition, lots of repetition. In the same way that we cannot simply say “I love you.” to our spouse and call it good for the next fifty years, we cannot simply tell people God loves them despite themselves and expect that they won’t need to hear that message again and again. Our enemy is constantly whispering in our ears that we are deceiving ourselves and God does not really love us. The rules which fill our lives repeatedly tell us that we have transgressed. The very nature of our human relationships is so often based on merit, history, failure, and scale balancing. Many of our people are sitting in pews wondering if God can really love them. Would you say that he does if you know what is in their hearts, what they are feeling?

This is a sermon to tell that person who is convinced that they are thoroughly wicked that they are right, but God loves them despite that. Jesus speaks amazing words of tenderness and love to his disciples today. This is the reason we are still talking resurrection today. Jesus has risen, he lives, he reigns, he is present in our lives, and he doesn’t turn from us in disgust but he loves us deeply and wholly.

The preacher will want to wrap the Revelation text into this as well. The concluding verse might make a great way to bring the proper law/gospel tension into this text. The unclean and doers of the detestable and false deeds are excluded, but those in the book of life are in. That means God is about the job of purifying me from all my detestable deeds and impure thoughts, so that when the day comes for me to stand before the judgment seat of God, I will belong in heaven. Not because I have amended my sinful life, but because he has wrought the holiness he demands. Indeed, if it were up to me, my sins would surely be included in that list of exclusions. But it is not up to me, Jesus has taken that job, he has washed me clean.

A potent story of forgiveness would work here. Three years ago we spoke of a woman whose past was creeping forward to poison her marriage. Her pastor was able to hear that confession and tell her that Christ had taken all that into himself, it was removed from her shoulders, and taken from this new relationship which God wanted her to have, which God blessed and delighted in with her. Too many of our parishioners think that they have something inside their past or heart which means they are out of God’s favor.

Too often we don’t let the Law do its work on people and we jump to the Gospel/absolution so quickly that it sounds superficial to people. This is the sort of sermon in which you have to let the law grind a little, to bring them to the point of being ready to hear what Jesus says to them.

Outline:

- a. Use the Revelation text to introduce this, this will set up the tension. John says that no one who does the unclean or detestable thing gets in.
 - b. Develop that. We know that we have done those things. Is John telling us that we are excluded from this vision? Here is perhaps where one might start the story of the forgiven sinner. But don't leap to the absolution too fast. Let it sink in. Let them think about this a moment. Let their own memories and deep thoughts accuse them.
 - c. Go to the story of Jesus on the way to Gethsemane with his disciples. He knows what is about to transpire and he is already looking beyond the sin to the forgiveness and he doesn't want them to be so ashamed and afraid on that day when they see him again. He "gives them peace." He urges them to "take heart"
 - d. He has overcome the world, even the world that is in their hearts.
 - e. Now bring it back to John's revelation. Run the text backward. Those whose names are written in the book of life are admitted, and they are admitted purely. Jesus purifies his disciples, he purifies us. Yes, there are things about our lives of which all of us are ashamed, thoughts and words and deeds. They will not follow us through those pearly gates, only the life which Christ has called forth from the font will pass that gate, only the new which Christ begins everyday in us will cross that threshold.
3. "The Kingdom Comes" (Acts Reading – The Christian today might be tempted to look about him/her and think that the Christian movement has run its course. But the Christian movement has always been empowered by the Spirit of God and built on the simple changes that God continues to make in lives like Lydia the seller of Purple clothe who was given the gift of generosity today. We want the hearer to see and believe the same Jesus is at work in this place.)

Perhaps it is the news of the Roman Catholic scandals, perhaps it is a couple of students who discovered Christopher Hitchens, but it seems to be open season on the Church and the kingdom of God. The Christian may well be discouraged and wondering if this Jesus is still working in this broken down collection of miscreants, failures, sinners, and near-do-wells called the Church. This sermon would remind the believer that the work of God's kingdom is not measured in cathedrals and bank accounts, but in lives touched, blessed, and changed. The preacher of this sermon will want to point the hearer to the good work that is happening right here in this community, and the countless communities like it around the world through loving and caring acts of God.

Our district president, Paul Linnemann, frequently notes for us that the Church is healthiest the closer to the ground you get. The parishes, the places where the gospel

meets the sinner, this is where the church really happens. Not in the convention or the election of a president or the rest of the things which seem to occupy minds of many.

This is not some defense or excuse making for the institutional church, it is a redirection from the scandals to the real church of God. We would turn the eyes of our hearers toward the good which God is doing and away from the failures of men.

This preacher will want to have some stories ready of good which happening in your congregation, the story of a baptism, a shut-in, a neighbor fed, or a person whose life has simply been blessed because God has worked something good in that life.

I think this sermon as well wants to get the hearer somewhat excited about seeing that kingdom of God in action. It is a really, really cool thing to see the light of Christ light up a sinners face. I think as I write this of the people in my parishes, the students in my classes, the people whose journey to Christ I have been a part of. These are simply my best memories. Share your versions of this, best if it is commonly held/known, but share this joy. It is pretty infectious when you do.

4. Get up! (Second Gospel Reading: That the Holy Spirit of God would direct the hearer to hear and trust in Jesus and get up out of that pew and into this community.)

This sermon will challenge the complacent congregation. Jesus who was the healing of the lame man stood before him and he stands in our midst right now. We have everything we need right now, we have Christ. But that means we cannot be lounging by the pool anymore, cocktail in hand, assuming that we cannot do anything about the problems we face, rather coping with them as best we can.

This is the anti “if only” sermon. How often, like this man, we don’t say “if only we had more young people...” or “if only we had _____....” fill in the blank. It could be money, it could resources, it could be energy/vitality, it could be a younger pastor, etc. But we have the greatest resource of all, the greatest source of energy.

We don’t need all those “if only’s” what we need we already have. We need Christ, we need his Spirit; both are richly ours.

This sermon wants to empower and equip the members to step into the neighborhood and community in confidence. You may want to use Paul here – he was banging his head against a number of doors and getting rejected, but Jesus called him and he opened doors. He did not stop trying! Eventually it got blessed.

Don’t rely on the world, the solution which seems too obvious and which is working according to the structures and reasonable expectations of the world may not be the way God is doing this. Indeed, he often works through really unlikely means. After all, he called me to this pulpit! The world wants to discourage us by telling us that churches grow when they follow expensive formulae of growth, often involving extortionate consulting fees. It isn’t that hard and at the same time is much harder. Jesus works

through love and that means we have to love the people out there. But that is not how we like to operate.

We love to control the situation – but when we proclaim Jesus is right here and he is the one who calls the shots, we are really surrendering all control and that will make people very nervous. Legalism and rules and fear often are our reactions to this. We want to reassert control through some “righteous” means. But Jesus did not follow the rule book here – notice that it was a Sabbath and he did order the man to pick up his mat and walk. This will cause trouble later in the chapter, but it needs also give us pause. Jesus moving us out may move us out uncomfortably – remember Peter from last week.

Think about this poor guy. He probably thought his whole life would be spent living by the pool. Now Jesus tells him to get up and walk and he has to go out and get a job. Perhaps he will make it big as a motivational speaker, but he no longer has the option of lounging by the pool, waiting. He has to get up and walk. He had not done that for 38 years!



The Ascension by Giotto

Ascension Day – Thursday, May 30

Too often forgotten, this little festival is an important part of the church year. Even if your congregation does not have a tradition of meeting on this day, I encourage you to find some way to remember this important milestone in the church year.

You might include an Ascension hymn at the end of the service on this Sunday, or at the beginning of the service on the next. You certainly also might put these readings in your bulletin as a handout or some sort of a devotional.

The theme of Ascension is not on the absence of Christ, but his presence. Ascension means that he is present differently now, but more

intimately and more closely with us than when he walked the dusty roads of Galilee. Now he is found the face and hands of the one who loves us. He is found in our own hands as we love another. He is in this word we read, this meal of which we eat, the water which washed on that baptismal day. He is right here. Just look at the book of Acts. Jesus floats off into the sky and

appears to have “disappeared” but then the disciples heal the lame, raise the dead, cast out demons, and open the eyes of the blind. They even sound like Jesus when they die a martyr’s death (see Stephen’s death scene in Acts 7). Jesus did not leave, he is just here differently.

How can we keep this day and its important message alive for our people?

Best, we have a service.

But the reality of only 5 people showing up may be problematic. As I said above, consider ending the service this day with an ascension hymn and perhaps precede that with the acts reading or the Luke reading below.

If you print these readings as a handout/devotional given to the members as they leave with an encouragement to use this on Thursday, follow that up with a congregational email/tweet/Facebook post which reminds them to observe Ascension somehow.

Have you got some cash laying around and looking for a fun way to promote your church? Hire a hot air balloonist to come to the church parking lot and give free rides to people. It’s Ascension Day – do something uplifting.

Don’t release a bunch of helium balloons, they are terrible for the environment. You could invite all the neighborhood kids to the church property to fly a kite that day. You could take the youth out on a hike in the hills and climb to the top and read this passage from Acts with them. You might give guided tours of the bell-tower if you have one. If you have a flat roof and your trustees will permit it, go for a walk up there and have a picnic.

I always thought that Prince of Peace Lutheran in Carrollton, Texas had the ultimate Ascension Day possibility. Their parish was located in an old car dealership which had gone bankrupt because the proprietor had grandiose ideas. The space was huge and in the back of the “nave” was a three story glass elevator. I suspect this is why God never moved them to call me to that parish. He knew I would do something really tasteless with it.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, as Your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, ascended into the heavens, so may we also ascend in heart and mind and continually dwell there with Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Psalm 47

¹ Clap your hands, all peoples!

Shout to God with loud songs of joy!

²For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared,
a great king over all the earth.

³He subdued peoples under us,
and nations under our feet.

⁴He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

Selah

⁵God has gone up with a shout,
the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.

⁶Sing praises to God, sing praises!
Sing praises to our King, sing praises!

⁷For God is the King of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm!

⁸God reigns over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.

⁹The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.

For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted!

Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the

saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³and were continually in the temple blessing God.