

April 18, 2021

The Third Sunday of Easter

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: Acts 3:11-21

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He is Risen!

Twenty years ago I was a geologist with the US Forest Service and I had projects across multiple states: Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, North and South Dakota. I was on the road a lot. On one trip, I flew to Denver and picked up the regional geologist and we drove up to western Wyoming to work on a mining claim. I was a little nervous meeting him because he was the person who hired me out of a pool of over 120 other geologists and I wanted to impress him. We chatted on the drive up, comparing about our respective time in the Army and talking geology and mining stuff, when I noticed the red and blue lights in the rear-view mirror. I immediately looked down at the speedometer: I was doing 90 mph. Now, if you've ever driven through WY, you know that it is easy to speed on those roads with few trees or anything else to give you a sense of speed. I had no idea what the speed limit was on that stretch of road, but I knew I was definitely over it. I pulled over, embarrassed that I had forgotten to turn on the cruise control, embarrassed that I was getting my first speeding ticket ever in front of the regional geologist, my boss' boss. When the officer got up to the window I handed him the documents and he asked the question that police officers always ask: "Do you know how fast you were going?" I did know, because I had looked immediately, but that really wasn't the relevant question. The important question was: What was the speed limit? What was the law I should have known about and tried not to break? I didn't try to weasel out of it. I was wrong, even if I didn't know how wrong I was. I got my ticket and paid my fine the same day at the courthouse, and we continued on our way, but the lesson we all learn as kids kept reverberating through my mind: Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

In our epistle reading from Acts chapter three, we walked in on the end of a miraculous healing performed by Peter and John. There was a man who was lame man who begged outside the temple in Jerusalem each day. He had been born with a congenital malady, his legs weak and had never been able to walk properly. His friends would carry him to the temple each day so that he could, with the help of God, receive enough alms to live on. There was no Social Security in those days and precious few "desk jobs" and besides, most people viewed congenital defects as punishment by God. He would have been used to being ignored. One afternoon Peter and John approached the temple to pray and the lame man called out to them, begging for alms. Peter told him that he didn't have any money, "**but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!**" (v.6) And the man was healed. He was able not just to stand, but to walk and leap and run. He was so happy that he cavorted around the two Apostles in the temple courtyard until a crowd gathered, a crowd who knew the man because they saw him every time they went to the temple. They were amazed at this miracle. And Peter used this opportunity to preach to them the Good News of Jesus.

Now, Peter was a good Lutheran so the sermon he gave was both Law and Gospel. And since it was only a couple of months since Jesus had been crucified and raised, and perhaps only a few weeks since Pentecost, Peter went right to the heart of the matter, to the obvious problem that plagued this pious men: They were the same ones who called for the Christ to be crucified. Peter didn't pull any punches, saying **"you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life"** (v.14-15). Peter did not soften the blow. He simply spoke the truth, and the truth often stings, especially God's truth. But he didn't do it out of malice. He did it out of love. He did it out of compassion. He knew firsthand what it was like to betray the Son of Man, for he had denied Jesus three times on the night he was arrested, even after he was warned that he would do it. So Peter knew what he was talking about. Guilt is guilt, even if we don't want to admit it. He said to them, **"And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers,"** (v.17) but he did not say that that made it alright. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. He told them **"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out,"** (v.19).

Sometimes it is easier not to know the law. Our man-made laws are ridiculously complex: We have Federal laws, state laws, local laws... no person can hope to know them all, and yet our elected officials keep adding more, as if more is always better. Just keeping track of those laws that affect us most directly is challenging. If you are a dairy farmer, you have health regulations that you have to follow. If you are a hunter, you have to keep track of the changes to the yearly changes to the hunting regulations and woe to you if you do not. Most of you probably couldn't keep up with all the changes to the tax laws over this past year, so you paid somebody else to keep you out of trouble. There are literally thousands upon thousands of laws and you are responsible for uphold them all. You can't say "I didn't know."

Fortunately for all of us, God's laws are not constantly changing. They are finite and knowable and were summarized by our Lord as, **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."** (Matthew 22:37-39) Jesus encapsulated the Ten Commandments and the moral laws of God in just a few sentences, and yet we still have trouble with those. The trouble is not the complexity of it. The trouble is that we don't want to think about His laws, we want to pretend we are ignorant of them, thinking that God will have to cut us some slack if we don't read the Bible, if we don't go to church that often or attend Bible Study where we grow in knowledge of His revealed Word. Then our lack of knowledge will protect us... or so we think.

You have acted in ignorance, but the time of ignorance has passed. Do not make excuses for your sins, like so many do. Do not pretend your past was perfect or your present is without fault. You don't want to talk to your children about cohabitation because then you would have to admit that you were wrong to do it when you were younger. You don't want to tell them that divorce is a sin because it would mean admitting your own failures before them and, more importantly, before God. There are so many things we have done or failed to do in ignorance, but ignorance of the law

is no excuse. Stop pretending you don't know. Stop hiding from the mirror of the Law. You have to own your past in order to put it behind you, in order to repent of it. We are follow Peter's call: **"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out."**

Your sins are blotted out, by the Author of Life who was slain for you on the cross. Who was raised victorious for you on the third day, who invited the frightened disciples to touch His risen flesh, to touch His holy wounds, who ate in their presence so that they would know the truth. That He had defeated death and was really alive. That He had accomplished everything He told them about, everything God promised through the prophets. Our Lord paid for your weaknesses, for your sins of ignorance and your sins of rebellion, so why do you continue to hide behind them? Jesus doesn't want to punish you. He wants to forgive you. He wants to bleach the stain white.

Rejoice brothers and sisters! Rejoice that our God is so loving, so merciful, that He died for us all, we who certainly did not deserve it. But deserve it or not, He pours out His mercy upon you. He bestows upon you gift after gift, including the gift of His own precious Body for the forgiveness of your sins. The days of ignorance are behind us. The days of blessing are ahead. We have the Risen God as our champion and in His company we are eternally secure.

He is risen! He is risen, indeed. Alleulia!

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp