

Rev. David R. Solum
2nd Sunday of Easter
April 17, 2020
Immanuel Lutheran, Michigan City
John 20:11-29

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The first two Sundays of Easter the disciples were huddled together in a home, behind locked doors, and afraid of the dangers outside. Sound familiar?

But contrary to what some people say about this passage, I don't think that the gathering behind locked doors was entirely *because* they were unbelieving. Yes, we read in the other Gospel accounts that the disciples did not believe the women, although John believed once he saw the empty tomb. By the second week, all but Thomas believed in the resurrection, and, perhaps because Thomas didn't believe yet, they hadn't left for Galilee where the angel and Jesus told them to go. But they still gathered behind locked doors.

We read that the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. Now, if this fear indicated a lack of trust in God, which it might have the first time, since they did not believe the resurrection yet, then certainly this fear was sinful. But it also would be a necessary precaution against the very real danger of the Jews who had crucified their Lord. If the disciples were sinning for staying behind locked doors because of the very likelihood of the Jews breaking in and attacking them, then you'd be sinning to lock your doors because of the slight chance on an intruder. But God has given us many ways to protect ourselves and our belongings from those who would do us

harm. We take proper precautions out of love and respect for the body and life God has given us and for the lives of those entrusted to our care.

Likewise, it is not a sin to take extra precautions in the circumstances under this pandemic. It doesn't show a lack of trust in God to remain home or to wear a mask or to wash hands. It would be testing God to be careless in the face of this disease that the Lord has brought us. Recently, our church council, in an emergency meeting a couple weeks ago, voted to apply for the government's paycheck protection program, which is available to give aid to those small business that might be suffering during this shutdown. Did that show a lack of faith or was it simply a reasonable precaution taken, using our God-given human reason to protect ourselves from an uncertain future? It could go either way, couldn't it? If it was done in fear that God will not provide for us, then it would be sinful. But if it was done trusting that this is one of the avenues through which God can provide for us, this is no sin. And at the moment, God has shown through your joyful and generous giving the last couple weeks, that He has another way in which He wishes to provide for us: through your offerings. Thanks be to God!

One does not take unnecessary risks, but when one is called to love the neighbor, then one should boldly go and take every risk necessary in service to God. Later, the disciples would be called by God and sent out to proclaim the Gospel publicly to all nations. After Pentecost they would risk house and home, life and limb in service to God. But again, they wouldn't *make* themselves martyrs or ask for persecution. But when commanded to stop proclaiming the Gospel, they responded, "We must obey God rather than men," and they started preaching to them right there. And after being beaten, they went into all the public places and continued

proclaiming the Gospel. The risks they took were only in service to God's calling, and where God did not call them, they protected their lives and kept themselves safe. They even ran from danger.

Thus doctors, nurses, and caregivers take risks to care for the sick, but they also wear masks and gloves and protect themselves. It is not necessary, on the other hand, for other people without the same or another similar obligation and calling, to take the same risks, indeed it is careless. We risk everything where God has called us to serve, but we protect ourselves and run from danger where God has not called us.

We're all struggling to find that balance during the pandemic. Do we visit Mom and Dad or not? Do I go to the store? How necessary is this item? When I go, should I wear a mask and gloves or one or the other? Should I get takeout to help the restaurant business or should I stay home and not risk being out for something unnecessary? Do I help my neighbor in need or stay home and avoid the risk of spreading or contracting disease? You're probably questioning a lot of things you're doing or not doing right now.

It is especially helpful to remember where God has called you and you have a responsibility to serve: To your family, community, business, and church. Ask, "Where am I most needed and least needed? What is most necessary for bodily life? In what way am I loving my neighbor by my actions?" Those places where we have an obligation to our neighbor, we must serve. Where we have freedom, we make the best decision we can in good faith and love for our neighbor. And we can be sure that when we are living by faith, in the grace of our baptism, the Holy Spirit

will sanctify our works and make them pleasing to God and helpful to our neighbor. Where we mess up and make poor decisions, Christ will forgive. And He will graciously guard us and watch over us all the way.

One temptation that comes into play as we try to make the best decisions about how to live during this unusual time, is the temptation to be very quick to judge others. People look at others and wonder if they are being as loving and careful as they are with their choices, and if someone chooses to do something differently, they might glare at them and react angrily and call them out on Facebook and complain about them to their friends. This is not the time to be so severely judgmental of others (not that there is ever a time, but especially when we are going through a trial we have not experienced before and we're learning as we go). We can help others be safe and give friendly advice, but should not overstep our bounds and burden people who are only trying to do the right thing and are probably themselves frightened and second guessing a lot of what they are doing. Stick to where you are called to be an authority: as a parent or leader in government or as a manager or owner of a business. You may command people there, but it is not your responsibility to judge the entire world's actions. That's God's job. Shaming people does nothing good for you or for them and is surely not pleasing to God, but is the devil's work, who loves shaming and burdening people's consciences.

In the midst of our uncertainties and fears and failures, Christ stands with His most certain word: "Peace be with you." We are all far from perfect at getting through times like these. Christ stands with the marks on His hands and feet and side and says, "You are forgiven." Christ offered His perfect life under trial for you. Although He was tempted and sorely abused, He did

not waver or hesitate in what He was called to do, but willingly offered Himself for mankind. He stood fast in His love for you and completed God's reconciling work to restore you to Himself.

To give you complete assurance in this, since we all can be doubting Thomases at times, Christ gives you this wonderful promise. He says of all His called servants, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." That is, when we hear the words of Absolution from ordained pastors, we should be just as certain about our forgiveness as if Jesus were standing in front of us saying those words. In addition, Christ also says of them, "He who hears you, hears Me." And He says of the Sacrament of the Altar, "This is my body....This is my blood." And finally, "Where two or three are gathered, there I am in the midst of them." Blessed are those who do not see this, but still believe it. Since His resurrection, Christ has never stopped standing in the midst of His people with forgiveness and life and salvation. He stands in your homes – and wherever you are – in your baptism. He stands at this altar for the Supper. He stands by the kneeling rail for Confession and Absolution. He stands in the pulpit for preaching.

We have this wonderful tradition of processing halfway down the middle aisle for the Gospel reading each Sunday. We aren't doing it right now for the sake of filming and because we have no congregation here. We do this between Christmas and Ascension. I would like to do it all year. The significance of this action is to remember when we hear the Gospel, Christ is there standing in the midst of our congregation proclaiming it to us! Isn't that a wonderful thought? And of course, whether we have a procession or not, this fact remains true. Christ is with you proclaiming His good news to you, even though it is through your phones or tablets or TVs.

Christ doesn't need to obey the stay-at-home order! He comes to us with His gifts and graciously forgives and watches over us with His holy angels. What a comfort!

Christ will continue to do this until you see His face and are able yourselves, in your own resurrected and glorified bodies, to touch the marks of His hands and feet and feel the wound of His side. He will break into our world again and turn all fear and sorrow and pain and anxiety into gladness. And we will have peace forevermore.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be yours in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen!