

April 24, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### Spread the Word: Jesus Lives!

This message is a saving fact  
 This message will be opposed  
 This message will not be stopped

I totally get it. I would have done the same thing. When Jesus died on Friday, his disciples hid in a locked room. It was only logical to expect that the Jewish leaders would arrest and kill them as well. When his disciples learned that Jesus had risen, though, they were bold and brave to tell everyone they could that Jesus lives. This morning, we also will be encouraged to spread the word: Jesus lives.

Here in Acts 5, we see that the Jewish leaders tried to stop the apostles. They arrested them (Luke doesn't say exactly who, but it could have been all of them) and locked them in jail. The next morning, the Sanhedrin got together for the formal trial. When they checked the prison, though, the apostles were gone. God sent an angel to break them out of prison. Maybe the angel put the guards into a trance, unlocked the door and escorted the apostles out. It was not magic. It was a miracle.

After the jail break, the angel told the apostles to go to the temple courts – the most public place in Jerusalem – and tell people about eternal life through the risen Christ. That's where the Jewish leaders found them the next morning. They brought the apostles into the courtroom. This was the same group that sentenced Jesus to death a few months earlier, but the apostles were not scared at all. The High Priest did not even mention the fact that they got out of jail. (He would have had to admit that it was a miracle.) He simply accused the apostles of disobeying a direct order and filling Jerusalem with the good news that Jesus came back to life. Peter and the others calmly explained (:29), “**We must obey God rather than human beings!**” Then they gave a wonderful summary of Jesus' work and boldly proclaimed that Jesus was true God. Nothing was going to stop them from proclaiming that Jesus lives!

#### This message is a saving fact

Just like those Jewish leaders, Bible critics today also try to ignore or explain away the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. Bible critics suggest that the apostles huddled together in their locked room and decided something like this: “*OK, we want the message of love one another that Jesus preached to continue so the best way to do that is to tell people that he is still alive. Even though we ran away in fear when Jesus was arrested and even though we are hiding right now, let's walk out into the open and start telling people that Jesus rose from the dead. If we want people to believe it, though, we really got to sell this story so we've got*

*to be willing to be imprisoned, tortured and killed. Is everyone OK with that?”* There was none of that talk. The message of Jesus coming back to life is not some myth that slowly evolved, or a hoax or a conspiracy. The reality of Easter rests on the testimony of eyewitnesses

When Jesus appeared to the apostles on Easter evening, he invited them touch him to see that he had flesh and bones and was not a ghost. In today's gospel lesson we hear that Thomas was not with them on that first Easter evening. All the others tried to convince Thomas about it, but Thomas refused to believe it until he saw Jesus with his own eyes. So, Jesus appeared to him too. At the end of today's Gospel Lesson, John explained that all these events were written down so that you can have eyewitness evidence that Jesus lives.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, all his enemies had to do was to do was to point to his corpse. They could not do that, of course. Instead, the Jewish leaders suggested that the cowardly disciples suddenly got brave and stole Jesus body while vigilant soldiers at the tomb just happened to fall asleep at that time and never heard a thing as they rolled a huge stone away from the tomb. That remains the greatest fake news story ever. Christianity is not based on a dream about love conquering the world and everyone living in peace, as some Bible critics suggest. Others say the Bible is so old that you cannot trust its accuracy. Do you believe that Alexander the Great existed and conquered most of the civilized world? Sure, you do, because it's in every history book. Credentialed historians, such as B. F. Westcott, Henry Morris, Lee Strobel and others do not blush to call the resurrection of Christ the most certain fact in history, even more certain than the rule of Alexander the Great who lived 300 years before Jesus. If you believe what the history books say about Alexander the Great, then there is no reason not to believe what the Bible says about Jesus. Christianity is based on facts witnessed by many. Jesus lives!

The physical resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith. As you heard last week, since Jesus did rise, then we know:

- That the Bible is true. You can trust it.
- That Jesus is true God. You can turn to him for any help.
- That your sins are truly forgiven. All guilt is gone.
- That there is physical life with a glorified body waiting for us after death.

Jesus lives! It is a saving fact!

#### This message will be opposed

It seems odd that the most certain fact in history is continually opposed in our world. The Jewish leaders did all they could to stomp out Christianity. For the first 300 years after the first Easter, the Roman Empire did all they could to stop the message of the resurrection. Christians were imprisoned, had their property confiscated, their bank accounts emptied, were brutally tortured and cruelly

executed. For over 80 years, the Soviet Union did all it could to get rid of Christianity. Communist China and other countries, especially those dominated by Muslims and Buddhists, continue to do all they can to get rid of Christianity.

We are glad that we don't face that type of persecution, but don't be fooled. The Bible with its message of Jesus as our risen Savior is strongly opposed in the good old USA. In the 1960's, evolution was an established teaching throughout our public schools. We were told that schools should not teach religion (and I agree with that), but now tax dollars are used in schools and museums to tell children that there is no god at all. (Do you see why I get so worked up for Christian education?) Our country was founded on the principles of LIFE, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the 1970's, we were told that the right to life does not extend to children living in the womb. I just read that there is legislation being debated to let mothers kill their babies even after birth. I'm sure you've noticed that abnormal sex behavior is not just tolerated, but is promoted and pushed on us as normal, even to little children in schools. These are not political issues. These things are moral issues that attack the Bible and undermine our faith. Sadly, many of these issues are even promoted by churches who call themselves Christian, some even Lutheran.

I do need to point out, though, that it does not help the cause of Christ when people like me and you and others, sniff with contempt at such Bible skeptics and those who live immoral lives as if our sins were not as bad as theirs. God does not rank sins on a scale from really disgusting to not so bad. All sin, whether it is out there in the world, or in here in our hearts, is spitting in the face of God. Our impure thoughts, our unkind words of gossip along with our thoughtlessly mumbled prayers, and our outward sins make us just as guilty as anyone else. Each and every one of us is a guilty sinner and deserves nothing but God's wrath and eternal punishment. Every day, we need to recognize that we are sinners through and through. And every day we need to look to the cross of Christ and remind ourselves that Jesus died for all of our sins. Every day, we need to look into the empty tomb and remind ourselves that Jesus rose to give us a new and perfect life in heaven. When God had every right to condemn us eternally, God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to life and die and rise for you. Through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit raised you from spiritual death and gave you a new life with Christ – a new life that loves Jesus and wants to live a holy life.

When I would read Acts 5, I used to snicker a bit when the angel broke the apostles out of jail. I would think, "Yes! Those bad people got beat." How shameful of me. People do not need our smugness. They need our Savior. If others live and promote a sinful lifestyle, recognize the root problem – lack of faith. If someone does not know God as a loving and forgiving Savior, then they can only imagine God as a mad monster or try to pretend that he does not exist. Instead of getting angry at them we need to show concern. Instead of scorning them, pray for the

compassionate concern of Jesus who wept over Jerusalem and prayed for those who crucified him. As we grow in faith, may we read Acts 5 and feel sad about those who rejected Jesus. Pray for our country and for those who do not yet know Christ. Pray that God have mercy on their souls in the same way that he touched your soul and brought you to faith. Until people know Jesus as their loving Savior, do not be surprised when they push back against the gospel. Jesus told us that the message of salvation would be opposed.

### **This message will not be stopped**

When the angel broke the apostles out of prison, he told them (:20), "**Tell the people all about this new life.**" If you read further in Acts 5, you'll see that after the apostles' trial, the Jewish leaders decided to release them, but only after they were flogged (Very painful whipping leaving permanent scars on their backs!), and ordered not to talk about Jesus. But the apostles kept spreading the word. The message will not be stopped. Eventually, all of the apostles, except John, were executed for their faith in Jesus. (And, as we heard in our Second Lesson this morning, he was thrown in prison and exiled.) Even after the apostles were gone, the message continued and within a generation, the gospel had spread through most of the world. The Roman Empire did their best to stop the message, but Christianity spread even further. The Soviet Union is gone, but the gospel continues. In spite of the severe persecution of Christians around the world, the army of Christ keeps marching forward. The Easter gospel will continue to march across centuries and continents. This message of life after death through Christ will not be stopped.

My friends, our world, our country, our culture needs Jesus just as much as ever. As the world seems to get darker with unbelief, though, notice that it is even easier for us to shine our light of faith. On the top of our new street sign is our logo with a rising sun expressing our mission statement to shine the light of God's Word. St. Matthew dare not be just a safe haven for WELS people who move to this area. As a congregation and as individuals, we have mission work to do. Pray that God give us the opportunities and the resolve to tell others about Jesus. Reach out in love to a neighbor, a relative, a friend. Maybe ask them if they had a nice Easter and then tell them that your Easter was great as you heard about life after death through Christ. In our Bible class last fall we learned how keep a conversation going with someone. If, for example, they say that Christians are bigots, instead of barking back, "We are not!" you can ask them what they mean by that term. Or, you can ask them what led them to that conclusion. We also need to support and encourage the next generation of pastors and teachers. The need is very real and the work is not always easy and the cost is not always cheap, but we have God's promise to be with us and the promise that his word will not return to him empty. With faith in our hearts and heaven in our future, may we follow the example of the apostles and spread the word. Jesus lives! Amen.