



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Christ is Risen. . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

First, a story that was told by Rev. Dr. James Kegel:

The young man was packing his suitcase for a trip when his friend entered his room. "Well," the traveler said, "I am just about packed. But I need to take a guidebook, a map, a compass, a mirror, a microscope, a telescope, a hammer, a volume of poetry, a few biographies, a songbook, a set of devotional works and the history book that I have been reading." The man's friend looked down at the suitcase and said, "That's impossible. You have only a small space left." His friend took his Bible and put it into the suitcase and said, "The Bible contains all the things I just mentioned."

Folks, over 150 years ago as a result of the Protestant reformation the Bible was recovered for not only the church but also for individual Christians. Not sure how many of you remember the original Martin Luther movie that was made in black and white in 1953 by the Lutheran Church. Well in the beginning of the movie, the Bible was laying in the sanctuary as a "Closed Book". In fact, it was chained to the pulpit in the church. Well, the young actor that played Luther actually opened the Book. Then he began to preach from an open Bible, proclaiming the Gospel message. Pretty clear that the producers of the film wanted us, the viewers of the movie, to understand the importance of Martin Luther in that he broke the chains of a closed book, a forbidden book, to preach the Word of God to those hungry for the message of a loving God.

You know I really dislike when people tell me that they go to a Bible church. Have you ever heard that? Young people seem to say that because they go to a non-denominational church and are not sure we will recognize it because it is not one of the mainline churches. Today, all Christian churches should be Bible churches, churches of an open Bible.

The Bible is not a book just to lay on the coffee table gathering dust until someone in the family is born, is baptized, confirmed, married, or dies and it needs to be written on the title page. The Bible is a book to be read, taken to heart and cherished.

One of the first things I did when I became church council president at St Olaf was to take two classes from Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, one in Old and one in the New Testament. I figured if I was to lead the congregation, I needed to be a bit more savvy and knowledgeable in Scripture. After the first class I fell in love. What a wealth of knowledge about God and who we were and are as his chosen people. It simply tells us what God wants us to believe and do. What better plan for our life do we need?

Yet, it amazed me how many people like me were at St Olaf did not ever read the Bible or have any idea what was between the closed book covers. At St Olaf we started a campaign that we hoped everyone would go through called Spiritual Renewal. Basically, it was to show people how to be a disciple for Christ. There were 6 focal points of being a good disciple: pray daily, worship weekly, give generously, serve, encourage others in their faith journey and you guessed it, read the Bible daily. Our first class on Bible reading, which proved just what I thought. Even the elders of the church could not find the Gospel of Matthew when asked to open their Bibles to the first chapter. I am not telling you this to shame anyone, but reading the Bible should be something we do on a regular basis. It is the inspired Word of God. And if you have not started yet, it's not too late, start reading Scripture. No excuses about it being a big heavy book to carry around like the one on the coffee table. I have Bible.com on my smart phone and it has 73 full versions of the Bible right on it. It weighs only a few ounces and can go anywhere with me. Oh, and it was FREE!

Jesus 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, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." The Bible is God's gift to us. Its words, no matter the version, bear witness to Jesus Christ. The Old Testament talks about a Messiah that is to come and the New Testament tells us that the Messiah has arrived to save the world and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And it is through these words that our faith is strengthened.

The third article of the Apostles creed discusses the Holy Spirit. In the meaning Luther said, "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel." And it goes on to say that God's Word, the Bible, gathers us, enlightens, and sanctifies us. The power of God comes through His Word. It is through God's word being preached, and read that faith is built. Our faith is built on what Scripture says. Some even say that the Bible interprets itself. But that is for another day.

The Bible has at its center Jesus Christ. The reading from Luke today shows Jesus after His resurrection, eating with the disciples. Then Jesus gave them a most gracious gift. "Then He opened their minds to understand the scriptures". Don't you wish God would do that for you? I know I do. Memory is not as good as it used to be, and I often need help in remembering where in Scripture a particular quote is. Everyone with me? Well, this gift of opening the mind of the 11 disciples makes clear to them that the prophets spoke truth that Jesus would suffer, be crucified, be buried and then in three days raise from the dead. They finally understood all that had been told and taught to them by Jesus. The Bible became clear to them.

And we come to understand Scripture when we read through Easter colored glasses. In other words when we see at the center of the Bible Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah. And we have the Holy Spirit to help us clearly read the Bible's words. Through faith we then can see that all of Scripture is written for the faithful. You know it is one thing to read the Bible for historical data or its literary texts. But the point of the Bible is not to prove or disprove science or parts of history.

But rather it is a culmination of the story of Jesus Christ, from anticipation of the Old Testament to the fulfillment of that prophecy in the New.

5 years ago, when I was on sabbatical, one of the things I did was to read the Old Testament straight through, without taking notes, highlighting or even dog-eared pages. I wanted to see if reading would give me a better perspective on the plight of the Israelites and the need for a Savior and it did just that. Well, I have to tell you that by the time I got to Jeremiah, my mind was scattered (not due to old age mind you!). What a story. I was bogged down in the details, that I lost sight of the big picture. Something was missing. I read or listened with historical ears not necessarily always with ears of faith. I did not always invite the Spirit to lead me on that journey. I wanted the whole picture and thought by reading as if the Bible were a novel, I would get that. Don't get me wrong, it was a great exercise, and in retrospect, I think I came away knowing God a bit better than I had prior to my reading. But I have found reading Scripture in smaller bites, can be more rewarding and certainly more faith filled. And so I urge you to join a Bible study group and study Scripture together.

The spirit of the Bible tells us of a loving and forgiving God. One that loves us no matter how many times we stray. He will always be there to pick us up and point us in His direction. Even when God is disappointed in our actions and lack of faith, He is there to forgive us. All those stories of the Old Testament people, from Adam and Eve to Moses and the children of Israel God was always faithful even when His people were not. And it is through Scripture that we see that happen over and over again, until we get to the New Testament where God makes the ultimate sacrifice to send His only Son to walk among us, to be killed by us, and to rise again for us. Over and over, we have that same pattern that culminated on the cross. We needed a Savior and God provided us with one.

The Lutheran take on this is found in the discussion of law and Gospel. The Bible is a book that shows God's judgement and His forgiveness. Scripture to Lutherans is both Law and Gospel, and sometimes even in the same verse. It convicts us of our sin and then we receive forgiveness from our loving Savior, Jesus. Reading text as Law or Gospel reminds us that we cannot save ourselves, no matter what we do. It is only by God's amazing grace that we are given the promise of eternal life.

Sir Walter Scott said to his son-in-law as he lay dying. "Bring me the book". When the young man asked the great author, "Which book, sir?" Scott replied, "there is only one book, the Bible. Bring it to me now."

And so today I encourage you to let your minds be open to reading the only one book, the Bible. Invite the Holy Spirit to direct your understanding of Scripture. The Word of God has the power to build faith, faith in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God. And that folks is how God's grace comes to work in us.

AMEN

Christ is Risen. . . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!