

St. Mark, Evangelist: April 25, 2021**“Connected Ladder of Grace”**

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today we observe the feast of St. Mark, the author of the second Gospel, also known as John Mark. He was originally from Jerusalem, and traveled with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch where they set out on the first missionary journey. When Paul and Barnabas were preparing to go on the second missionary journey, we read in Acts that Barnabas wanted to take Mark along again, but Paul objected because Mark had left them during their first journey. Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas. Eventually Paul and Mark would reconcile, but finally Mark would work mainly with Peter in Rome, where he was asked by the Christians in Rome to write down the preaching of the apostle Peter. Tradition holds that Mark was instrumental in Alexandria, becoming its first bishop, and that he suffered a martyr’s death.¹

With loving joviality, it is joked at the Seminary that Mark is the Lutheran gospel. There is not a lot of frills. It starts with the baptism of Jesus, ends with the Ascension, and Jesus is very down-to-earth throughout; getting dirty, spiting, grabbing tongues, and sticking fingers in ears. One gets the sense reading Mark that time is of the essence. Our Gospel reading for this day is one such highlight; much ground is covered. Jesus appears to the disciples, rebukes their unbelief, restores them and sends them to preach and baptize, ascends into heaven and keeps His promise of continually working through them for the sake of His Church—all done in 6 verses.

Because Mark is often short and to the point, his book gets ridiculed and scorned for being too simple, or an incomplete copy of Matthew. There is even some supposed question to the last verses of his Gospel as not being authentic; which is actually a misnomer, because the earliest manuscripts of papyri have these verses. There are some complete manuscripts that have these verses and some that do not. Why is all of this important for you to know? Because it is from these verses that we hear a deep and important Word of God on His work of grace in baptism and preaching, “[Jesus] said to [the apostles], *‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.*”

¹ *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, St. Mark, Evangelist, pg. 1291

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.²

Every age produces its scoffers, especially directed at the holy, good, and gracious gifts of God. If one can cast doubt upon these words, it then makes it easier to tinker with baptism and preaching, the works of salvation, who can stand in the office of the ministry, and what the office of the ministry is to do. Is it an office that serves babies and sheep, or is it an office that is to be changed by babies and sheep?

Mocking and ridicule is easy to come. It is easy to ridicule faith in One God and Three Persons, the Trinity and Unity in Trinity. It is easy to scoff at the idea of miracles, the authenticity of the Bible, the person of Jesus as God and man, God working in simple words, washing in simple water, and feeding body and blood through simple bread and wine. It is easy to mock and poke-fun at the ideas of heaven and hell. These are all said to go against science and reason, and truthfully, in many ways that is right. Science is a gift that is given to help us understand how things in this visible world work.

We have leaps of technology and understanding of how the body works, and medicine, and health, and plants, and weather; yet, we still cannot answer many more questions. Science cannot tell us exactly where we came from, nor where we are going. It is limited to this visible world. While it is good and useful, we must be careful not to make it a god, nor worship it as such. The starting point is the answer to a very simple question—does man exist as an independent creature, a stand-alone entity, with free-will in all things, as a law unto himself—where what you see is what you get and you are completely free to make all and every decision for yourself; or, is there an invisible world, of which we cannot see or apprehend with the senses, a place where science and reason cannot penetrate, and instead must rely on it to be revealed?

It's that simple. Does God exist or not? Jacob is given a great vision of a ladder, and this is important to think about. Is man connected to the invisible world, where there is both an up and a down? Or has the ladder fallen, or there is no ladder, where all that is and remains is the never-ending horizon?

Despite all the mockery, even with all of the new understandings and technological advances, science has not been able to stave-off death. Life on this earth is not eternal.

² Mark 16:15–16

Day by day the tick of clock is driving towards the tock of the clock, steadily moving to the moment of our bodily death. The things we wanted to change, or repeat, or do over, or do differently, will be left the way they are.

None of us know when that time is up, and so many live in ignorance of that time; but here is the odd thing. We spend at least one third of our life, or more, preparing for a vocation. We prepare well in advance for trips; buying plane tickets, making reservations, planning how best to make every minute count. We make sure there is enough time in the morning to prepare for work, or our kids for school. We even spend much time preparing to go to bed at night. How many prepare for death?

There are ways to prepare for the physical aspects of death. There is pre-funeral planning worksheets that I can give you to put information in order of baptism, confirmation texts, marriage, favorite hymns and verses, and so on. Many arm themselves with knowledge of proper insurance and wills. Some arrange for cemetery plots and monument stones. As we run from doctor to dentist, from surgeon to pharmacist, we know that one day the clock on this earth runs out; how much more important it is for us to be prepared for everlasting life!

In the twinkling of eye the last trumpet will sound, and this is the stronghold importance of Mark 16. The preparation for eternity is God's work; it is by believing and baptism one receives faith and has faith strengthened. Jesus calls the apostles to preach, which is handed down to those who are called and ordained into the office of the holy ministry. At the same time, all baptized believers have a vocation to support and participate in the church and to carry out their various callings in life, so that the Gospel be spread throughout the whole world. The well-known words Mark 16:16 underscores the necessity of faith and baptism. By word and sacrament, earth and heaven are joined, God and man are ever-together, the invisible world is broken forth and apprehended by faith by those in the visible world. There is no allowance for salvation of who has believed but has refused baptism, nor for one who has been baptized but did not, or does not now, believe.

Science cannot answer the question of what happens after death, but the Bible is very clear. There is a heaven and a hell. There is a place of eternal life and eternal death; a place where God is ever-present with His grace and glory and a place where God has removed His gracious presence and all that remains is His presence of wrath.

This simple teaching is not a nice and easy one to preach. It is not an easy pill to swallow. If we can rid ourselves of the clarity and certainty of Mark 16, we can cast doubt on these simple truths and maybe make Christianity more palatable, right?

Many try. Pastor Merciful says, “God is kind. God is love. God would not punish anyone that way.” That pastor is not preaching the true God who says, “***For the wages of sin is death,***”³ and, “***Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.***”⁴

Pastor Wicked, Pastor Twist, says, “If God is just and fair and God is one, then the world will end as it began. There will not be two options in the afterlife, but one. God should exert His authority and justice and wipe out all of the wicked as soon as they die; thereby only having one heaven and no hell.” These are the messages of many funerals today. There is no talk of God’s judgment against sin, or the reality of death and hell, which ignores Jesus’ saving death on the cross. Instead, it is preached that, “Everyone is in heaven. They have served their time here on earth. They all are good people, and they tried really hard, and touched many lives, and so surely God being good, wants that good person with Him.” When Pastor Wicked speaks this way, Jesus is ignored, baptism is done away with, and faith can be non-existent.

Yet, there remains another pastor, The Most Holy Reverend Hopeful, who says, “There has to be a way out of this. We are taught to give second chances on earth, so surely we are given a second chance upon death. Even if you don’t get it all quite right, or have no faith, there will be a sometime to get it right later.” Brothers and sisters, there is no second chances at death. This pastor forgets Hebrews 9, “***It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,***”⁵ and 2 Corinthians 6, “***Behold, now is the day of salvation.***”⁶

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our hope; the message we shout from the rooftops and declare to all nations, that pastors preach and you live, “Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” The Son of God, out of His eternal grace and mercy descended the ladder of humanity, taking on the torments of hell and the wrath of God against sin.

³ Romans 6:23

⁴ John 3:36

⁵ Hebrews 9:27

⁶ 2 Corinthians 6:2

He has paid for your sins in full, “*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*”⁷ While we seek to knock down the ladder and wander off into the horizon, the goodness and mercy of the Lord seeks after us. Christ has rescued us from the jaws of eternal death, and broken the ticking and rattling of the gates of hell.

How do you know this good news is for you? There are accompanying signs. The apostles were given special signs such as preaching the Gospel in languages they didn’t know and things with serpents, which we hear about in Acts. Christ still works with His church. He still gives His Word and signs. His word is spoken openly today. Through His Church, Christ continues to give His gifts.

Even in the midst of pandemic and fear, doubt, uncertainty and death, baptism is administered, the Holy Spirit is given, and faith is strengthened. For you, the called and ordained servant of Christ, in Christ’s stead and by His authority, lays hands upon you in baptism, in sickness, and upon your death bed. Hands are even placed upon your body at death, on your casket as a reminder for all those gathered, that Christ is still working. This faithful body is redeemed, awaiting the resurrection; even as the faithful soul enjoys the bliss of heaven.

The hands of the servant bestow the gifts of the hands of the Savior. And what happens? They are made well. That doesn’t mean just a physical healing, it involves the whole person; which means, that even if physical death should occur, eternal life has been given and bestowed, apprehended and clung to by faith. The ticking clock is done away with and a sundial is given—where no batteries are necessary and the Son of God will give it eternal light.

All of this happens right here. Gathered together under Christ’s Word and Sacraments, this is all for you. It is not your time to show God how great you are; it is the time where God descends the ladder and brings heaven to you. God’s own eternal word is spoken. Christ’s holy body and blood are present for His people to feast. In a world that can only see the horizon, faith here looks up. Sitting in the pews, you are reminded as you have to look up to see here; and what do you see? The cross, the altar, the lectern, and the pulpit—preaching and signs.

⁷ Isaiah 53:6

I know that many Lutherans get nervous when they hear the word signs; and rightly so, as it carries a lot of baggage. Preaching, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper and not mere signs pointing to something, they are ways by which we know exactly where we are what is being given. Just as a city sign doesn't just point to a city, but declares that you are in that city—with everything that goes with it—so, also God's gifts of Word and Sacrament declare and give to you exactly what they say.

The Holy Spirit used Mark to write a Gospel, the good news of salvation, won by Christ and given to you in Word and Sacraments. We thank God for Mark, and the authenticity of His gospel that keeps us ever attached with God, singing of Christ,

“True God, He first
From death has burst
Forth into life, all subduing.
His enemy
Doth vanquished lie;
His death has been death's undoing.
“And yours shall be
Like victory
O'er death and grave,”
Saith He, who gave
His life for us, life renewing.”⁸

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

⁸ With High Delight Let Us Unite LSB 483:2

Prayer of the Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Jubilate)
25 April 2021

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. O Lord, through St. Mark, You show us the importance of Your truth in Word in Sacraments. Shine Your light on those who are caught in error's darkness, that by the Holy Spirit's work they leave their errors and be at peace in Your truth for all people at all times in all places. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Preserve Your Church, O Lord, from every sorrow and mockery of the enemy. In this little while between Christ's resurrection and our own, do not let the threats of persecution, loss or discomfort turn us from the joy and confidence of His redemption. Sustain all preachers faithful to their calling, all confessors steadfast in their trials and all Christians firm in the faith for life. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Hear our prayers for all Christian homes. Preserve all married couples in love and faithfulness; strengthen all parents for their task as teachers of the faith; uphold the unmarried honorable and unashamed in their station; and with good deeds in every home, let the ignorance of foolish people be put to silence by Your divine institution. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty God, it is Your will that every human institution exercise the authority You give them from above to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good. Give us good government at every level, under which we may honor everyone, love the brotherhood and fear God. Above all, let our subjection be offered always for Your sake as sojourners and exiles in this world, and if we must endure suffering, let it be unjustly and mindful of You. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You have promised to send Your holy angels to guard and keep Your children. We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as *Joan, Dennis, & Diane* celebrate their birthdays. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Father, as we live among scoffers and mockery, in broken bodies and minds, we know that we can confidently ask You to lay Your gracious hand upon us, making us well in body and soul; be with those call upon You, the shut-in, the homebound, the sick, the recovering, the oppressed, the lonely, and all who have requested our prayers; [*especially Carmen, Susan, Zoey, Floyd Doughty, and those we name in our hearts*]. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Give joy in the midst of sorrow here at the Sacrament of the Altar. Give repentance, a firm faith and a united confession, that we may have honest fellowship in the blessings of Christ's testament. With consciences thus cleansed from evil and renewed in You, enable us to stand undaunted until the day of visitation. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord God, of Your fatherly goodness You allow Your children to come under Your chastening rod to conform us to Your only begotten Son here in suffering on earth and hereafter in glory. Comfort us by Your Holy Spirit in all temptations and afflictions, that we would not despair, but trust continually in Your Son's promise that our trials will endure but a little while, and then be followed by eternal joy. Grant that we would overcome all evil in patient hope and at last obtain eternal salvation; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**