

"Great Joy" -- Luke 24:50-53

12 May Anno Domini 2002
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho
14 May Anno Domini 2002
The Treasure Valley Circuit Pastors' Conference
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Dear Brothers in the Ministry of the Word,

On the evening of September 19, 1884, as part of his second evening lecture, the Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther addressed and catechized our fathers in the faith, men who would become pastors in your grandfathers' church, concerning the effects of preaching the Law.

"In the first place, the Law tells us what to do, but does not enable us to comply with its commands. ... In the second place, the Law uncovers to man his sins, but offers him no help to get out of them and thus hurls man into despair. In the third place, the Law does indeed produce contrition. It conjures up the terrors of hell, of death, of the wrath of God. But it has not a drop of comfort to offer the sinner. If no additional teaching, besides the Law, is applied to man, he must despair, die, and perish in his sins. Ever since the Fall the Law can produce no other effects in man. Let us ponder this well" (pages 13-14).

On the other hand, the Gospel is the Good News that God the Father sent His Only- Begotten Son into this world via the womb of a virgin in order to be our Redeemer. Jesus, through His active and passive obedience, fulfilled His own Law and atoned for the sins and the sinfulness of all. Christ's substitutionary death on the cross has accomplished a sufficient Ransom for every human being who ever was, who now is and who ever will be. His Resurrection from the dead demonstrates defeat over death and the devil. All of this is for you. God's Incarnation is for you. Jesus' Life is for you. Jesus' Death is for you. His Resurrection is for you.

So also is the Ascension of our Lord for you. Though often overlooked, the Ascension is Good News for you and ought to fill you with Great Joy. Christ's Enthronement to where He had been from eternity, that is, from everlasting to everlasting, is for you and ought to cause you to chant ... "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His Holy Name!" (Psalm 103:1). The sermon text for today is the last four verses of the Gospel Reading for the Ascension of our Lord. Please listen to those verses under the theme of ...

... Great Joy

"Then He [Jesus] led them out to Bethany, and, raising His hands, He blessed them. And it came to pass while He was blessing them, He parted from them and was taken up into the heaven. And they, after worshiping Him, returned into Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the Temple, blessing God."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Dearly beloved, lift up your eyes and behold that little congregation. That small flock is departing from the place where the Ascension of our Lord occurred. Do you not see the congregation traveling on the road going to the holy city? Do you not behold the Ascended Christ's congregation going to that holy place?

We might expect them to be downcast and filled with sorrow, for Jesus the Christ, Who was crucified for the sins of the world, Who is risen from the tomb, Who was with His own such that they could, with their ears, hear the holy Word of the LORD from His mouth and they could, with their eyes, see the holy wounds of God, "parted from them and was taken up into heaven." But no, behold the congregation's countenance as the disciples depart and go. This Bride of Christ journeys with great joy; not just joy, but as the Bible declares ... with "mega-joy." But why this "Great Joy" ?

The overall answer is that these disciples had been properly catechized by Incarnate Christ Who taught them the doctrines of the faith, particularly His Person and His Work, and the disciples understood all these things whatsoever He had told them. In fact, "to them He presented Himself alive after His Passion by many proofs, appearing to them during the forty days, and speaking of the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Specifically, the disciples would be filled with Great Joy as they returned to Jerusalem because:

1.) First, Jesus taught them the truth concerning who He is ... the two natures in the one person ... that Bethlehem's Baby is the I AM of the Burning Bush ... that Galilee's prophet is the Exodus Rock ... that Calvary's Crucified is creation's Creator ... that David's Son is David's Lord ... that this Risen Jew is Israel's Messiah ... "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). This is Emmanuel. This is the Word made flesh and telling them the truth. "Then He said to them, 'These are My Words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled'" (Luke 24:44).

2.) Thus we have already started to touch upon the second reason that the disciples were filled with Great Joy, namely, the active and the passive obedience of the Incarnate Son of God. They were catechized by Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, concerning what He had come to do ... "'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead'" (Luke 24:26-27).

3.) The third reason why the disciples returned to the holy city with Great Joy was that, "lifting up His hands, He blessed them." While the Scriptures do not record the specific words of His blessing, we do know exactly what His hands looked like. On the eighth day, Jesus had said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see My hands" (John 20:27). The hands of Jesus bore the prints of the nails wherein our salvation was wrought. These are the same hands of God that, thirty-two days later, were lifted up during the blessing which Jesus spoke over His little congregation.

4.) Fourth, is the realization of an amazing truth and promise ... that the Ascended Jesus would never leave them for "He has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5). Just

before Moses was called to be with the LORD in Paradise, he told the Church that "It is the LORD Who goes before you; He will be with you" (Deuteronomy 31:8). Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave His Word, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). While Jesus "blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven," He is truly present with His own who gather together in His Name and He is active in His doings. Thus, Luke could write in the first chapter of Acts: "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus BEGAN to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up" (Acts 1:1).

5.) That leads to the fifth reason why the disciples returned with Great Joy was that they were to be the LORD's stewards entrusted with His Word "that repentance to the forgiveness of sins should be preached in His Name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Here they awaited the Trinitarian Festival of Holy Pentecost when the Son would send the Spirit promised of the Father. Here the Church would congregate in the Presence of the LORD God Almighty, and the stewards of the mysteries of God would serve Christ.

"And they returned to Jerusalem with Great Joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God."

So, dearly beloved, lift up your eyes and behold that little congregation. That small flock is approaching the House of the LORD. Do you not see the disciples traveling on the road coming the holy place? Do you not behold the members of the Ascended Christ's congregation coming to Church? Look at them. Do they have Great Joy?

That depends, doesn't it? Are they hearing the preaching of God's Law that always accuses the old sinful nature and serves as a proper prelude to God's gift of repentance, or are they hearing manageable Law that makes man happy and satisfied with a deadly system of synergism? Of such has the prophet declared, "They have healed the wound of My people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14).

Look at those people coming to the Lord's House. Do they have Great Joy? Or, asked another way, have they been properly catechized concerning the "hypostatic union" and the communication of attributes in Jesus the Christ of God. Real Lutherans believe, teach and confess that Jesus Christ is "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary." This is one of the fundamental teachings of Christianity and the neglect of or the departure from this doctrine will lead to a Eutychian Jesus or a Nestorian Jesus or a Mormon Jesus or a Muslim Jesus or Jesus as a new Moses or as a son instead of the Son.

Look at those people coming to the Lord's House. Do they have Great Joy? Are they hearing ... every Sunday and each time when the Church congregates ... are they hearing the Good News of the active and passive obedience of Christ ... of Jesus' substitutionary atonement for all sinfulness of all people and all sins of each person ... of Christ crucified and risen and ascended? If not, why not? This is the Gospel, but it is only Good News and it only creates Great Joy if it is spoken from the mouth of the preacher and heard in the ear of the parishioner.

Look at those people standing in the Lord's House. Do they have Great Joy? Is the message they are hearing one of "repentance to the forgiveness of sins" ? Are they gathering together in the Name of the LORD and in the Presence of the Almighty God, making confession of their sins and hearing the forgiveness of all their sins? Are they shown the nail prints in the hands of Jesus and do hear the LORD's Word of blessing? In other words, is the foremost doctrine of Christianity being taught,

proclaimed, confessed and sung ... is justification by grace through faith directing the form and permeating the content of the Church's song in the Divine Service?

And if your answer is "yes," do not think more of yourself than you ought. If you were perfect in your preaching and teaching and stewardship of the mysteries of God, and no pastor is, then you join the rest of us in confessing "we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). And if your answer is "no," and you have been withholding justification by the grace of God alone through faith alone through Christ alone, then you have nothing to preach in the Church and nothing to proclaim to the nations. There is no message of repentance to the forgiveness of sins and no Great Joy.

So, what is to be said to you shepherds who are cut to the heart with such preaching of the Law? Simply and only the Gospel of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension of your Lord. It is this messenger's privilege to proclaim it to you on this day. Listen to that Word, you shepherds. "Fear not; for behold, I bring you Good News of a Great Joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the City of David, Who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). Men of the Word listen to that Word from the cross pleading on your behalf for all your sins when He petitions, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Those of you whose souls seek the balm that binds up the broken-hearted, hear the Word of God relayed by another messenger who announced, "Fear not; for I know that you seek Jesus Who was crucified. He is not here; for He has risen, as He said" (Matthew 28:5-6). Fear not; for do you not behold the Ascension hands of the Risen Jesus and hear the Lord blessing you? Fear not; for the enthroned and reigning LORD is with you always and will never leave you nor forsake you. Fear not; for the message of repentance to the forgiveness of sins is meant for you as well. Therefore dear baptized, hear the Good News of the LORD your God: You are forgiven in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.