

EASTER SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 April 8, 2012

Mark 16:1-8
 Acts 10:34-43
 I Corinthians 15:1-11
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, have you eaten lunch in the new **Subway** store downtown? I had lunch in the old Subway store out by Pamida a couple of times before and I was pretty much eating there almost all by myself. Friday, when I had lunch at the **new store downtown**, it was busy, busy, busy the whole time I was there. One of the workers said that they were busy from 8:00 a.m. right through when I left there at 2:00 p.m. They had the same sandwiches as before, they were just in a different place. As I sat at my table looking out the window toward the stoplight, I saw cars and cars going by. That spot is right where everyone meets in Aitkin. And because it was Easter weekend, I think all kinds of people were coming home to Aitkin to see Grandmas and Grandpas.

Did you have company come to your house this weekend? I think that there is some company in Jesus' house today. Do you think that Jesus is glad that we are all here for Easter? When we leave here to go home, will Jesus stay here at the church? Where will Jesus be?

After Jesus died on the cross, the people buried his body and they were very sure that he was going to stay in that grave. Did he? No! Jesus rose from the grave and started going all around the world gathering people to be a part of God's family. That's why First Lutheran Church was built. Jesus uses this place to gather children of God, to love and feed them. Are you a child of God? Yes!

And do you know what kids? Jesus doesn't just sit here at the church. Jesus also goes to the busiest places in town, where lots of people are passing by, meeting and living. Do you think Jesus might be down by the stoplight? At Subway? Do you think that Jesus ever comes to your house? Do you think Jesus rides in your car? Goes to your school or daycare? Do you think that Jesus loves you? I think so too. **How about if we watch for Jesus out in that world this week? He'll be there whether we see him or not. Even graves can't stop Jesus.** Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

Did you see this week's issue of **Newsweek** magazine? Its cover article is entitled, "**Forget the Church – Follow Jesus.**" In this lengthy article, the author, **Andrew Sullivan**, seems to paint **Jesus** as a **marvelous example for living a godly life** in this world. He convincingly argues that the Christian church is doing a hell of a poor job following Jesus. He cites contemporary concerns from all of the divisions over doctrine, to all of the violence that the church seems to at least condone if not cause, to being too tied to politics and the power structures of our land. He has a whole grocery list of historic events where the church's involvement has been less than stellar, or at times even death-dealing. Sullivan joins with **President Thomas Jefferson** in arguing that much of the Bible should just be forgotten in order to clearly focus upon the **moral example** that Jesus' teachings gave us. Jefferson literally cut quotes from Jesus out of the New Testament and used them to create his own selective, little bible.

I remember coming home for supper one evening when I was serving my first year as a pastor. I had witnessed some very negative treatment by an older, upstanding woman of the church to some new, young woman who had made some minor mistake in kitchen usage procedures. The younger woman had been helping to serve at a funeral or something. I was too gutless to say anything at the time. It was quite a miracle that the younger woman had even come to church in the first place. Now she might just quit. Coming home discouraged, all I could say to my wife was, "**I think the church did more harm than good today.**"

"**Forget the Church and follow Jesus?**" Faith in Christ isn't "Jesus lived, died and rose again so that we can be better people." It isn't even so that we can go to heaven when we die. Faith in Christ is a **life-giving relationship** with God who, despite our imperfections, doubts, fears and even evil deeds, **comes and meets us where we are and stays there for and with us and our world – all of it.**

Everything that we are doing here today is **about Jesus**. The Christian Church is **all about Jesus**. **But Jesus is all about the Church** and the world. According to one of Jesus' earliest followers, **Peter**, in our text from Acts, Jesus shows "**NO partiality**", is "**Lord of ALL**," went about "**doing**

good and healing ALL,” and **“EVERYONE who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through Jesus.”** The Church is all about Jesus and Jesus is all about the **salvation** (wholeness/healing) of **ALL PEOPLE**. Our **world** teaches that life is all about the **individual**. **Jesus** teaches that life is all about **community with God, with neighbor and even with enemy.**

The **Apostle Paul** is an excellent example of that. Paul, in our second lesson, writes that the **“Good News”** we share is that Christ **died** for our sins, was **buried**, was **raised** from the dead and **appeared** to lots of folks on lots of different occasions. Paul is the fellow who hunted down and killed early followers of Jesus before he himself became a Christian. Paul said only the **“grace”** of God (**a good gift that we don’t deserve**) could have pulled his salvation off. **JESUS SAVED PAUL.** So, according to this early Christian convert, **what do we need to be doing** to participate in God’s offer of salvation? **“Believe” – Hang onto Jesus who is already hanging onto you!**

The Bible isn’t a history book. It is one of the main channels through which Jesus, Living Word, has chosen to come into our world today. Christianity isn’t a religious test we have to pass. It is the gathering of broken, sinful people who God loves and cares about enough to **save anyway.** If faith in God is a **religious test**, the disciples **failed with flying colors.**

It was that first Easter Sunday morning. The women, because the men were all afraid and hiding, the women came to the tomb to do proper burial care for Jesus’ body. They worried about who would move the huge stone covering the tomb entrance, but it was already moved when they got there. What they found next was **no Jesus, an angel and some unbelievable news.** They were terrified. The angel said, **“Don’t be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here... But go tell his disciples (the hiding ones) and Peter (the denying one) that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; (back to their own home town) there you will see him, just as he told you.”**

That was the **Good News of Easter!** How did they react? They **“fled,”** were in **“terror,” “amazement,”** and **“said NOTHING to any one for they were afraid.”** (Repeat) This is how the Gospel of Mark ends. **Nobody told anybody** the good news about Jesus! Would God have to go to **“plan B?”** Later Christians were so troubled by this that at least two different endings were added to Mark’s gospel in the years that followed. The

earliest Christians **blew their God-given mission entirely.** **But, Jesus still went to Galilee,** found them there, welcomed them back to himself, forgave and healed them, fed and moved through them. **It is a miracle that you are even here today!** If it wasn't for your mother-in-law, who knows where you'd be... **No, if it wasn't for Jesus** keeping on coming through broken, sinful, selfish humans, there'd be no First Lutheran Church in Aitkin. I'm thinking that Jesus went from Galilee, their home town, to Aitkin, our home town...

Despite the crosses, the gallows, the Inquisition, the Crusades, the Witch Trials, Slavery, The Holocaust, Communism, Apartheid, the vast spectrum of theologies, and our current poisonous political environment – Jesus still comes to and through the gathering of Christians. Jesus may be our **pattern for living.** **But Jesus is far more** our **hope for life** here and now and forever. Despite our personal and church community failings, we are still God's chosen people. Jesus still gathers us, forgives us again and again, heals us, renews us, fills us with the Holy Spirit and then with us heads back out onto the streets of Aitkin and the world. First our Lord and Savior feeds us, then he entrusts to us the business of feeding others. **Some days we do more harm than good.** Either way, Jesus keeps faithfully coming to give life to us and through us... That's good news! That's Jesus risen! That's Jesus here with us right now.

“Forget the Church and follow Jesus?” I can worship God in my deer stand or fishing boat. I can see the wonder and beauty of the creation and the divine mastery of its artist. But, I can't see or hear how God feels about me. Do I matter? Am I just one little, insignificant speck in time?

When I am here in worship, as I gain a new, little sister or brother, I am reminded of the day long ago when water splashed on my own forehead and Jesus promised, **“Child of God, you have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever.”**

It is in this place that I taste Jesus' love in the bread and wine when he says to me, **“This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.”** Here I am fed, forgiven and empowered for life again and again.

It is here where the **Good News is proclaimed** in scripture and preaching. Here Jesus, Living Word, himself meets us at this crossroads of God's

people's lives and speaks the **Word of Life**, hope and newness that I so desperately need to hear again and again.

And here in this place, **I rub shoulders with and sometimes am carried by** you and the other sisters and brothers of Jesus, wounded and limping themselves, whom God himself uses to love and care for me.

“Forget the Church and follow Jesus?” Jesus is the one who built this building and this Body of Christ for our own life and salvation.

Christianity isn't about Pastor Darrell or you. It's not even about the Church. It is all about Jesus, but Jesus is all about us and his Church.

- It's not about how much we know, but **who we know**.
- It's not about how good we are, but about **how good God is**.
- It's not get a little religion before you die,
- It's not get your kids to Sunday school so they can learn to be good,
- **It's introduce them to Jesus!**

Don't be deceived. No one is ever good enough to go to heaven. No one is ever good enough even to live as a child of God right here and now.

But, Jesus claims each and all of us and promises us forgiveness, life and love now, here and forever **anyway**.

The Psalmist sees it like this. **“The Lord is my strength and my song and has become my salvation. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”**

How do you see Easter? **Does Jesus live in your house? Do you live in Jesus' house?** Thanks be to God. Amen.