

“Simply Christian”

Text: All Readings

At Our Savior Lutheran Church in Minot, we often discuss God’s work and our response. Giving God all credit for creating us, redeeming us from sin and Satan, and sanctifying us in His truth...He also utilizes *us* in His work. Yes, He allows sinners like you and me to share His love and truth with others in our lives. All the difficult parts are done *for us* by our Lord, but we also have a vocational responsibility to be Christians, living stones, in the world. No sweat, right?

Obviously, that’s an understatement. Sharing Jesus with those in our lives may be *simple*, but I don’t know if any of us would consider it *easy*. God’s work of redemption, the coming of His kingdom, the *missio Dei*...these are sophisticated concepts. *Simple* happens when we understand our *role* in the work. But I’ll get to that in a minute. *Let’s start here*: would you consider driving to work simple? I’m sure most of us would. The daily commute to work often becomes so rote that we don’t even remember doing it by the time we arrive at our destination. It’s just something we do, like eating or even breathing. But, as simple as that commute may be, the processes that make it possible are anything but.

In order for your vehicle to operate the way it does, countless highly skilled people had to figure out a way to make multiple complex systems work together in one fluid act. Engines work seamlessly with transmissions, gasoline sparks without destroying the car or driver, sophisticated rubber tires hug the road so that we can drink coffee without fear of spilling a drop. Truly amazing. And it often takes place without a second thought from the driver.

I.

In today’s Gospel, we witness a familiar scene. Jesus has just appeared to His disciples in the dark room. After assuring them that He is, in fact, the resurrected Lord, He opens their minds to understand that everything written in the Old

Testament was written about Him. Then He tells them: **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”** This is a beautiful moment. In a way previously unrecognized by even His closest followers, Jesus shows *this* point in time as the meeting of Old and New Testaments – all of this is happening in the person and work of Jesus Himself.

But the disciples were given little time to ponder the beauty of this reality. If we take Luke’s gospel by itself, it almost appears as though Jesus ascends on the day of His resurrection. Taking Acts into account, we see that He ascended 40 days after Easter, and thus we still celebrate at this point today. But the fact remains...He ascended.

Have you ever found yourself becoming dependent on a strong leader? I’m sure most of us can remember a coach, or a manager, or even a friend or relative who helped us understand our goals and motivations when things were tough. Imagine now if *Jesus* were that person. For three years, the disciples had watched Him heal people, chastise sin, teach with authority, and get them out of numerous scrapes. Jesus’ life was a complex tapestry of miracles and divine wisdom. As He prepared to ascend, He tells His followers: **“you are witnesses of these things.”**

I’m about as old as you can be and still call yourself a millennial, but I am officially part of that generation. On a regular basis, I use a desktop computer, a laptop computer, an iPad, an iPhone, and an Apple Watch. Whether I am working in the original languages, taking high resolution photos with my phone, writing a sermon, or figuring out a new app, I do take my technology for granted. And I know I’m not alone. My boys can figure out video games and computer programs that I would have struggled with at their ages. It’s difficult to imagine the youth of today

without tablets in their hands and sophisticated smart phones on their ears. But, again, the seamlessness with which this technology has entered our lives...is no fluke.

Many incredibly intelligent people have worked for decades to make computers smaller, faster, more powerful, and more beautiful. When I first saw that the iPad could play movies, I wondered how you fit the DVD into such a small space. I was just beginning to understand flash memory. 20 years before I began to appreciate watching hi-def videos on my phone, Toshiba was developing the technology that would make it possible. Like the car example from before, many complex systems work like a practiced orchestra to make my entry into the digital world effortless. But what about the disciples?

Their initial reaction to Jesus' news was to misunderstand His intentions. They say: **"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"** **[He replies]: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** No, Jesus is not going to overthrow Rome. No, Jesus is not going to turn Jerusalem into a major world superpower. Instead, He is sending the disciples into the entire world. And they will do it without the unique physical presence of Jesus that has become their rock and anchor. I won't rehash the events of Pentecost today, but let's face it...the disciples had a long road ahead of them.

II.

Luke tells us that the disciples were filled with joy after Jesus' ascension. We experience that joy in our own lives as we remember the Lord's work for us. But then comes *our* reaction. And we get scared. For many of us, we have accepted Christ's work on our behalf since childhood. It's amazing that Jesus died for our sins and rose again for our salvation, but it's also *established fact* for many of us. We don't often struggle to believe it. The concept of sharing this same truth with those

who may not *want* to hear it – or at least have the *appearance* of not wanting to hear it – is a little more complicated. Or, better put, it’s a simple process that looks *anything but simple*.

Have you recently talked with someone in your life about Jesus? Particularly someone who isn’t a strong Christian? For those of you who have, was it a great experience? Was it all tears and hugs and overwhelming gratitude? Maybe it was! Unfortunately, our “Jesus encounters” with the world often *don’t* have that element of instant gratification. Don’t get me wrong: it happens. But often our conversations about our Lord are met with polite disinterest, awkward side trails, or even frustration. So how do we know when God’s kingdom is near in the hearts of the people we share our lives with?

We could spend many sermons talking about the work of the disciples...but, for now, I want to focus on the reality that *you and I* face every day. It’s difficult to be a confessing Christian in today’s world. Fortunately, we have beautiful promises from God’s Word. In today’s epistle, Paul tells the Ephesians that he has been praying that Christ would **“give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.”**

Paul speaks these words to a people already faithful to God. No doubt, they saw God’s mission at work and His kingdom come in the reality of their worship life: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the preaching of the Word, the prayers of the saints. No doubt, they saw God at work in their loving Christian interactions with one another. But Paul’s prayer *transcends* this. His prayer directs God’s love toward seeing the kingdom and mission at work in those *not yet* His own. So how do we recognize those moments? In a word: *need*.

The Bible is filled with great examples: Nicodemus, the confused Pharisee; the seemingly unlovable and unloved woman at the well; the bleeding outcast; the rich young ruler; even the disciples. All examples of God's grace and love at work. All healed, inside and out, by our Lord. Who in *your* life is in need of healing? Who in *your* life needs a helping hand or a loving word? Who in *your* life is in need of Jesus? Of course, we are *all* in need of Jesus. Here I'm referring to those who don't yet know Him as their Lord. If they *are* in need, and particularly if you are the one in position to help them, the Lord is at work. Recognize this beautiful work in *your own life* and don't be afraid to act as Jesus' hands and mouthpiece in theirs.

Our Lord has ascended. He still comes to us in the Word. He still gives us His body and blood. He still hears our prayers as we converse with our heavenly Father. But it's not the same. He no longer walks this earth. Until He comes again, He uses His church, He utilizes *us*, to spread the Gospel like ripples spreading on the surface of a pond.

It's not always easy. Often, it's the opposite. Any time you work with and among people, things will get messy. But it *is* simple. Like a car, like a computer, there are many complex operations at play when we talk with others about our Lord. But remember: Jesus did, and does, the heavy lifting. He has already won the victory. God bless you this week as you continue to *be* the church in this community where you have been planted. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:7 – we plant and water, but God gives the growth. **Amen.**