

May 11, 2025

Fourth Sunday of Easter

“Testing the Messaging”

Acts 20:17-35

Alleluia! He is Risen! (He is risen indeed. Alleluia)

We are still in the Easter season and this proclamation is appropriate throughout the year. The cross and empty tomb is the foundation of our Christian faith; solidly based only in the salvation work of Jesus Christ the crucified; the Son of the living God. He is risen, thus we also have eternal life in Him.

And of course, we love the further assurance Jesus speaks when challenged by the Jews in the Gospel reading today: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”*

This is great news. No matter how much Satan tempts and accuses us, no matter how the broken, evil world afflicts us, no matter how often our fallen nature trips us up into failure and sin, we stand baptized into Christ, and nothing can pry us away from His eternal kingdom. This also is a solid divine promise...but don’t you dare take it for granted.

St. Paul is speaking to Christians when he says, *“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”* These people have heard Paul’s proclamation of these wonderful divine promises and have received them in faith! They are Christ’s sheep, securely in the palm of Christ’s hand. Yet Paul continues with this warning: *“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”*

But wait! How can that happen? Aren’t these sheep securely in Christ’s hand? Aren’t we also? Well, yes. But the warning Paul issues is not about these sheep being snatched away. It’s about those teaching something other than the Gospel Paul proclaimed, and these sheep falling for it, liking it better, and willingly walking away from the truth. They don’t get snatched from God’s hand. They up and leave of their own accord, because their faith becomes perverted by bad messages.

Now of course I can look outside of our Holy Scripture-founded Lutheran confession and point to the problem in many places. Sadly, there is not shortage of churches with preachers claiming to be Christian but not at all proclaiming the Gospel Paul and the other apostles taught—the depravity of our sin, the need for repentance unto Christ that we would receive the greatest gifts of forgiveness, salvation and a resurrection to perfect life. No, their messages point more to the god of self, that God’s purpose is our happiness and prosperity in this life now. Or that salvation is in our hands, if we’re faithful enough or prayerful enough or obedient enough or make ourselves holy enough—and often that the reward for that behavior is also in the here and now. There is a lot of non-biblical, non-Gospel garbage out there, and it has drawn a lot of believers away.

But I’m preaching to y’all, Lutherans who know better, correct? Well, this is why I said not to take being secure in Christ’s hand for granted. I try my best to be true in my preaching of the Gospel. If you think not, please call me out on it—I’m only human and can err. But the truth

is, in the 21st century we have messages moral and spiritual in nature coming at us from all sorts of directions, and if you are not on guard these can lead you astray also.

I've touched on this before—your patriotism to the USA and your understanding of the rights you have here. Good blessing indeed, but they can bleed into the spiritual realm in awful ways. Is anyone here more passionate about their politics than they are about Jesus? Anyone feel justified in hating the terrorists who'd like to destroy us? We have rights and we have standing in this country. Be honest, do you completely check that attitude at the door when you go before God in prayer...or does it kind of stick?

Holy Scripture is crystal clear that you are not your own, you were bought at a price. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. But the culture teaches "Your body, your choice" in ways that go way beyond just abortion. Have you fallen for it, considering yourself as the authority to do what you want with this body...but that's okay because I'm still in Christ's hand? But wouldn't that truth mean that it is His body, not to be sullied in sin?

What does the world say about suffering? It's wrong. It's injustice. You deserve better. It's always right to avoid suffering. Do we then as Christians justify avoidance of suffering something as trivial as embarrassment for the sake of Christ? James writes, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*" The Bible pretty much guarantees suffering and sacrifice for those who are in Christ, yet we listen to the world and are shocked and appalled when it arrives.

And here is a big one that I ran into on Facebook the other day: A Christian only needs to forgive when the offender asks for forgiveness! That's the teaching of the world there—that one can hold onto malice if the sinner refuses to make it right, to show remorse. Jesus died to for all sins out of love for all creation and calls on us to love the same way. Yet we struggle against this, especially when it is up close and personal.

I've only touched on a few misleading teachings of the world. There are endless others. This is why we don't want to take anything for granted. The promises of God are indeed steadfast and true...but we are called to live in them. Other voices call us to wander from them.

Obviously I'm calling on y'all to examine what teaching and leadings you are accepting and trusting—what you are believing is true. But let me point out the obvious—you can't do that unless you are in that by which the truth is measured—the Gospel Word of God. Many "good Lutherans" studied their catechism and confirmed years ago, but have spent precious little time in the Bible since then. And yes, of course, being here on Sunday hearing that Word proclaimed in sermon, liturgy and hymnody is wonderful; you are receiving the Gospel full-throttle in Word and Sacrament here with all its benefits.

But the leading of the world is coming at you in many ways every day. Satan's lies through these messages do not take a holiday. The Gospel truth that convicts you of sin, leads you to repentance and pours out Christ's forgiveness is the two-edged sword that cuts through the lies to reveal Jesus reigning over you and keeping you in His hand. This Word should be your daily guard, challenging those false leadings that would draw you away.

Jesus is risen. Jesus is reigning. No one can snatch you out of His hand. This is truth. This is Gospel. This is salvation. This is yours. Jesus gives it to you this very day. Walk in it.

St. John wrote: "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*"

I don't care how good and right a message of the world might seem; it's still of the world. Test all of it by the Gospel Word of God...the Word that keeps you forever in Christ's hand.

Amen.