

John 20.19-31

Quasimodogeniti & 175th Anniversary of the Missouri Synod

24 April 2022

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!**

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the *Deutsche evangelisch-lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio, und anderen Staaten*—the 175th Anniversary of the German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. What's today known as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

On such an occasion—on an occasion when God has granted us to look back over a 175-year history to His hand of grace at work, it is, as we say, truly meet, right, and salutary that we should mark it with some celebration, and certainly with prayer and God's Word, as we are doing.

In fact, our Missouri Synod is deeply coded into the very being of this congregation, praise and thanks be to God!

Even our nave screams "Missouri Synod." The eight stained-glass windows on the lectern side of the nave over there chronicle the history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Moving from chancel to narthex they start with the Luther window and the year 1517, the traditional date of the Reformation. That medallion depicts an open Bible with the chains around it burst, and it's opened to Ephesians 2.8. Of course, in 1517 Luther would have known that only in Latin: *gratia enim estis salvati*. But by the time this building was erected in 1938—the third building of our

congregation in 64 years—not only was Luther’s Latin long in the rearview mirror—we had just adopted our first English constitution 5 years earlier. The window couldn’t even be in German!

The next window depicts the great dragon-slayer, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. Sweden had adopted the Reformation some half a century earlier. Gustavus Adolphus entered the Thirty Years’ War, which endured from 1618 till 1648, on the side of the Lutherans battling against the dragon of the papist church which threatened to expunge Lutheranism once and for all in the Counterreformation. He was martyred at Lützen, Saxony, on 6 November 1632, in a battle that proved crucial for the success of the Lutheran forces. A small price to pay that the full redemption in Christ might still be proclaimed.

The next pair of windows focus on how Lutheranism came to America in the first place. The burning heart over there represents the Pietist revival at Halle, not far from Lützen, where the leading light was August Hermann Francke. It was Francke’s son, Gotthilf, who in 1741 encouraged a young Lutheran pastor, Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, to accept a call to serve the German Lutherans in North America, who were being plucked away from their Lutheran Confession by the missionary efforts of Nikolaus Ludwig Reichsgraf von Zinzendorf and shuffled off into a new church he had founded, the Moravian Church, simply because the Moravians spoke German.

But from that point on—the remaining four windows—they’re focused on our Missouri Synod. I hope you get a chance to look at them carefully. The first one says “The Saxons” and shows three ships, one of them grayed out. That grayed-out ship is the *Amalia*.

What's going on? In 1817, on the 300th Anniversary of the Reformation, the Kaiser of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm 3., promulgated a decree whereby Lutherans and Calvinists must join at the same altar, along with an *Agendabuch* that fudged the Lutheran distribution formula. "This is the true Body of Christ. This is the true Blood of Christ." You know those words well. In Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm's agenda, the pastor was no longer to say that, but, "Jesus Christ says, 'This is My Body,'" leaving it up to the communicant to decide for himself what it was that he was receiving in his mouth. By 1837, after struggling against the Union for two decades, two groups of Lutherans left for North America. Pomeranians sailed from Stettin, and Saxons left from Bremen. Though the window depicts but three ships, they sailed on five. The grayed-out ship is the *Amalia*, the ship carrying their treasury, which went down mid-voyage.

It's those Saxons who arrived in Perry County, Missouri, where they founded a little Lutheran colony.

Next window symbolizes Friedrich Wyneken. Wyneken is represented by a bee: for Wyneken was known for his tireless work in gathering the German Lutheran immigrants in the States into congregations to receive God's Word and Sacraments. He migrated to the States the same year as the Saxons, but came from Hanover through Baltimore. Ultimately he found himself working among German immigrants in and around Fort Wayne.

By 1845 he was in discussions with the Saxons in Missouri. The two groups found that they confessed the same doctrine: all the truths of God's Holy Word and all the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions without qualification, without reservation, without condition. And through those discussion he came into contact with Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, who was

the chief architect and first president of the German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States.

That brings us to the Walther window. The log cabin—a replica of which can be found on the seminary campus in St. Louis—was the first home, in Perry County, of Concordia Seminary, with Walther its first president. The five steeples behind the cabin represent the five congregations of which Walther was the *Pfarrer*, or senior pastor, in St. Louis. Through his publication *Lehre und Wehre—Doctrine and Defense*—Walther tirelessly taught and published all the teachings of God’s Word and our Confession. And he assiduously defended the truth of God’s Word against error. He drafted the first constitution of our Synod, founded Concordia Publishing House, taught at and was the first president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. And on 26 April 1847, 175 years ago, he founded the German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. We rightly remember Walther for tirelessly passing on, from Germany, the wealth in teaching of Lutheran orthodoxy. You are very much his heirs.

The very last window—one which always surprises me—celebrates the great American Lutheran dogmatician, Franz Pieper, whose chief work, *Christliche Dogmatik*, remains the standard Christian doctrine textbook in our seminaries. What surprises me always about our window is the fact that though this nave was erected in 1938, and Pieper had died just 7 years earlier, there’s nevertheless a window for him. He was recognized for the giant he was even in his own lifetime.

Well, that finishes up our tour of the lectern-side windows.

They are beautiful. And they beautifully remind us of our heritage. But how sad it would be if they were our entire patrimony. Pieces of art commemorating men and events that mean nothing for today. Paper reminders of a glorious past with no claim on the present. May it never happen here!

But that is not the case. And it has never been, praise and thanks be to God!

For, as I said, “being Missouri Synod” is written deeply into the DNA of our congregation. Our constitution puts it like this:

“Our congregation accepts without reservation the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice” and “all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: the three Ecumenical Creed (the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles [including the Tractate on the Power and Primacy of the Pope], the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord.”

With that statement alone animating everything in this congregation this place would still be St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church even without the stained glass. Even without the beautiful reredos and altar. Even without the colorful vestments of our church. Even without bells and organ. What makes St. John’s St. John’s, what makes the Missouri Synod the Missouri Synod, is the final primacy, authority, and claim upon all preaching and teaching of God’s Word and our Confessions as the true exposition of that Word of God. May the gracious Lord secure that to us

till the Lord Jesus returns! For without His Word. And without its right exposition, we perish.

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word!

By now you might well be asking what this little history lesson has to do with the Gospel for today. With Jesus coming first on the night of the resurrection and then eight days later (as the Jews counted), when Thomas was present.

It's pretty simple.

At the end of it all—after Thomas saw and heard and felt the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ—Jesus pronounced this blessing: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

How do you “not see and yet believe”? Or to put it differently, how do you have the real Jesus in your midst, doing what the real Jesus does—forgiving sins, giving salvation and everlasting life and healing from every ailment and disease and wound in the bliss of heaven. How do you get *that* when the real Jesus isn't there to be seen?

That was Thomas' problem. To have the real Jesus he needed to see and touch and feel and smell.

But that's not what Jesus instituted the night of His resurrection. Instead, He took all that He is and He has—He took the “real Jesus”—and packed Himself up inside His Word and told His disciples to go out and do it. Just say it! “I forgive you all your sins.”

It's the most ludicrous thing in the whole world! Sins are sins against God. That's what David cries out in Psalm 51 after his dalliance with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband and the lies and deception he perpetrated on Israel. He doesn't list off Bathsheba and Uriah and Israel in his prayer. Instead, he says, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight." Sins are sin against God. So how in the world can a *man* forgive *sins*?

He can't. Unless it's the case that the man's word isn't the man's word, and that the forgiveness isn't the man's but God's, and that God Himself—Christ Himself—is *in that Word of God*.

And that's why Jesus pronounced that macarism, that blessing, eight days later. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed. To have the real Jesus you see with your ears. You touch with your ears. You feel and smell with your ears. Why? Because the real Jesus has packed Himself up inside His holy Word.

You see? It all hangs on the Word. Baptism doesn't do all it promises to do because we pretend that's case. No. It buries us together with Christ into death and raises us with Him from the grave *because Christ Himself is in the very Word that makes that happen*. It doesn't save from sin and death the devil's power because that's a nice thought. It does it *because Christ Himself in His Word actually brings that salvation*: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."

And "Baptism also now saves you." He's not with us with His true Body and Blood in the Sacrament for us to eat and drink just because that's a nice thought. He is *because the Word that carries Jesus joins itself to the bread and wine*, that says: "Take eat. Take drink. This is My Body. This is My Blood."

Beloved in the Lord: the legacy of our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is nothing more and nothing less than that: God's pure Word. God's Word which bears Christ and brings the real, living Jesus to us. God's Word, which forgives all our sins and gives us everlasting life.

May the good and gracious Lord keep this congregation to the day of His return firm and steadfast in His Word and through it, all of you steadfast in the faith in Jesus Christ, your Savior!

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

jsb

sdg