

Why We Need God

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.
Amen.

Last Wednesday a passenger in a taxi heading for Midway airport, leaned over to ask the driver a question and gently tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. The driver screamed, lost control of the cab, nearly hit a bus, drove up over the curb and stopped just inches from a large plate glass window. For a few moments everything was silent in the cab. Then, the shaking driver said, “are you ok? I am so sorry but you scared the daylight out of me.” The badly shaken passenger apologized to the driver and said, “I didn’t realize that a mere tap on the shoulder would scare someone so badly.” The driver replied, “no, no. I’m the one who is sorry, it is entirely my fault. Today is my very first day driving a cab. I’ve been driving a hearse for the last 25 years.”

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”^[a] ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.^[b] ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

It is the third week of Easter and in the book of Luke this is Jesus’ second appearance to the disciples. Although the story sounds a bit different from the book of John, this is Luke’s version of events on that first Easter night when the disciples are hiding away from the world. It is no surprise that the disciples were hiding though Luke does not lead us to believe that the disciples were afraid – perhaps more disbelief – that what Jesus said would happen three days after he died actually came true – that he would die and on the third day be raised again.

Sometimes, when things happen that you don’t think should happen, don’t want to happen, the shock does strange things to you. Events seem out of sync. People seem out of place. You are hearing and seeing the reports, but they don’t sink in, maybe don’t even make sense.

I have wrestled this week with the news of another death at a traffic stop. Daunte Wright is dead. Shot and killed by a Minneapolis police officer last week. One week after Easter. The officer pulled her service weapon and fired a shot. She believed she had grabbed her taser. Our first thoughts: How could this happen again?

Another black man shot and killed at a traffic stop by another white police officer. I don’t believe it, we might say. When the first reports reached us, the first question many of us asked might have been, Who is Daunte Wright? Why is his name trending on Twitter? Or, why is his picture on the nightly news? We don’t want to believe our ears and eyes. We are in the sorrow of our disbelief. We don’t want the reports to be true. They are too heartbreaking to comprehend. Another family is in mourning. Another community is at a loss. Doesn’t make any sense. How can this still be happening? How can families recover? How can communities come back, ever be the same? When will it all end? Jesus of Nazareth,

a man you have known and loved and followed across the length and breadth of Galilee and even beyond, has been arrested, tried, tortured, crucified and buried. End of story. No one comes back from that. The reports that he is alive are discounted not because you don't want them to be true – you most definitely want them to be true if you have followed him for the last three years of your life and given up everything else in this life to follow – but because they can't possibly be accurate. We are still in the sorrow of our disbelief, even if we hold our breath in the hope that our sorrow will be replaced by joy. Both events that we are talking about – death in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, and life in Jerusalem, Israel – are at their core completely routine. One because we have become numb to another story of tragedy between those sworn to protect and those they swore to protect – the other because in our civilized, trust only what you can know for yourself by experience – the resurrection is too much to trust on faith. They can't possibly be true. How could it have happened again in Minnesota or anywhere here? How could it have happened on the outskirts of Jerusalem? Both events ripple far beyond the borders of their communities. That they do not get more in-depth attention and discussion to get to the roots of these events, what they really mean for all of us, is sad. It is at times almost more than we can deal with mentally, psychologically, spiritually.

There is a debilitating sadness in the story of Daunte Wright and the scores of others like him. Does it have to be like that? It is hard to look beyond the surface of the tragedy, and have patience for the actualities of the event before jumping to conclusions in reaction to the attitudes of the country. What does it mean that another body lies dead on the streets of another one of America's cities? Do we miss the opportunity to come together around it to make changes in our society that can make sure this does not, cannot happen again? It is not a simple story, there is not a quick-fix answer, but it is not one that we can simply step around. And if you think you have solved this one – feel free to tackle the next tragedy at the Fed Ex facility in Indianapolis – believe me – we have plenty of reflection, prayer, and concrete actions that need to be taken. And not for a moment, do I believe that the ultimatums on both sides will simply solve the problem. No doubt some would argue for more police on every street and others would argue for no police or a complete dismantling of our current system of peacekeeping – for lack of a better word. Well, my friends, I cannot speak to Minneapolis, MN. I can speak to walking alongside and working with members of our Waukesha Police Department. I can tell you that I am daily reminded of their call to serve the common good. I am also uniquely placed to watch them live out their calling – with integrity, dedication, and excellence. I have deep respect for their work and their calling to be among us as those who serve and protect. Knowing all along that events happen we cannot always explain and that each must be held accountable for their actions. Welcome to every moment in this life.

There is a sad familiarity in the story of Jesus risen from the dead. There shouldn't be. It should be joyful. It is the power of God for us. Jesus rose from the dead. Or in more joyful terms: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Jesus rose from the dead for you and me and Daunte Wright and everyone everywhere and all of creation.

Do we find it hard to believe? We say no, but is that only because we have heard it so often, so often that we have lost the ability to be shocked about God being killed for us and returning to life for us. His followers in that room that night, that first Easter night because it is still Easter, find it hard to believe. It's just not part of the world in which they live. We know that because Jesus says to them:

Luke 24:36-48
Third Sunday of Easter
18 April 2021

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris Marien

“Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see ...” They almost miss the power of that night, almost miss what God is doing right in their very midst. Oftentimes we do too. We have heard this story so often, it has become so routine, even though we confess almost weekly that Jesus rose from the dead, it doesn't seem real. And yet, my friends, this is why we need God. God's promise, God's love, God's presence pointed out, each and every day, in the harsh and painful realities of this life Jesus gently reminded the disciples of their need to serve, their call to serve, their duty and obligation to serve that first Easter night when he said to them “Have you anything around here to eat?” He reminded them that even with everything swirling around them, now was not the time to withdraw into themselves, but to move out into the world. As witnesses of both the power of death and the overwhelming, all-encompassing power of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is our calling from God. This is how we serve – by telling others the story of Jesus, by listening to the stories of those God places in our life, and by stepping out of our own stories long enough to be present to another.

It may be uncomfortable. To serve Jesus, we have to be willing to serve Jesus – wherever he is. Whether that be in an upper room or on streets of our communities or anywhere in between. It is what church is all about. It is what serving is all about. We have the power given us by Jesus to witness to his plans for the world. We can't sidestep that call on our lives. Otherwise, why are we here? No doubt enough churches have closed because too many of our brothers and sisters forgot what it meant to follow the call of our Savior and to walk as disciples.

I read a blog post earlier this week. “God won't give you more than you can handle is idolatry of self sufficiency hiding behind spiritual sounding words. The truth is people are dealing with more than they can handle all over the world. That's why we need God and why God's given us each other. I know. I've had more than I can handle more than once. God gave me strength and God gave me people who came alongside me to bear my burden when I could not. I hope to do the same.” I hope we all do the same – as we are reminded that we need God – as we are reminded that this world we live in – needs us – to be the children of God called – the disciples of Jesus sent. My friends, the time is always right to serve, to love, and to lead others to the promise and power of living this life in the light of our risen Savior, Jesus. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.