



Fifth Sunday after Easter
18 May 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and risen Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

It has been a full week of ministry, as it often is, here at Ascension. Thursday night as tornado watches were issued and severe thunderstorm warnings were announced, the three pastors decided to not cancel our last JOLT of the school year. We had big plans – group games, doughnuts tied on strings, worship with communion, and one-on-one faith conversations between students and their trusted adult people. But as the day progressed, I became less and less confident that people would show up. Lacrosse began practicing and baseball games began their schedule which pulls students from Thursday nights of confirmation. Pastor Tony and I went to the store and bought ice cream treats for the end of the night – 50 ice cream treats to be exact because we were expecting to have a lot of leftovers. And at 5 to six – there were three students and three adults. Well – ok. And at 6 there were 10 students and 10 adults. And at 6:05 there were suddenly 25 students and 34 adults and what is going on Holy Spirit? The night turned into a glorious testament to the faithfulness of our God and the faithfulness of adults and students once again sharing with their pastors that what we do as church matters. At the end of the night when all was said and done, when donut pieces were swept up and the last of the mint chocolate chip ice cream was wiped up from the floor and the window, when communion was put away and the chairs were reset for worship – the three pastors stood in the narthex and gave thanks to God for an amazing night of ministry. What we do as church matters.

There are days it may not seem to be true. Not for the number of people who show up but for the lack of notice that the rest of the world may or may not take. Of course, the church can often be known for that which the world perceives to be unchurchly. Though I am not often inclined to listen. Please, please stand in judgment of something you know nothing about. Yes, yes, your ten second google search makes you an expert on the things this pastor has studied for years, not to mention members of the church that read their Bible daily and know it as well, if not better than their pastors at times. It is often what gets me into trouble, and well, sometimes, maybe, Pastor Tony too. Okay well maybe even Pastor Edwin – but he is still far too respectful to get into the argument. Give him a few more months. I am not even sure you can classify what happens as trouble – I am convinced, more often than not, it is that we find our passion for the story of Jesus and what it means to follow Jesus gets us into trouble – disagreements, challenging conversations – call them whatever you want – but when we find ourselves on the hill questioning whether or not we want to die on this hill – it often comes down to whether or not we believe Jesus is about to be crucified again for something he already died on the cross for – and well, we just aren't willing to be so agreeable. When we find ourselves face-to-face with the things of this world that are just too far outside the love of God – that is when we tend to get into trouble. Tell me who, you believe, is in and who is out in the Kingdom of God. I have an answer for that. Tell me that your brother's sin is bigger than your sin. I have an answer for that. Tell me that the welcome of our God – the welcome of this church, does not apply to the gay child of God or the undocumented child of God or the alcoholic child of God or the immigrant child of God or the divorced child of God or the imprisoned child of God. I have an answer for that. Tell me that what someone has done is unforgiveable – even if you really think it should be unforgiveable. I have an answer for that. Happily, I will meet you on the hill. What we do as church matters.

It is why Jesus takes the time to share with the disciples one more commandment before he hangs on a cross. “I give you a new commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” It sounds good Jesus. Really good. Yet, it is easier said than done. There are days when it does not seem to matter. No matter how much love is shown, there are days we may be ignored – days we may be outright rejected even by those who claim the same Savior as you do. And yet, what we do as church matters.

We are in the great season of Easter, but today we hear Jesus speak these words while he sits at dinner in the upper room with the disciples the night before he is crucified. Why return us to this moment? Should we not be celebrating the joy of resurrection power and the promise of eternal life while instead we are hearing Jesus remind us again to “love one another.” I often say that the sermon you hear is the sermon I needed to preach to myself. And hearing Jesus speak these words to us today reminds me that Jesus also needed to hear the words he was preaching that night over bread and wine. Remember who was at the table. 12 disciples gathered with Jesus that night – among them was Peter – the one who would deny Jesus three times before Jesus was led to the cross; Judas, the one who would betray him to religious leaders; and John – the one who is often described in the Bible as “the one whom Jesus loved.” Do you wonder how Jesus felt that



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night? Reminding his disciples to love one another while he already knew one would betray him and one would deny him and nine of the last ten would desert him as he hung on the cross. Only John would stay by his side all the way to the cross. Is it possible that Jesus needed to remind himself of the commandment to love one another as he reminded the disciples of the same?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said once that the story of the church is like a great extended family that receives a tremendous bequest: they receive an inheritance of a wonderful, beautiful, spacious, luxurious home to share. There is only one stipulation. All must live in it together. I have a great love for the church and all of her struggles. I also have great love for God's people and all of our struggles. It is how I learn to love in greater ways. So often by the examples you offer to me and to each other and to, literally, all the world. From Dopp Street to Layton Avenue. From Waukesha, WI to San Jorge, El Salvador. From Ascension Lutheran Church to Samaria Parish in Usa River, Tanzania. What we do as church matters.

A member of our church entered hospice a couple of years ago. After not feeling good for a while, a visit to the doctor revealed cancer. Her mother's death a few years before, left her with a faithful neighbor and some friends at Ascension. After her diagnosis, I found out that she decided to pass on her doctor's treatment plan and return home and live out the days she had left. I visited her in the ICU before she was able to move home. We shared communion. And after I had given her the blessing, she took hold my hand. She was completely wrapped in blankets, with only her hand and head visible. She had been smiling at me the entire visit, but after the blessing, she focused her eyes on me and said, "Pastor, I want to thank you for coming - you and the people at Ascension have been very good to me, you and my friends at Ascension have shown me so much love. I just wanted you to know that." It was a moment of humility I still carry with me. What does "love one another" look like?

It looks like taking care of the ones who have no one else to take care of them.

It looks like reaching out to the difficult people in your life.

It looks like humility even when you know you hold the high ground.

It looks like courage when you want to run.

It looks like respect even as you are rejected

It looks like persistence even when you are tired.

It looks like sacrifice for the good of another.

It looks like showing up when others walk away.

It looks like praying when you don't know what else to do. What we do as church matters.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I say the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I hear a loud voice from the throne saying, "See the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them and be their God. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." We are still in the great 50 days of Easter and we will live in the joy of the resurrection for as long as we possibly can. The power of death will visit us again before we can blink. But for today, we shout: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Because the world needs to hear a word of promise. A word of hope. A word of life. And we are the ones to speak that word. What we do as church matters.

Today, we welcome Ronan Bonnel into the family. We make more space in the house. We add another seat to the table. We promise to pray for him – teach him – bless him – forgive him - honor his gifts – celebrate his accomplishments – instruct him when he loses his way, like we all do at one time or another. Most importantly, we promise to love him. We will excel. We will fail. We will start again. This is what it means to love one another. Today in the gift of Ronan we are reminded that Jesus does exactly the same for us. A reminder that what we do as church matters. Thanks be to God. Amen.