

Sermon – John 16:12-15; Romans 5:1-5

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Grace Lutheran Church

Holy Trinity – Year C

16 June 2019

“In Sure and Certain Hope”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. June 1, 1994. May 17, 1998. December 14, 2003. June 14, 2015. June 11, 2019. June 16, 2019. What, you might be asking, is the significance of these dates? They are, in order, the date of my graduation from Appleton West High School; my graduation from The College of William and Mary; my ordination to the ministry of Word and sacrament; the day you voted to call me as your senior pastor; last Tuesday; and this morning. But what, one might ask, do those dates have in common? Well, they are just a few of the dates on which I was pretty sure I knew everything. As it turns out, I've been wrong each time. Except for today. As far as I can tell, today is a day that I actually know everything. We'll see how that turns out. Of course, we always have learning to do, growth to achieve. To be honest, the older I get, the less I know. And not just because I'm getting forgetful! I'm just gaining an honest appreciation that I have much learning to do. So has it always been. Remember June 1, 1994, the day of my high school graduation? That day I sat in the local college's football stadium, listening to our class speaker deliver an inspiring commencement address, the focus of which was the story of a young gang member in San Francisco who overcame adversity of every sort to become one of the NFL's greatest running backs, and a successful actor, too. It turns out there was more to learn about that story, however, as it was only a few weeks later that we saw that same running back, OJ Simpson, fleeing down the 405 in his white Bronco. Best not to assume we know the whole story until the whole story is finished! There's always more to learn.

2. Today, we find ourselves once more in the Upper Room with Jesus and his disciples on the night before his death. These disciples have spent three years walking with, listening to, and learning from Jesus. Surely, they know what they need to know by now. So what does Jesus say to them? “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” As he prepares to leave them, Jesus does not deliver a valedictory address in which he pronounces his students fully ready to enter the world. No. He tells them that he has much more to say to them. Not only that; they aren’t yet ready to hear this truth.

3. Beyond Jesus’ words simply being a check on their egos, the disciples must have begun to wonder what the syllabus for Discipleship 102 would look like. But it turns out there weren’t more things for them to learn; instead, there was more for them to learn about the one thing. And that thing was none other than their teacher, Jesus. To teach them what they needed to learn, Jesus went willingly into suffering and death. Crucified for their sake and for the sake of the whole world, Jesus taught them what they needed to know: God loved them so much that Jesus was sent to die for them, to be raised for them, to return to the Father bringing them along, to send out the Spirit upon them, so that they would know, and continue to learn, just how much God loved them. It doesn’t make much sense. Even the psalmist knew this: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” A good question, with a better answer: “Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

4. What the disciples needed to learn, what we – crowned with glory and honor – need to learn, is not an ongoing, ever-expanding knowledge *about* God. It is, instead, an ongoing, ever-deepening awareness of the singular fact of reality:

God is the Father whose Son died to save us, whose Spirit lives in us, whose life suffices for us. Let us make no trinitarian mistakes; God is not *like* those things. God *is* this God. The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is not a sequel to the story of Jesus. My old Lutheran Confessions teacher, Gerhard Forde, helped me understand how much we need to learn about the one great truth we already know. He said it this way: “Sanctification is just getting used to justification.” Which is to say that the Christian journey *is not* an ever-ascending journey of holiness in which we grow closer to God. Rather, the Christian life *is* the ever-growing awareness of the one, holy God’s journey in Christ to us. Paul wrote to the Romans (and to us) that we are justified by faith. We insist there must be more to the story, but there never is. You, for Jesus’ sake, are loved and saved and that’s all there is to it. In him, even our suffering becomes cause for boasting – for in our suffering we find endurance, character, and hope. And hope never disappoints. The Christian life is getting used to this fact, that in the face of what appears to be overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we have reason to hope. For Jesus was dead, and now he’s not, and it was all for you. And that, my friends, is enough.

5. A few weeks ago, our extended family gathered in a small-town cemetery in western Wisconsin to inter the ashes of Erika’s grandmother, Grandma Kay. It was the small kind of cemetery where they would prepare the plot for a casket, but you were on your own with an urn. An uncle dug the hole, careful to leave nice pieces of sod intact so that they could be replaced. Gathered there in pouring rain, we shared stories and sang songs and held tightly to our children’s hands, perhaps mindful of the fact that they would one day do this with whatever was left of us. I wasn’t presiding at the committal service; my services weren’t required. After all, Erika’s family is a little bit like Grace Lutheran Church – every fourth person is a retired pastor. But I could have led the service from memory, particularly the moment in which the physical remains – just dust, ash, nothing more – were placed in the earth: “In sure

and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ...” What an odd thing to say in that moment. Hope? Sure and certain? Yes. In that moment, and in moments like it, reality is unavoidable. No self-improvement plan, no course of study, nothing about *you* will undo your death or that of those you love. But God will. God has. God does. For Jesus was dead. And now he’s not. And that, still, is enough. Hope does not disappoint.

6. We have much to learn, my friends, many ways to better understand our God. Today’s focus on the Holy Trinity is reminder enough of that. One could spend the rest of one’s days pondering just what it means that God is three-in-one and one-in-three, and it would be time well spent. But when all is said and done, it’s all about the one thing, and that’s a growing understanding of what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which we are made right with God. That’s what we need to keep hearing and learning and not forgetting. Robert Farrar Capon succinctly sums of the work of the Spirit, that third Person of the Trinity: “The work of the Spirit is nothing other than the work of Jesus; and the work of Jesus is the raising of the dead.” The Spirit proclaims to us the work of the Son, this One who died for us to restore us to the Father, that we might become part of the world-without-end that is the triune life of God. When I ponder this, I realize that I will never, ever know everything that there is to know. As much as I love such thinking and speaking, such wonderful theologizing, my finite mind will just never comprehend the vast reality of God. Yet at the same time, I know precisely everything that I need to know. And so do you. You are alive in Christ, filled with the Spirit, a child of God forever. That’s something we want to know more and more and more. And the more we know it, the less we need to understand the Triune God, and the more we want to praise and adore God simply for being God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is the end of the story, a story forever without end. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.