

St. Andrew Evangelical Lutheran Church
Rev. Christopher Raiford, Pastor
"Jesus is the WORD " John 11:17-27, 38-45
Sunday March 29, 2020 – 5th Sunday in Lent

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

There was a time when business deals in this country were sealed with a handshake. That just doesn't happen in the big city anymore, although it still can happen in smaller, rural communities where everybody knows everybody. Even buying a car can be as simple as negotiating the price and then finalizing the deal with a handshake.

However, I have lived a large portion of my life in the big city, and that experience has left me a tad bit skeptical. So sealing a deal for a car with something as simple and old-fashioned as a handshake leaves me feeling uneasy and vulnerable. A perceptive salesman sees that. That's why he adds, "*Chris, you have my word.*"

If you open up your Bibles to John the first chapter, you will read, "***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men.***" (John 1:1-4)

A few verses later you will read, "***The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.***" (John 1:14) The Word Made Flesh.

That's the rather odd title that the Apostle John gives our Savior, Jesus Christ. And yet there's nothing odd about it, when we remember the handshake, coupled with the phrase, "*You have my word.*" When the Father sent Jesus into our world, the Father was saying, "*You have my word!*" Every promise kept. Every prophecy fulfilled. God's Old Testament conceived, as it were, by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger! **Jesus is the Word of God.**

The purpose of John's Gospel is to prove to us that God has given us His Word. And God has sealed that Word, not with a handshake, but with his precious Son, Jesus Christ. To prove that Jesus is the Christ, John records for us some of Jesus' mightiest miracles. But John also spends a lot of time—more than any of the other Gospel writers—recording for us the things that Jesus said. John makes sure we hear the words spoken by the Word.

Mary and Martha often heard those words, too, didn't they? The Gospel accounts make it clear that these two sisters loved the Lord Jesus. And they showed it. How many times did Jesus stay in their home? How many times did Mary sit at the Savior's feet

and listen to Him teach? Mary even went so far as to pour costly perfume on Jesus' feet and wipe the feet dry with her hair, proclaiming Him Lord and declaring her devotion! How the Savior's teaching moved them! Comforted them. Strengthened them.

Did their heart skip a beat when Jesus said, "***I am the good shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.***" Did his words, "***I know my sheep and my sheep know me,***" help them get through hard days, confident that Jesus was with them, knowing their sorrows and their every need? When Lazarus took ill, did they especially treasure these words spoken by the Word made flesh? "***My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.***" (John 10, selected verses.)

What comforting words Jesus had spoken! Now, when Lazarus was dying, Mary and Martha remembered those words. They trusted those words. So, they reached out to their Master. They sent the message, "***Lord, the one whom you love, is sick.***" And what happened? Nothing. No messenger came. No Savior arrived. Their brother died.

Jesus didn't show up in Bethany until four days after Lazarus died! What do you think Martha was feeling as she rushed out to meet the Savior? We really don't have to wonder, do we? She laid bare her heart when these words tumbled from her lips, "***Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!***"?

Then there was Mary. She stayed back at the house, where she was being comforted by the other mourners. Yet, when Martha returned with the news, "***The Teacher is here .and is asking for you,***" Mary got up quickly and went to him. When she saw him, she fell at Jesus' feet. And Mary's first words? "***Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.***"

"*Lord, why didn't you come? Why didn't you answer our prayer? We don't understand, Lord! We thought you gave us your word!*" That's what the sisters were really saying that day. In their heartache and their loss. Have we ever said the same to Jesus? Maybe under similar circumstances. Maybe it was our wife, our husband. Our mother, our father. Our son, our daughter. Maybe they lay in the hospital bed. And we prayed, and prayed, and prayed. But it seemed Jesus didn't listen. Jesus didn't come. And our loved one died. Why didn't Jesus keep his Word?

But he always keeps his Word, doesn't he? Even when it seems he doesn't! In the case of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, Jesus

delayed four days for a reason! Jesus shared that reason with his disciples as soon as He received the sisters' message. **"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."** (John 11:4)

As hard as it was for the sisters, and as hard as it was for Jesus (he cried, too, you know), Jesus knew it was best if he didn't come until all hope was gone. For you see, Jesus didn't want to just give Martha His Word. Mary, His Word. Us, His Word. And what word is that? **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."**

That promise is so incredible, so impossible, and so unbelievable, that there is a part of you and me that cannot accept it. It's too good to be true. Our everyday life never works that way. We don't buy the used car that is priced suspiciously low. The one that was only driven to church on Sundays by a little old lady. Not even with the most vigorous and firm handshake. Not even with the promise, *"You have my word."* We want the phone number and the address of the little old lady!

So it was that the Word Made Flesh stepped into a cemetery. And there He proved that, **Jesus, is the Word of God.** Even before our Savior went to the cemetery, the Bible tells us **"he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."** (John 11:33) What troubled him so? He saw Mary **"weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping."** He saw Lazarus' grave. **Jesus wept.** He was deeply moved. The curse of sin breaks Jesus' heart as much as yours or mine!

But the Word Made Flesh was not powerless to help! **"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So, they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."**

"You Have My Word!" This is more than a handshake. This is more than a smile and a gleam in the eye. This is the Word Made Flesh, the Son of God and the Son of Man. This is the Resurrection and the Life. This is the Holy One of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Promised Savior! We know it, because of this impossible miracle. This unbelievable miracle! And this miracle happened all because Jesus waited long enough, so that Lazarus would be dead already for four days.

Ah, but wasn't that a bit much? Four days of weeping, of waiting, and of wondering for Mary and Martha? Wouldn't three days have been enough? Why not two? Why not one? Dead is dead, after all! Why wait so long? This seems so cruel!

Why wait so long? Because of the Jewish people. By the time of Jesus, they had developed an elaborate superstition that soul hovered over the body for three days after death. During that 72-hour window of opportunity, perhaps a miracle could take place; perhaps soul and body could be reunited, and the dead raised! But not after four days! By then the body was already decaying. By then there was absolutely no hope!

Until God's Word came. Until the gravestone was removed. Until the shout, **"Lazarus, come out!"** Until the dead rose, healthy and whole, and God's Word was kept! For you see, Jesus was going to the cemetery when He promised, **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."** A few weeks later, Jesus was in another place that smelled of death. A place outside of Jerusalem next to a garbage dump. A place so vile and so disgusting that some called it Golgotha—the place of the skull—perhaps because of all the skulls left lying around after executions. Others called it Gehenna, a hell on earth. There Jesus hung on a cross, because there the Word Made Flesh paid the price to keep His Word. Giving us life meant taking our death. Giving us heaven meant taking our hell. As St. Paul explained, **"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13)**

Jesus didn't shy away from his own death. From his own grave. Because that was all part of God's plan! This was all a part of keeping God's Word. Of course, there had to be more! There had to be Easter morning. Women rushing to the tomb to pay their last respects to their dead master, to wrap his body with spices and anoint him with expensive perfumes. There had to be the earthquake. There had to be the rolled away stone. There had to be no body, just grave clothes neatly folded. There had to be an angelic messenger telling the women, **"He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."** (Matthew 28:6)

When we open up our Bibles and read the Gospels, on every page our Heavenly Father is telling us, **Jesus, is the Word of God.** Let the Word Made Flesh be the One who soothes your guilty conscience, the One who fills your dreams, the One who inspires your hopes, the One who fuels your courage, the One who lifts your eyes to see heaven waiting as God's gift of grace. For the Word Made Flesh has given us His Word. **"Because I live, you also will live."** (John 14:19) Amen.