6th Sunday of Easter – May 25, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29, Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, IL

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Throughout this Easter season I have been drawing our attention to how our readings, and especially the Gospel readings, have been building on one another week after week and getting the disciples accustomed to the new reality that Jesus' resurrection has created. The first couple of weeks were just about helping the disciples to wrap their heads and hearts around the fact that Jesus really *had* risen from the dead, and then we started to learn what this meant for them and how their lives would be different because of it. First, we learned about the difficulty of proclaiming this news to others, and the humility needed for that task. If the disciples themselves had trouble accepting the reality of the resurrection, you would think they would know to expect some pushback when it came to them telling others about it. Then we learned about the importance of forgiveness and the welcome news that our past does not have to be an obstacle to the good future God has in store for us. After that we learned how resurrection life is different, and how Jesus and his followers are a threat to all those who have a vested interest in the way the world works now, that the kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing about operates with different values, different rules, and includes people we may never have expected that God would care about.

All three of our readings are once again working to draw us deeper into what resurrection life looks like, and I want to address each of them in turn to see how they might help clarify that vision for us. And I want to start with our second reading from Acts, the Macedonia call, and the encounter with Lydia. We had the story of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the Roman Centurion last week – not someone Jesus' first disciples expected would be someone joining their movement. And I mentioned in passing the story of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch – another sort of person that they were no doubt surprised to find God concerned about. Now we have this story of Lydia, a Greek professional woman employed in the cloth trade. We don't really know very much at all about Lydia beyond what we learn in this reading. But what is notable about her is that she is a woman in charge of a household. That was unusual in the ancient Greco-Roman world, though not unheard of. But it would have been unthinkable back in Galilee and Judea, and probably also in the Jewish diaspora that Paul grew up in. So, I wonder if this encounter might have had Paul scratching his head the way Peter had done at his meeting with Cornelius. And Lydia might well have been the leader of this little worshiping community gathered outside of town, and so might therefore have become an early leader of the church. If so, she would not be the only one, as we glean from some of Paul's letters. In thinking about this, I noticed for the first time the disconnect between Paul's vision and the reality he encountered when he got to Macedonia. In his vision, it was a man that appeared to him and called him to come help. But when he got there, it was a group of women he met. And that made me wonder whether Paul would have gone to Macedonia if the vision had been of a woman. Maybe it had to be a man to make him take it seriously. Complete speculation on my part, I realize. But I think it fits with the underlying theme in Acts of the Holy Spirit pushing the early church to expand its boundaries in more than just the geographical sense. And that was in no way easy for the early church. One of its very first conflicts was resolved in the chapter just before this one, and it was about whether and how Gentiles could be included. And we're still having conflicts like that, aren't we, about who can be included, and who can be our leaders. And the Holy Spirit is still pushing, I think.

And speaking of the Holy Spirit, that's just where Jesus is taking us in our Gospel reading. We've started to turn the corner in the Easter season and our focus is shifting from the resurrection event itself to what comes next. And what comes next is not what the disciples probably wanted and now maybe even expected, that Jesus would stay with them and bring to realization the kingdom of God that he has been promising. But that's not what happens. What happens instead is the Ascension. Jesus leaves. That's on liturgical calendar for this coming Thursday, although we will observe that next Sunday. Jesus does not stay with the disciples but returns to the right hand of God the Father, from where he came in the first place. Our Gospel reading today is Jesus preparing the disciples – and us – for that to happen, and it gives some hint, I think, for *why* that is happening, although it's more explicit a little later, in readings we don't get this year. Jesus is going away so that Advocate, the Holy Spirit, can come to us, and it is the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, who will guide us into the future, teaching and reminding us of everything he has said and done, and leading us into all truth.

What's hinted at here is that in Jesus absence we are meant to grow and to learn, and that the measure of our growth and learning will be the love that we heard Jesus talk about in last week's Gospel reading. Remember? The new commandment, that we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us? Now, I don't know how much you've thought about this, but love doesn't really work very well as a commandment. Love that is more than infatuation or sentiment is something that develops when relationships are nurtured. Jesus has loved the disciples throughout the time he has spent with them over three years, ending with laying down his life for them on the cross. Now it's time for that love to bear fruit and be developed in the disciples through their relationship with one another and with those they will encounter as they go out to make the Gospel known to the world.

The time between Jesus' ascension and his return is the time of the church and the Holy Spirit, working to nurture us in faith, hope, and love, nudging, leading, and supporting us as we live into that most difficult of all "commandments," to love one another. As I said, that has never been a simple or an easy task, even as the church was beginning. The good news of God's love for us in Jesus has always been resisted, from within and without the church, and it has been distorted and misused. But it has never been eclipsed. Patience, persistence, and the peace of God have been the keys both to hearing and to sharing that good news, especially in times when things seem to be falling apart. If this is one of those times, it is not the first of them, or the worst of them – at least not yet.

And the vision before us in our second reading is meant to help us with the patience, persistence, and peace needed for the life that we are called into. As I said last week in the children's sermon, it gives a surprise ending to the Bible. Because for one reason or another we have often been led to think that the goal of our life of faith is getting to heaven as our final destination. Some of our hymns reinforce that idea, and some biblical passages also lead us to think that way. But this final scene in the book of Revelation gives us a different vision: a renewed earth where God comes to live with us. Surprise! We're not going to heaven, at least not as our final destination. Heaven is coming to us! And that gives new meaning to Jesus' words in our Gospel reading: "I am going away, and I am coming to you" and "we will come … and make our home with [you]."

So, take heart, dear people of God. Be patient and persistent, confident that Jesus' death and resurrection are changing the world, and that God's love is bearing fruit in us even now. And the peace of God, the peace that Jesus leaves with us, the peace that passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, firm in the joyful conviction that Christ is risen, alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)