7th Sunday of Easter – June 1, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 17:20-26, Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
Last Thursday on the church's calendar was the Ascension of Our Lord, one of the six major festivals of the church year. We were aware in our worship planning that we weren't having a separate Ascension service this year, and we talked about the possibility of using the Ascension readings today. But we decided not to do that, partly because I wanted to talk about the readings for this Sunday and partly because I decided that I could talk about the Ascension in the Children's Sermon. And we did choose an Ascension hymn to start our service this morning

There is another thing I want to say about the Ascension before turning to today's texts. Because it is the Ascension that illuminates what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel reading. He's praying to the Father about the disciples, and precisely about the time when he will no longer be with them in the flesh as he has been up until this point. There are two readings that cover the Ascension, one right at the end of Luke's Gospel, and the other at the beginning of Luke's sequel to his Gospel, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. It's essentially the same story both times, kind of like when TV shows catch you up with what happen in previous episodes. But in the book of Acts there is more detail, which serves to introduce the rest of the book. After Jesus ascends in to heaven, suddenly two men in white robes appear to the disciples as they are staring up into the sky. These are presumably the same two men who appeared in Jesus' empty tomb, and maybe – just maybe – the same two who appeared on the mountain at Jesus's transfiguration. That's a fun speculation that I won't go into now, except to say the they are described in very similar ways. At any rate, it's what they say to the disciples that I think is significant, and what would be the main point of an Ascension sermon, if I were preaching one this year. The men say to the disciples, why are you standing here looking up into heaven? Go to Jerusalem as he instructed you and wait for the coming of the Spirit. I think that message is for us too, namely that the life of faith is not to be focused on heaven, but rather here on earth. This is where faith is lived out by the power of the Holy Spirit until Jesus' return, faith that is active in love for the neighbor and the world that God has loved and become joined to in Jesus. (Hold on to that thought, because I'm going to come back to it at the end of my sermon.)

As I said, that sets the stage for today's Gospel reading from John, where Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples in a very specific way. This comes right at the end of a long section of the Gospel during Jesus' last evening with them before his crucifixion. At the beginning of that section he gave them the example of foot washing as their way of relating to one another, after which he gave them the new commandment, to love one another has he loves them. But he ends here in this prayer for unity that has never before struck me so powerfully as almost a desperate plea. And notice that this is not just about the disciples, but about us as well. That's who Jesus means by "those who will believe in me through their word." That's us. Remember the Thomas story. It's John's point for writing all of this down. I talked a little bit last week about the conflict that was present already in the earliest church. Jesus knows that's coming. But does he also know about the conflicts that will continue in the church after that, conflicts that continue in one way or another right into our own time two thousand years later? We spent a full year studying that in seminary. If Jesus had that future history in mind as the background for this prayer, well, that had to have hurt. Because it is supposed to be the love that we have for one another that will point to Jesus and show the world that we are his disciples. And how are we doing with that? Yet he

prays that we might be one, one with him, aligned with his mission to love the world into life, starting with one another. We are going to fail spectacularly over the next two millennia and counting. And yet he prays. And these are his last words before going to the Garden of Gethsemane, to betrayal, humiliation, and death. This is what he is taking to the cross with him – our disunity, and our failure to love as he loves, our persistent love of the darkness rather than the light and life he brings. He is taking all of that on himself because he is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as John the Baptist pointed out way back in the very first chapter of this Gospel. He will bear that sin to the cross to die, and to be left in the grave when he rises to new life on Easter morning.

We would like that to be the end of the story. We would like it even better if Jesus' resurrection had resulted in the new creation in all its fulness and splendor, if the sin of the world had just disappeared on that Friday afternoon two thousand years ago as Jesus breathed his last. But that is not how it works. The marks of sin remain everywhere in the world, throughout history, and in the stories of our own individual and collective lives. What we have, though, is the promise that Jesus' death and resurrection are in fact in the process of taking away the sin of the world, that sin and death and evil have in fact been conquered. And this leads us to our second reading from Revelation. For the third week in a row we read from the final chapter of Revelation, the vision of the holy city descending to earth, and God coming to live with us and making all things new. But it remains a vision, a promise to the early church at a time if intense persecution by the Roman empire, a time of when the earliest Christians were also in conflict with their own people. Yet the vision is given, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that God is in fact still at work, that the promise holds and will come to pass. You might have noticed that the verses we read were not continuous, that a number of verses have been omitted. I think there are good reasons for that, but I'm also aware of the irony that one of those verses is a warning not to leave anything out of the vision, or to add anything to it. But there is another verse that was left out that I think is helpful and relevant for times such as ours, especially if you share my sense that these are perilous times for our country, and for the authentic witness of the Christian message by those who have twisted it into a justification for cruelty, violence, and greed. "The time is near," says the vision. "Let the evildoer still do evil, … and the righteous still do right." Shocking words, maybe, but they speak to me. I think that there are faithful ways to be active in our current situation, and that we should seek those ways out, but I also think that there will be no quick solutions to the problems that face us. Evil will continue. But for those who trust in the promise of the vision, the promise of our baptism that God is indeed still at work in the world and in us, the way forward is in continuing to trust the promise, and continuing to let the promise bear fruit in righteousness, acts of love and concern for our neighbor and the world, and to resist the temptation to return evil for evil and contempt for contempt. I won't pretend that that is easy. It isn't. But it is, by the grace of God, the faithful way forward. And that's why I'm glad that the Bible ends the way it does, with the grace of God. Because that is our only hope, the hope that we cling to as we share the Easter promise that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)