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April 26, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A      1 Peter 1:13-23

May grace and peace be yours in abundance! Amen (1 Peter 1:2b)

What does it mean to be the Church in this time when we are not able to do the things we normally do?

How are we living as followers and proclaimers of Jesus Christ who is resurrected and glorified with God the Father, when we don't sing together or pray together or make quilts together or teach our children together?

As we wait to gather again, does that mean our faith is put on hold too? Or has faith—and our living of it—been reawakened in these past few weeks?

It might feel like we are living our faith separately, but how are we still "Church" collectively, even when we are apart?

First, we need to name what it is that defines us as a community of faithful people. If someone asked you a couple of months ago what Zion Lutheran Church is, what would you have answer?

It's the place where I spend time with my friends.

It's the place I hear God's Word and receive God's grace in the words of forgiveness and in Lord's Supper.

It's the place where we sing good songs of God's love and praise.

It's the place where my mom and dad make me go, and I stand up and sit down and read words that don't mean much to me, but I know it makes my mom happy that we are there so I follow along and can't wait for it to be over.

It's the place that fills up with kids on Wednesday afternoon to learn about Jesus and God and what it means to believe.

It's the thing we do on Sunday mornings because we've always done it. I just don't think about it much anymore.

What would you say about what the Church is to you now?

It's the people I trust to love and care for me when the going gets tough.

It's the people who I know will pray for me and who I can support in prayer.

It's people all over the world who are sharing their thoughts about faith and hope and promise in God's care for us. Some of those people are pastors but there are others, ordinary people, who are proclaiming their faith through songs or poetry or photographs or art that speak to the promises we have through Jesus Christ.

It's people who are serving the community in ways they never have before, because they have the time, they have skills, they have the good health to serve. Their hearts have been moved to do what they can to love their neighbor.

Now, I made up these lists, but I suspect they are pretty good guesses about what people have thought about what the Church is about. Notice that the first list is all about place. Yes, we gather with friends and we do some things together, but church is primarily identified as a place we go to be with God and God's people.

The second list is all about people. It is people that make up the Church. When the building is empty the church is not gone. The church has just dispersed, like the first readers of 1 Peter who are called "the exiles of the Dispersion" in the opening of the letter. When we gathered in this building every Sunday in the past, we were always sent out with the words, "Go in peace" and serve the Lord, or remember the poor, or share the good news.

The writer of this letter gives his readers four directives in the passage we read today. First, set your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you. (v. 13) This is not so much an action but an attitude. It is Christ who will bring grace to us. We are only asked to look for that grace and look toward its coming with hope.

Second, we are to be holy in all our conduct. (v. 15) That seems a tall order, but we are reminded that we will be holy, for [God is] holy. It is the work of the Spirit of God—the Holy Spirit—to declare us holy. And so, we are told to be aware of how we live, so that we reflect the holiness of God alive in us.

Then, we are told to live in reverent fear of the "Father...who judges all people impartially according to their deeds." (v. 17) Again, this directive is lived in response to what God has already done. Jesus' death and resurrection has freed us from the powers of sin and death and that is an awesome thing! With reverent fear we honor God's mighty acts of power to create and renew and bring forth life, and we come before him with a humble heart to receive both judgement and grace.

And finally, we are directed to love one another deeply. (v. 22) We have heard that directive before, on Jesus' last night with his disciples when he washed their feet and prepared to give his life as his ultimate act of love and service to them and to the world. "As I have loved you, you should also love one another," Jesus said. (John 13:34)

All these instructions are markers of the Church. The Church is the people who live with trust in our God who chose us and knows us and loves us so deeply that he would enter this human life and take on our suffering and death, and redeem us, freeing us from all that keeps us from loving God and loving each other.

We are not in this building together today. But this is not the Church. You are the Church. We are the Church. And we have been loved and blessed by Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection, which frees us to love our neighbors in ways we might not have chosen or imagined otherwise.

As we continue for a while longer in this time apart, away from the building where our faith and friendships have been nurtured, we are called to trust in God's love and power and presence in us, so that we can love our neighbors "deeply from the heart"—the heart that belongs to our merciful and mighty Savior.

Thanks be to God! Amen