

Ascension Day on St. Mark's gospel the 16th chapter: *Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.* (verses 14-20 NIV)

Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God¹, he lives and rules there with all authority over heaven and earth for us and our salvation. Therefore we have all reason to

1. be brave and courageous to proclaim the gospel with confidence.
2. not loose faith or refuse his witness in word & sacrament.
3. rejoice for his living presence in our midst in word + signs².

Dear friends and favourites of our risen Lord Jesus Christ – he, who is risen from the grave, arose to heaven on this day and is now sitting at the right hand of the Father. With such a good friend, top advocate and supreme judge in the most high and mighty place of all, the heavenly throne, celestial palace and courtyard, you've got all reason to smile, yeah laugh out loud, rejoice, sing, jump, "gitta", Zumba step and be merry as confidants, beloved and most highly cherished and held dear of the highest Lord and God himself even whilst you are going about your daily – and sometimes boring, nerve-racking, strenuous business here on earth and in that place, where you have been called to serve faithfully and do a good job as long as it is day and before its "tshaile", night drops in on you or another holiday or it's

¹ In the Augsburg Confession we learn to confess with the last part of Article III,4-6: "Moreover, the same Christ "descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, is sitting at the right hand of God" in order to rule and reign forever over all creatures, so that through the Holy Spirit he may make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, also distribute to them life and various gifts and benefits, and shield and protect them against the devil and sin. Finally, the same Lord Christ "will come" in full view of all "to judge the living and the dead . . .," according to the Apostles' Creed. Rejected are all heresies that are opposed to this article." (Kolb & Wengert Pg. 38)

² Miracles + wonders, preaching + doing

time you too must call it quits, retire, retrenched, dismissed to then rest from your labours – temporarily perhaps or permanently, because the Lord your God has called you home to be with him – finally at peace, at rest at last in eternal bliss and joyful salvation³.

Now this sounds straight forward enough, but we're not quite there yet and just like those disciples of old⁴ we too have our nasty problems and dirty issues with faith, not trusting God as we should and not expecting all good from him as we have all reason to do. Yes, this old bother and dreadful sinful inclination still sticks to us as we tend to rather hesitate, distrust, suspect the worst, fear this and that more than God's wrath and stubbornly refuse to rejoice in his goodness, thank and praise him for his wonderful creation, gracious salvation and preserving, sanctifying and hallowing presence in this very world of ours – this speck in the universe – speaking to us in his holy word (Law & gospel) and doing mighty deeds of miracles and wonders daily that we tend to overlook them so easily. Yes, that we take his very own word and his most precious treasures and gifts the holy sacraments – the gospel preached and the visible signs of his grace, love and mercy – as common stuff far too easily disregarded, despised as lowly, misjudged as just too plain, scorned to lightly and never appreciated and celebrated appropriately even in our best moments. "Don't just stare at the heavens!" the angels say to the disciples. It's not time for star- nor navel-gazing. It's time to get going, to wait for the Lord and the gift of his Holy Spirit, remain true to your calling, follow his mission, work as long as it is day, serve at tables and amongst the most needy and make disciples of all nations. Go preach, go teach, go baptize, go wash those feet, go clean those dirty linen, go tend those wounds, go help, serve, love and do what is necessary and comes up!

Now our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ knows us and this our weak & little faith, our tendency to be alarmed by rustling leaves, trembling for the wrong causes and hesitating with bewilderment and plain fear, when we should be brave and outgoing in outreach and

³ "Eia wär'n wir da!" and "Du sollst werden von dem Elend dieser Erden und von der Sündenarbeit frei!"

⁴ "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. (Mar 16:6-13 NIV)

service. He knows our weeping, mourning, when we should be laughing and dancing, that we lack courage, fall prey to cowardice and perplexity, when we should be up-beat, up and about, working, serving, learning, teaching etc. etc. That's why he as our good, loving and helpful brother, mentor, teacher, friend and Lord again and again invites, calls, motivates, moves, forgives, heals, empowers, strengthens, rekindles us by pulling us towards himself and keeping us close to him and his goodness, grace and mercy: "Come and follow me!", "Don't be afraid!", "Take courage - it is me!" He uplifts, edifies and sustains us with his kind words, endearing sermons, saving gospels and inspiring letters of apostles and prophets. He does countless miracles and wonders, visible signs of his divine power and authority in his church and beyond to the ends of the earth and amongst all people.

This is the very Lord, whom his disciples, the apostles of old knew as the one, who doesn't just demand this kind of trust and confidence, but shows himself in miracles and wonders, that he well deserves all our trust in him.

For he can feed thousands in the desert with practically nothing and they are all fed; he changes water into wine, he stills the ferocious storm, makes wind and waves die down, grants peace and quiet that all are quite amazed and St. Peter can even walk on the waves himself; Jesus heals the sick, let's the blind see, the lame walk and frees those possessed by devils and evil spirits; and preaches the gospel to the poor. See all this are visible signs demonstrating his power and almighty divinity! Thereby he doesn't want to intimidate, but rather comfort, encourage and promote the little faith and trust and confidence in his disciples: *"Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?"* (Mat 16:9 NIV)⁵

It is the very Lord, who could not even be stopped by betrayal and denial, by the most horrendous torture and violence, yes, not even by the terrible death on the cross or burial in a grave shut off with a huge rock and guarded by soldiers, weapons and seals. Not even death, devil and all of hell could hold him back from accomplishing his glorious and

⁵ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?" (Mar 8:17-21 NIV)

But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." (Joh 10:38 NIV)

victorious mission to save and liberate sinners from these very ills and most dire threats and enemies. However when the women hear it on Easter morning from those angels, what do they do? Do they rejoice, sing and clap their hands, jumping for joy and out of pure gratitude and thankfulness, lauding and praising God? No. They don't. Rather: *"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* (Mar 16:8 NIV)

And when Mary Magdalene had seen him and on his greeting: "Mary!" recognized him and then told the disciples, who were mourning and weeping, that he was alive and well and that she'd seen him, did they believe? No, they did not believe this.⁶

Then he appeared to those 2 disciples on the way to Emmaus and explained to them again and in all detail, that all this had to happen this way and that it was crucial, necessary, vital, meet, right and salutary and that it was all strictly according to God's holy will.⁷ St. Luke records Jesus response to these Emmaus disciples: "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luk 24:25-26 NIV) Well, when their eyes eventually were opened when he broke the break at supper they were overjoyed, they returned immediately to Jerusalem and to the other disciples to share the wonderful news of Jesus miraculous resurrection and most awesome victory and triumph "...but they did not believe them either." (Mar 16:13 NIV)

Dear brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers: We should not doubt this wonderful gospel and saving message of our Lord's glorious resurrection and most triumphant victory. Rather we should take courage from it, put our trust in it and share it gladly with those, who are still mourning and weeping, lost in darkness and shadows of death, sin and unbelief. Especially to those, who have been unreached by the gospel, who are still following other gods, idols and hopeless ways, who have fallen by the wayside and have given up the Christian hope due to doubt, fruitless ideologies and vain and empty myths and phantasies.

⁶ "When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it." (Mar 16:9-11 NIV)

⁷ Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. (Mar 16:12-13 NIV)

From the beginning our Lord and Saviour has called his people back to true faith and trust in him. He has shown them, that he is alive and well and he has sent them on the mission of their life: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.**" This is a crucial, vital and life-saving mission for: "**Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.**" So don't waste time. Make use of the open doors. Preach this saving gospel to all creation in good and bad times. Do your daily work as a faithful labourer, servant and worker in God's holy service and calling. Invest the gifts, he has bestowed on you richly and plentifully and way beyond your worthiness or merit for the benefit of many and to his honour and glory. In this way and by this means, God will create faith where and when it pleases him. It will surely not come back empty, but do, what pleases him. His holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament, the writings of the holy apostles and prophets, his most precious Word in Law and Gospel will give your speech the necessary substance, but also saving authority and effectivity.

And your Lord and God will accompany and underline your speech with such signs as he deems right, meet and salutary. Remember the most effective, clearest and saving signs are those of the gospel itself – the washing away of sins, the burial into Christ's death and incorporation into his new life & creation, the bestowal of the Holy Spirit and royal & divine kinship of God's children and heirs of heaven in the cleansing waters of his most precious gift: **holy Baptism**. The other sign is that of his very own **body and blood**, given and shed for your for spiritual sustenance in this valley of death, keeping you for eternity through thick and thin, driving away sin, death and all evil and giving your fading and decaying body eternal promise and hope that will not die even in the darkest night and the deepest grave and most gruesome death. This all and far more he grants you in his holy sacrament of the altar under the visible signs of bread and wine. The laying on of hands in **Absolution** is another visible sign of his grace and mercy. In another context this also a sign of the holy **ordination** into his most holy office of the ministry. The **blessed sign of the cross** + in the morning and evening and in-between. Even suffering, death and dying of the martyrs and holy saints of the church is such a sign of the church and God's miracle & wonder. The spread out arms during **Benediction**. Powerful, encouraging signs and pointers to the gospel, God's goodness, forgiveness, tender mercies and persevering graces, signs of the church and holy saints of God.

- New tongues: Translations⁸ (Pentecost overcoming Babel)
- Snakes: St. Paul on that island bitten by an adder. (Baptism as curing the bite of the old evil foe etc)
- Deadly poison – not just metaphorical, but also really.⁹ (Forgiveness of sins grants eternal life & salvation)
- Sick people – hospitals, hospice, infirmary, asylums, sanctuaries, nurseries, apothecary etc cf “Of Gods and men”¹⁰ Medicine. (Reference: Lord’s Supper as pharmakon athanasian)

These are his powerful signs of life and salvation. They point to him, who is proclaimed in the gospel to the very ends of the earth. For he lives and reigns over all. He the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – one God, never failing, but surely reigning. He is about to return to judge the living and the dead. Then we will see him coming as he once departed, we will see him as he is and all knees will bow before him and all tongues and voices will proclaim his praises and acknowledge that he alone is the Lord and worthy of all adoration, glory and worship – now and always. Amen. The Peace of our living and reigning Lord IX be with you always +

Hymn 494:1-3.4-5

⁸ Wikipedia: The Bible has been translated into many languages from the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. As of November 2014 the full Bible has been translated into 531 languages, and 2,883 languages have at least some portion of the Bible.

⁹ Loya, Bogotshwane,

¹⁰ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1588337/>