

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Synod has encouraged congregations to continue a focus on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this Sunday, which it is calling “Here I Stand” Sunday, for in April of 1521, Martin Luther had been summoned to appear before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet, that is, the ruling assembly, being held in Worms, Germany. Luther’s life was on the line. Needless to say, Luther was not the Pope’s favorite person; Luther had challenged the Church’s teaching; he had challenged the Pope’s authority. The Pope responded by excommunicating Luther in January of 1521.

But rather than receiving the Imperial ban immediately, German noblemen, including Luther’s Elector Fredrick the Wise, insisted that Luther be given a hearing. Gathering as many of Luther’s writing as they could, they stacked them before Luther on April 17, 1521, and they read the titles. “Are they your writings?” they asked him. He answered that they were.

He was then asked to recant them and was told what a refusal to recant would mean. One can almost hear Luther’s trembling voice as he told them that recanting would not be so easy, after all, this was about eternal salvation. Luther asked for a day of reflection, which was granted.

On the afternoon of April 18, Luther was brought back before Emperor Charles and asked again whether he would recant his writings. This time surely it was courage from God that filled him, the strength of faith that comes from knowing a gracious Lord and God, who Himself endured the dishonor of an unjust trial, the suffering of cruel soldiers, the shame of crucifixion, the icy cold of the grave, but who rose victorious from the dead on the third day.

This courage and strength overwhelmed the fear that had made him so timid the day before. He was asked to be brief, but his answer took some explaining, which he did. He was reminded again to give a brief answer, and so Luther confessed the words you have in your bulletin insert: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.”

Fear had filled Jesus’ disciples some 1,500 years earlier, for they had seen Jesus be unjustly arrested, accused, tried, convicted, sentenced, and executed. Remember from the Gospel last week? They were in that locked room “*for fear of the Jews*”

(Jn. 20:19). Still, odd reports were surfacing during the day. Mary Magdalene had reported that she had seen Jesus. How could that be? Joseph and Nicodemus had buried Him. Peter, too, reportedly had seen Him — the disciples were discussing that when two of the brothers, who had been on the road to Emmaus, came back to Jerusalem to tell the others that they, too, had seen Jesus, and that they recognized Him “*in the breaking of the bread*” (Lk. 24:35).

That’s when Jesus came and stood in their midst. And again, as we heard last week, Jesus said to the disciples, “*Peace to you.*” And our Gospel says, they were both “*startled and frightened*” by His presence. Maybe startled is right; the Lord knows — and so do our catechumens — how I react when I am startled. I’m just glad they didn’t post on social media the recording that they took ... no I didn’t use any foul language, but I did scream. But the Greek word used here can mean much more than just being startled; it can mean “terrified,” and some English translations translate it that way. They were, after all, hunkered down.

Moreover, the disciples were troubled by Jesus standing there and had questions “*arise in their hearts,*” surely as Luther later had as he debated within himself about what he should do.

Jesus answered their questions — even their doubts — in three ways. First, He spoke to the disciples assuring them, “It is I myself ... it’s all right! You can touch me. I’m not just a spirit. I have flesh and bones” (paraphrase). And He showed them His hands and feet. They knew the tomb was empty! And the two angels had said that He “*has risen,*” just as He said He would. Could this be Jesus, risen physically from the dead?

The disciples were amazed by all this, and joy began to well up in them. Nevertheless, they still “*disbelieved,*” St. Luke reports. Therefore, Jesus went further. “*Do you have anything to eat?*” He asked them. “*They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.*” For surely a mere spirit with no flesh also has no need to eat. Here was more proof that this was Jesus in the flesh, Jesus risen from the dead.

But then Jesus provided them with the clincher, for ultimately they had something more sure than even being an eyewitness — at least, so said Peter about another theophany, the Transfiguration: “*we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed,*” Peter wrote, “*to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*” (2 Pet. 19). The evangelist John admits it, too, about his own unbelief at the resurrection, for when John saw that the tomb was empty, he believed that, but, he reports, “*as yet [he and Peter] did not understand the Scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead*” (Jn. 20:9).

Thus, like He did for the Emmaus disciples, Jesus took the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms, and He showed the disciples how He fulfilled them, especially *“that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.”* More than that, Jesus *“opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”* That’s when they really believed, for this prophetic word is the *“lamp shining in a dark place”*; it is *“a lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path”* (Ps. 119:105). By this lamp does the day dawn and the morning star rise in our hearts — by this Word do we believe.

In this way, Jesus silenced all their fears. His resurrection wiped away their tears; the promise of their own resurrection calmed their troubled hearts. And the blessings He imparted to them emboldened the apostles to go forth starting at Jerusalem and proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection along with *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... in [Jesus’] name to all nations.”* In this way, these cowardly disciples became courageous apostles, commissioned to be Jesus’ witnesses and to spread the Good News of salvation in His name at the risk of their own imprisonment and eventually their martyrdom.

Listen to how Peter proclaimed it just as Jesus had instructed: *“you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.”* That’s cross and resurrection. *“To this we are witnesses,”* as Jesus had told them. And a bit later: *“what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled.”* Christ had shown them that it was all foretold in Moses and the prophets. *“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out,”* — repentance for the forgiveness of sins — *“that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.”*

Peter’s message to the people at the temple is a message for us today in the face of death, for we have faced it up close in the past year, and surely death is always close by us (Lk. 12:20). But as Peter did and as Luther did, let us shake off our fear and cling to the sure word of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Let us take to heart Peter’s preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that we may be forgiven and given our own times of refreshment.

And let us live our lives boldly even in the face of fear. Peter and the disciples no longer quailed in a locked room, but went forth boldly, and most were indeed martyred for the sake of Christ. Luther followed their example. He came back the next day and stared down death, confessing, “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” You probably remember how God spared Luther’s life with the aid of his Elector Fredrick the Wise, who protected him in the Wartburg Castle. Luther thus died confessing this faith to the end.

So how about us? Shall we cower with a fear that betrays faithlessness? Or shall we go forth boldly as Jesus’ disciples did through the ages, as proclaimers of Christ

incarnate, crucified, risen from the dead, calling ourselves and others to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, suffering all, as we say in our confirmation promises, “even death, rather than [falling] away from” “this confession and Church” (LSB, 273)? Shall fear paralyze us, making us impotent? Or shall the cross of Christ, His resurrection, the message of forgiveness in His name, and the hope of life eternal empower us to a confident faith and a bold witness?

We pray, O Lord, with Peter and Martin and all Your saints, who have gone before us, take away our fears, and give us a bold confidence in You and in our ultimate victory with You. For Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.