

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

As Jesus is being led to His trial before the temple priests, Peter followed, probably at a distance, as does another disciple, whom many think to be John. John was known to the high priest, so he was able to enter the courtyard with Jesus, but Peter could not. John spoke to the servant girl and brought Peter in. This servant girl thought she recognized Peter and pressed him, "You are not also one of this Man's disciples, are you?" Peter replied, "I am not," and with that denied Jesus the first time. (cf. John 18:12-17)

Twice more, Peter denied knowing Jesus—denied His God and Savior. Then, the rooster crowed. Peter remembered Jesus' words, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." He went out from the courtyard and wept bitterly. (cf. Matthew 26:75)

Some time later, Jesus had risen from the grave that He was placed in after His crucifixion. He appeared to His disciples on multiple occasions.

On a certain occasion, He was with seven of them on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. He had revealed Himself to them while they were out fishing; He asked for some fish, but they had none, so He told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. John marveled at the great catch of fish, turned to Peter and said, "It is the Lord!" At this, Peter put on his outer garment, jumped in the lake, and swam to shore. There, Jesus and His disciples had breakfast. (cf. John 21:1-14)

After breakfast, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him, three times, "Do you love me?" Three times, Peter replied, "Lord, you know that I love you." The third time Peter's response was more emphatic as he was grieved at the questioning; "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." With each reply, Jesus told Peter to feed His lambs and sheep. (cf. John 21:15-17)

Three times...both the number of times Peter denied Jesus before the crucifixion, and the number of times Jesus restored Peter in response after breakfast. The grieving over the sin is done, and Peter is forgiven.

That's when Jesus told Peter, "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." What does this mean? Jesus told Peter this in order to show by what kind of death he would glorify God. According to legend, in Rome, Peter was crucified, his arms were stretched out over the cross beam, and he was led to where he did not want to go as he carried it to the place where he would be nailed to it. However, not wanting to die like Jesus, he was crucified upside down. After saying that, Jesus told Peter, "Follow me." The restoration of Peter is completed. (cf. John 21:18-19)

That was right before today's text. There, Peter, having been told about his death, turned toward John and asked, "What about him?" Jesus' response is rather indignant as he told Peter, "That's none of your business." Of course, Jesus didn't put it that way. "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." "Don't worry about him, Peter; you follow Me."

It's funny how God can say something, have something written down, and what He says is taken completely out of context or be completely misunderstood.

- God told Eve that her Seed would crush the serpent's head; so when she had given birth to Cain, she expected him to be the promised Seed. Her hopes were crushed when he murdered his younger brother. She gave birth to another son, Seth, and looked at him as merely being a replacement for Abel, but still the one through whom the promise would be kept. (cf. Genesis 3:15; 4:1, 8, 25)
- By the voice of many prophets, God had told His people of invading armies He would send if they did not repent of their wicked ways—if they would not turn from their honor and worship of idols and false gods. They refused to listen, not taking God at His word, and the kingdoms

fell to invading armies.

- By the voice of the same prophets, God had told His people of One who was to come to set them free from sins and the oppression of sin. He sent signs of this One—a virgin birth, healings, resurrections, a suffering servant. The people saw the signs and had the Word of God, yet they denied that Jesus was the fulfillment of that Word.
- In today's text, Jesus said, "If I will that John remain till I come..." and people start spreading rumors that John wasn't going to die. You might also imagine that rumors began to spread that Jesus would return in John's lifetime—within a generation—but that would go counter to what Jesus had previously taught, that no one knows the day or the hour of His coming, not even He, but that it would come like a thief in the night. (cf. Matthew 24:36, 43)

"You follow me," Jesus told Peter. Peter was restored to being a full-fledged disciple, you could say. From that moment on, he heeded God's Word...mostly. He taught the people, telling them of the things he had been told and had seen. He wrote letters to churches, reminding them of the promise that is theirs in Christ, that Jesus was with them and that He would return. He followed Jesus, right to death, to a death similar to the Lord's, in fact.

However, that doesn't mean that he never doubted the Word of God. In fact, John would also have had his moments of doubt, even though he wrote his Gospel account in order that that you would believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing, have life in His name. (cf. John 20:30-31) All of the apostles doubted, as did every person to whom they ministered. And that doubt continues to this day.

You can see the evidence of it in the number of heresies that have crept up in the church in the centuries since Jesus' ascension. Every creed that you confess combats some of these heresies. Every ecumenical council added to the written confession of the Church against one heresy or another. You may recall hearing about one this past Wednesday, where the Third Ecumenical Council met in Ephesus in AD431 and confessed Mary to be the Mother of God against the heresy of Nestorianism, which denied that the divine and human natures of Christ are united in the one person of Jesus, contrary to what the Scriptures teach. However, from Manichaeism to Arianism to every other "Christian" -ism out there, to a tee they all originated from a faulty understanding of the Word of God.

But it's not as grandiose as the heresies of the past, which to one degree or another still have form and substance today among those who call themselves Christian. Even within our circles, from those who call themselves Lutheran, even to members of this congregation, people still have a hard time believing the Word of God. People still hear Jesus say one thing, but understand Him to mean something else.

- Jesus tells you, through the apostle Peter, that Baptism now saves you, corresponding to the Ark which saved Noah and his family. (cf. 1 Peter 3:21) Still, there are Christians who claim that Baptism is simply a response of the believer to the decision he or she made to be a believer. Through the act, they claim, a person demonstrates that he or she is now a believer, but they either reject or overlook the simple phrase that Peter wrote in his letter.
- Jesus tells you, by way of the apostle John's pen, that when the called ministers of God's word deal with you according to the Word of God, the forgiveness they proclaim is just as valid and certain as if Jesus your dear Lord dealt with you Himself. The converse is also true, according to the same passage, that if these ministers should have to retain your sins—binding them to you—then it's just as if Jesus Himself bound your sins to you, which condemns you. (cf. John 20:22-23) However, you'll still hear some who call themselves Christian who will say that only God can forgive sins, and that no man has the right or authority from God to do so.
- Jesus tells you, by way of the pens of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul, that when you receive a morsel of bread and a sip of wine as part of His Supper, that you are eating and drinking His body and blood. (cf. Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) The apostle Paul even goes so far to call what you eat and drink a mystical union of bread and body and wine and blood. (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16) Still, there are myriad people out there who will say, for one thing, that when Jesus said "is," He really meant "represents," or, for another thing, that such a mystical union completely transforms the bread into body and the wine into blood, or for yet another thing, that bread and wine don't really matter when it comes to Holy Communion.

It's not just Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper that are in question, however. Anything about the Word of God is questioned, from the creation to Jesus' return. And you, dear hearers, suffer the same affliction that those who assumed that John wasn't going to die suffered. You hear Jesus say one thing, but you understand Him to mean something else.

That doesn't make anything that Jesus actually said untrue. His coming was promised, and it happened. Just two days ago, you heard the apostle John's words that the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among men. You have heard these past few weeks from Matthew and Luke of the coming of the Son of God. Throughout the year, you hear from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the many things the Son of God has done for you. And these things are retold with encouragement by Paul, Peter, James, and John, even as John gives you a glimpse into the life that is to come—yours by way of the faith that you have been given in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

These are what these men have recounted for your hearing and believing: that the Christ has come, the Christ has died on the cross, the Christ has risen from the grave, the Christ has ascended to the right hand of the throne of glory, and the Christ will come again to claim you to be with Him where He is in eternity. Jesus tells you through His Word, recorded for you by His apostles, to believe in Him, and in so doing, He gives you the faith to believe.

By that faith, you follow Jesus; just as He told Peter, "You follow Me." What He has given you to know, you will know, by His Word. What He has not given you to know, what business of yours is that? For those times when you do not understand what He tells you, when you misinterpret His Word, confess it. Your Lord is merciful, gracious, and compassionate. His Word is true, despite your understanding or lack thereof. He will do for you what He has promised to do for you, particularly, forgive your sins and raise you from your graves and take you to be with Him where He is, a promise you hear by way of the pen of St. John. (cf. John 14:3) Where He is you know, and the way there you know, too.

As the apostle John recorded, Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6) The Way is death and resurrection, the Truth is that Jesus is God, and the Life is His that He has given you. By death and resurrection, you, too, will be where He is. Yes, at the appointed time, you will die and be placed in a grave, but you will rise again and receive eternal life for the sake of Jesus Christ your God. The only way to escape death is to be alive when Jesus returns. Then, on that Great Day, those who have died and gone to their graves will rise first. Then, together with them, those who remain will meet Jesus in the clouds and with them go into life everlasting. (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) All of these are true because Jesus has promised them; through your Baptism into His death and resurrection, they are yours. He died on the cross; through your baptism, you died in the font with Him—that is to say, through Him, you have died to sin and risen again to newness of life. (cf. Romans 6:3-11)

It may not feel like it at times, but the Word of God declares this to be true. What you have just heard is a retelling of what the apostles John and Paul had written. All of what they have written is written for the same purpose that John has given in His gospel. As the apostle wrote,

[T]here are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)

The things that are written are given to point you to the Christ, who is your Lord and Savior, who has gone to the cross and given His life for you that you may believe and live. He has given you the faith to believe, and so, on the Last Day, you will live. You will live, because Jesus has shed His blood for your remission, your propitiation; by His work and merit, you follow Him, and you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.