

EASTER 2
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 20:19-31

There are two way in this life: the way that seems right and the way that is right. Many ways seem right. Even the most wrong way will seem right if we want it to at the moment. We can convince ourselves that the very path to hell is paved with roses if we give the sinful nature a chance. So how do we know what is right, and how do we make sure that the church sticks to it.

It's really rather simple. God creates faith through the Word. God strengthens faith through the Word. God preserves faith through the Word. And the Word is the supreme and final authority for the Christian. The church that governs itself with that Word, defines its message by that Word, and founds its being upon that Word, that church is on the right path and in the right way. The church that does not, no matter its size, its age, or its title, has stumbled upon the wrong path and is in the wrong way. It's not that difficult is it, to say, at least, if not to do?

One of the problems confessional Lutheranism sometimes has faced in history is that it has no set structure. At least, some have thought this a problem. Especially when times have gotten tough, when strife or doctrinal debate has arisen, some have inevitably called for or sought to establish someone or something in charge, to settle the dispute, to bring peace, to have the final word and put the church's problems to rest. And sometimes it's worked, for a time, but only for a time. Human solutions, like human beings, have expiration dates.

The fact that confessional Lutheranism has no set structure and chain of command has sometimes led people to wonder if confessional Lutheranism can survive for much longer, or whether there can be such a thing as confessional Lutheranism at all? The truth is that it is precisely its ability to roll with the punches so long as it keeps hold of the Word that has allowed confessional Lutheranism to persist, but that often seems unlikely in the heat of the moment.

Confessional Lutheranism is hard to nail down, because we can't really define what it looks like outside of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. We know what Roman Catholicism looks like. Look at Rome, the pope, the cardinals, the bishops and priests, and there you have it. And the same is true of many Protestant churches. Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and congregational churches, for example, get their names from their view of church authority, of what the church should look like. Episcopalian means the bishops are in charge. Presbyterian means the presbyters, or elders, are in charge. Congregational means that the congregations are in charge. So what about Lutheranism? As I've joked before, I'm fine with a pope in Lutheranism, so long as it is me. The same is probably true for you. But what does the Bible say? Who should be in charge?

Did you know some Lutheran churches have bishops? Did you know Martin Luther even put forth bishops for some Lutheran churches? And did you know some Lutheran churches are run by consistories, in essence a governing board of clergy and prominent laymen? And, as I hope you know, some are organized in synods, where congregations voluntary join in fellowship, recognized through common teaching, to do mission work and ministerial education. Who is right in their organization? They all are. The New Testament has left Christian churches free to adopt the form of church government that works best for the ministry of the gospel in their setting. But none of this should ever be about who is in charge, because the church already has a Head, Jesus Christ, and it already has an ultimate and final authority, His Word. Throw in some pastors, ambassadors of Christ, to preach and teach the Word, to baptize, commune, admonish, and absolve, and laypeople, to hear the Word, ponder it, live it out in their vocations, and support the ministry of the Word with their prayers and offerings, and you've covered the biblical bases.

Listen to how our first lesson begins again:

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

Ezekiel wasn't called to tell a great joke, a cute story, or even to persuade Israel to believe. No, he was called to preach God's Word. And he wasn't called to be sweet and lovable, to please people, or to win them over to himself. No, he was to point to Christ, our resurrected Lord, and the grace that abounds to us in Him. The same Lord who gave Ezekiel the words to speak on that day gives us His Word still today, recorded in the Scriptures to be proclaimed and explained by His called servants in the church and by godly parents in the home.

Pastors err and do themselves a burdensome disservice when they try to judge their ministry of the Word by attempting to discern the purposes God has assigned for their preaching but not revealed to them, or when they insert themselves into the equation, as if they needed to light a little extra fire under the Spirit. And laypeople only set up their own faith to fail when they lose sight of the cross by focusing on the one preaching the message of it.

Don't put your faith in pastors. Put your faith in Christ, where the Spirit puts it. And don't expect your pastors to speak to you worldly wisdom, or what you necessarily want to hear, or what some unfaithful shepherd down the road has spoken. That is not fair to your pastor, and it is not right in the church. No, expect your pastor to speak God's Word, because that is what he has been called to speak, because it is only that Word—and not his own—that can bring dry bones to life and absolved doubting disciples. And don't expect a dispute about what is right or wrong, what is true or false, what is wise or foolish to be resolved by a vote, by factions, by seniority, or by semantics. Yes, someone might manage to get their way that way, but that is never God's way. The answer to what is right or wrong, true or false, wise or foolish is to be sought in His Word, and when His Word answers, that answer is to hold full sway. Otherwise, a church might still have stained glass windows, but it has ceased to be a true church.

God's Word brought dead bones to life. God's Word rose from the dead. God's Word restored Thomas' faith. God's Word brought new breath and life to frightened and weary disciples. God's Word, through which the world was created in the first place, and God's Word, which will be fulfilled and declared at its end.

Easter is about God keeping His Word. And He has kept it. Christ's hands and feet, shown to Thomas, pierced on the cross and now signs of His victory, are proof of that. And He will keep His Word. Our task is not to ensure that, to help His promises along, or to supplement what He has spoken. Rather, our task is to trust what He has said, to learn it well, and to pass it down. And when that Word is spoken, there is no room for debate and there is to be no scouring for loopholes. No, in a truly Christian congregation, there is only "Amen" and humble submission. May it be so among us as long as He gives us together, because His Word is never in the end to our detriment, but always for our true and eternal good. Amen.

**Typed from a preaching outline. Please forgive any typos or grammatical errors.