

# ONCE FOR ALL

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*A Sermon Series for the Sacred Triduum*

*Maundy Thursday · Good Friday · Easter Sunday*

*"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."*

*— Hebrews 10:14*

## **A Note on the Series**

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The Triduum — the three holy days running from the evening of Maundy Thursday through Easter Sunday — is not three separate occasions loosely grouped by proximity on the calendar. It is one liturgical event, one dramatic arc, one story told in three acts. The sermons in this series are written to be heard in sequence, each one carrying forward a thread that the previous one established.

The unifying theme is the blood of the new and eternal covenant. On Thursday evening, we see it promised and given at the table. On Friday afternoon, we see it poured out on the cross. On Sunday morning, we meet the One whose blood it was — risen, victorious, and alive. The covenant cannot be broken, because its guarantor is the living God.

The preacher who uses these sermons is encouraged to end each of Thursday's and Friday's with a forward lean — a sense of something unfinished, something still coming. The resurrection is the answer to a question that the cross raises and that the empty tomb alone can answer.

These sermons are written from within the confessional tradition of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, with particular attention to the real presence of Christ in the Supper, the objective atonement of the cross, the bodily resurrection, and the centrality of the means of grace as the delivery system of everything Easter promises.

## The Cup He Did Not Refuse Maundy Thursday

*Exodus 24:3–11 · Hebrews 9:11–22 · Matthew 26:17–30*

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a scene in the oldest annals of Israel's history that most people move past on their way to more famous passages. Moses has just received the Law. The people have responded — twice, emphatically — "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." And then comes this: oxen are slaughtered. Their blood is collected in basins. Moses takes half and throws it against the altar. He reads the Book of the Covenant aloud. The people say yes again. And then Moses takes the remaining blood and throws it — on the people.

*"Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." — Exodus 24:8*

Blood on the altar. Blood on the people. One life spilled so that two parties might be bound together. This is ancient. This is visceral. And it is entirely intentional.

We live in an age of contracts. When you close on a house, you sit at a table buried in paper and sign your name forty times. When you start a job there is an offer letter, a benefits packet, a non-compete clause. We have made the solemn into the bureaucratic. We have replaced blood with ink, and sometimes we wonder why our promises feel so thin.

But covenants — the ancient kind, the binding kind — were sealed in blood. Something had to die. Life had to be poured out. Because the implicit logic of ancient covenant-making was this: may this happen to me if I break this promise. The slaughtered animal was not a gift given to God. It was a warning enacted before the people. This is what covenant-breaking costs.

The author of Hebrews is blunt about the reason: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." This is not primitive superstition. It is the grammar of justice written into the fabric of a moral universe that God

himself created. Sin costs something. Life was forfeited. Blood must answer for blood.

But there is a problem with the Mosaic covenant, Hebrews explains. The blood of bulls and goats cannot actually take away sin. It can point forward. It can dramatize the need. It can cast the shadow of the reality. But it cannot accomplish the thing itself. "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." The old covenant was a promissory note, not a payment. A down payment on something that had not yet arrived.

Into this long, patient, bloody history of promise, Jesus sits down at a table in Jerusalem.

The Passover lamb has been prepared. The bitter herbs are on the table. The cups stand ready. Every element of this meal is layered with centuries of meaning. The Passover was the annual rehearsal of the night when death passed over Israel's houses — when the blood of a lamb on the doorpost stood between a family and the destroying angel. Year after year, generation after generation, Israel rehearsed this story: blood means deliverance. Somebody dies so that somebody else can live.

And on this particular night, the One who would become the final Passover Lamb is reclining at the table. He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it: "Take, eat; this is my body." He takes the cup: "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

*"This is my blood of the covenant." — Matthew 26:28*

He is not speaking in metaphor. He is not offering a dramatic illustration of what is about to happen. He is instituting something — something that will continue until he comes again. The old covenant, sealed with the blood of oxen on the people of Israel, is being superseded. There is a new covenant. It is sealed in his blood. And he is giving you that blood to drink.

The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has always confessed, with Martin Luther, with the earliest church fathers, that these words mean exactly what they say. "This is my body. This is my blood." Not a representation. Not a memorial enhanced by sincere feelings. The body that will hang on the cross tomorrow is present in this bread. The blood that will be shed at Golgotha is present in this cup. The Supper does not point away from Christ toward a

memory. It delivers Christ — crucified, risen, and alive — to you, here, now, for the forgiveness of your sins.

Consider what is happening in our world this very week as diplomats labor over peace agreements in troubled corners of the globe. We know from long experience how fragile such agreements are. They are signed with great ceremony, and then they unravel. They collapse under bad faith, changing leadership, or the weight of old grievances. Every peace deal on earth carries within it the seeds of its own breakdown — because the signatories are human beings, and human beings break promises.

The covenant Jesus institutes this night is of an entirely different kind. It cannot be broken — not because the human parties are faithful, but because he is. He knew, as he passed that cup around the table, that within hours he would be betrayed by one of the men sitting in that room. He knew Peter would deny him three times before dawn. He knew they would all run. He gave them the cup anyway.

He gives it to you anyway. Not because you have earned it. Not because you will keep your end of the bargain. But because he keeps his, always, at the cost of everything.

Matthew tells us that after the supper, they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. They sang the ancient Hallel psalms — Psalms 113 through 118 — the psalms of Egyptian deliverance, the songs of a people who had been brought through the sea. They sang about a God who rescues. They sang about the goodness of the LORD. They sang on the edge of an abyss they could not see.

Jesus could see it. And he sang.

He did not refuse the cup at this table. There was another cup waiting — in a garden, in the dark, where he would pray: "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me." But it was not possible. Not if you were to be forgiven. Not if the covenant was to be sealed.

**He took the cup he could have refused. And he went out into the dark — for you.**

Come back Friday afternoon. The price is not yet fully paid.

## Bearing What We Could Not Bear Good Friday

*Isaiah 52:13–53:12 · Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9 · John 18:1–19:42*

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a word in Isaiah 53 that occurs, in various forms, four times — like a drumbeat beneath a dirge. The word is borne. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." "He bore the sin of many." "He shall bear their iniquities."

To bear something is not merely to feel sad about it from a distance. To bear something is to take it from someone else and carry it yourself. It is transfer. It is substitution. The weight moves from one set of shoulders to another.

Isaiah wrote these words seven hundred years before Golgotha. He had never seen a crucifixion. Rome had not yet invented the cross. Yet he describes a Servant who is "despised and rejected," "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." One who is "pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities." One upon whom "the LORD has laid the iniquity of us all."

This is not vague spiritual poetry about a noble idealist who suffered for his convictions. This is a precise theological transaction. The sin belongs to us. The punishment falls on him. The wound is his; the healing is ours. "By his wounds we are healed."

There is a word for what Isaiah is describing, and it is one that polite theological circles sometimes prefer to avoid. It is called penal substitution. It means that the penalty for sin — the death that sin earns, the wrath that justice requires — was placed on Jesus in the place of those who had earned it. This is not a medieval invention or a Reformation novelty. It is Isaiah. It is the grammar of the Passover lamb. It is the logic behind every animal ever slaughtered in the courts of the Temple. Something dies instead of the one who deserves to die.

Last month, a man in Ohio was in the news for stepping in front of a vehicle to push his young son to safety. He was badly hurt. His son walked away

unharméd. When a reporter asked him why he did it, the father seemed puzzled by the question. "He's my son," he said. As if that answered everything. As if that answered everything.

It did answer everything. Love acts. Love absorbs the blow. Love takes the wound so that another does not have to. What happened at Golgotha is that instinct — this father's instinct — raised to infinite, eternal power. Not a parent acting on impulse. But the eternal Son of God, in full knowledge, in full willingness, walking into the worst that human sin and divine justice could produce, and absorbing it all.

For you. Specifically. Your sins. Your debt. Your name on that receipt.

The author of Hebrews gives us something surprising in the midst of all this. He says: we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. He was tempted in every respect as we are. And then, in chapter 5, this: he "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud crying and tears, to him who was able to save him from death."

*"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud crying and tears." — Hebrews 5:7*

Loud crying and tears. The eternal Son of God, weeping.

This is Gethsemane. This is the God who does not stand at a safe and philosophical distance from human suffering and issue theological explanations. This is the God who enters it. Who sweats blood. Who asks, in the garden, if there is another way. Who finds there is not, and goes forward anyway — not because he was forced, but because he loves you with a love that does not waver before even this.

John's account of the trial and crucifixion is forensic in its detail, stripped of sentimentality. The garden, the arrest, the kangaroo proceedings before Annas, the interrogation before Caiaphas, then Pilate — who declares three separate times, "I find no guilt in him," and three times is shouted down by the crowd. A guilty man, Barabbas, walks free. An innocent man walks toward execution.

This is not a miscarriage of justice that God regrets. This is the justice of heaven working its way through the courts of earth. The guilty one goes free. The innocent One dies in his place. But unlike Barabbas, whose freedom was accidental, your freedom was intentional. Planned before the foundation of the

world. Executed in time, on a specific Friday, outside a specific city, by nails that were not accidental.

On the cross itself, John is relentless in his honesty. There is no softening of the nails, the thorns, the thirst. Jesus says "I thirst" — the One who told the woman at the well that he could give living water, now dying of dehydration. The God who breathed the first breath into Adam now struggles for each breath on Roman wood.

And then: "It is finished."

*"It is finished." — John 19:30*

Tetelestai. Scholars of ancient papyri have discovered this word stamped across unpaid accounts in the records of the ancient world. It was the receipt word. Paid in full. Account settled. The creditor has no further claim.

Your debt — the specific weight of your specific sins, accumulated across every day of your life — was stamped with that word at three in the afternoon on a Friday outside Jerusalem. The bill was not waived. It was not overlooked in a gesture of divine sentimentality. It was paid. Fully. Finally. Once for all. God did not lower his standard. He met it.

And then the veil of the temple tore from top to bottom. From top to bottom — not unraveling from use, not cut from below. Torn, suddenly, violently, as if by hands that were not human. The curtain that had separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple — the curtain that said, in fabric and thread: you do not have access to God, access is reserved, the way is closed — that curtain was eliminated.

The way is open now. Access is granted. Not because the standard was lowered, but because the price was paid.

His tomb was sealed. Soldiers were posted. The stone was enormous.

The story appeared to be over.

**But Tetelestai does not mean the story is over. It means the debt is paid — and when a debt is fully paid, the prisoner walks free.**

Come back Sunday morning. The guard at the tomb is about to have a very bad day.

## The Tomb Could Not Hold Him The Resurrection of Our Lord — Easter Sunday

*Acts 10:34-43 · Colossians 3:1-4 · Matthew 28:1-10*

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is early. The sky is the color that precedes dawn — not yet light, no longer fully dark. The city is still sleeping. Two women make their way through the streets of Jerusalem, carrying spices. They are going to anoint a body.

They know the tomb is sealed. They know there is a guard. They have been talking about the stone — who will roll it away? They have all the practical concerns of people who are doing a last, loving thing for someone they have lost. They are not wondering whether Jesus might be alive. They are wondering about the logistics of death. These are not women of naive, optimistic faith who expected the impossible and got it. These are grieving women on a practical errand in the gray pre-dawn, armed with spices and resignation.

This is important. The first people at the tomb on Easter morning were not looking for a resurrection. They were not people whose belief generated the experience. They were people whose experience shattered every expectation they had.

And then the earth shook.

Matthew tells us there was a great earthquake. An angel descended — "his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow." The guards, trained soldiers whose specific assignment was to prevent this very moment, "trembled and became like dead men." The stone is rolled away. And the angel says the words that have been echoing through two thousand years of Christian proclamation:

*"He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay." — Matthew 28:6*

As he said. Three words that matter enormously. Jesus had told them. Three times in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus announces: I am going to be handed

over; I am going to be killed; on the third day I will be raised. The disciples could not understand it. The categories did not exist. But he said it. The resurrection of Jesus is not a surprise ending bolted onto a tragedy. It is the fulfillment of his own explicit promise — spoken in advance, disbelieved, forgotten in the grief of Friday, and now standing in front of the women as an angel with an earthquake and a rolled-away stone.

We live in an era of profound skepticism about truth claims of any kind. We have been deceived by institutions we trusted — governments, corporations, media, sometimes churches. Artificial intelligence can now generate convincing video of people saying things they never said, synthesize voices indistinguishable from the real person, produce images of events that never happened. Our culture is swimming in fabricated reality, and it has made people reasonably suspicious of everything. How do we know anything really happened?

Precisely here, the historical evidence for the resurrection is worth sitting with. Notice who the first witnesses are: women. In the first-century world — Jewish, Roman, Greek — the testimony of women was not admissible in court. Women were not considered legally reliable witnesses. If you were constructing a resurrection story from scratch, and you wanted it to be believed, you would not — under any circumstances — choose women as your first and primary witnesses. You would choose respected men. Priests. Elders. Roman officers. The fact that every Gospel account names women as the first witnesses is a mark of historical honesty so distinctive that it actually argues for the record's reliability. Nobody fabricating this narrative would have told it this way.

Peter, preaching in the household of Cornelius in Acts 10, delivers the gospel to the first explicitly Gentile audience in the book. Notice what he does not offer them. He does not give them a beautiful metaphor about hope's persistence in the face of suffering. He does not say that Jesus lives on in the memory of his followers or the ongoing power of his teachings. He says this:

*"God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." — Acts 10:40–41*

Who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. Eyewitness testimony. Embodied testimony. They sat at a table with a man who had been crucified and buried, and they ate with him, and they knew exactly how extraordinary this was. This is the testimony that launched a movement that reshaped the ancient world — not that Jesus inspired them to live better, but that God raised him bodily from the dead.

This is the non-negotiable center of the Christian confession, and the Lutheran church has never flinched from it. The resurrection is not a metaphor for new beginnings. It is not a symbol of hope's survival in difficult times. It is a bodily, historical, space-and-time event. The same body that was nailed to the cross on Friday walked out of that tomb on Sunday — transformed, glorified, imperishable, but physically real. Real enough to eat with. Real enough to be touched. Real enough to show the wounds and say: this is not a ghost. I am the One who was dead, and I am alive forever.

Now comes Paul's word in Colossians 3, and it is addressed not to historians or theologians but to you — to people who will walk out of this church in a few minutes into ordinary Tuesday lives:

*"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." — Colossians 3:1–3*

If then you have been raised with Christ. This is present tense. Paul is not describing a future hope, though it includes a future hope. He is describing who you already are, right now, today. Because in your baptism — and here the whole Triduum comes together into a single point — in your baptism you were buried with Christ and you were raised with Christ. The water of baptism was your participation in the death of Jesus on Friday and the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday. You have already passed through the judgment. You have already been counted among the dead. And you have already been raised on the other side of it.

Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Think about what that means for how you walk out of here today. Your identity is not determined by your performance, your failures, your reputation, your finances, your worst moment, or your best achievement. Your identity is

hidden with Christ in God — held in the grip of the One who defeated death itself. Safe. Secure. Immovable. And when Christ appears, Paul says — when he returns in glory at the end of all things — then you also will appear with him in glory. This is your future. And because it is certain, it is already, in the most important sense, your present.

And this is why Thursday's table and Friday's cross and Sunday's empty tomb are not three separate observances. They are one story, told in three acts. At the table Thursday night, Jesus gave the disciples his body and blood — the covenant sealed in his flesh, given into their hands, placed on their lips. On the cross Friday afternoon, that body was broken and that blood was shed — the covenant ratified, the debt paid, the receipt stamped: tetelestai. And in the tomb Sunday morning, the stone was rolled away and the guard fell like dead men, because the One who had borne the sin of the world had not merely died for it but conquered it — and the empty grave cloths lying there in the shape of a body were the receipt that God himself endorsed: paid in full, debt discharged, prisoner released, alive forever.

Researchers have documented a phenomenon they call post-traumatic growth — a counterintuitive reality in which people who survive devastating illness, catastrophic loss, or near-death experience sometimes come through the other side with a depth of life, a richness of compassion, and a clarity of what matters that they could never have found on an easier road. Oncologists observe it. Grief counselors describe it. Theologians have noticed it for two thousand years. Something about going through death — not around it — produces a transformed life that going around could never have achieved.

This is an earthly shadow, a pale echo, of what Easter actually is. Easter does not offer you a spiritual bypass around suffering. It offers you the God who went through death himself — all the way through, without detour, without compromise — and came out the other side, and now calls you to follow him. Not around. Through. Into the life of God that never ends.

The women leave the tomb with fear and great joy. Matthew gives us both. Not just joy. Fear and great joy. Because Easter is not a greeting card sentiment. It is not a pleasant conclusion to a difficult week. The ground has shifted beneath the feet of the entire cosmos. The God who made the universe from nothing has invaded the empire of death, faced it on its own ground, defeated it from the inside, and emptied a tomb. That is terrifying in the most

beautiful possible sense. The universe has just been revealed to be a different kind of place than death would have us believe.

"Go quickly," the angel says, "and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead."

This is what you are for. Not just to receive the news, but to carry it. You are an Easter person living in a neighborhood, a workplace, a family, a city that has not yet heard. You carry in your body — by your baptism — the same resurrection life that cracked that tomb open on Sunday morning. You eat and drink at this table — not a memorial for a dead teacher, but the living body and blood of the One who is seated at the right hand of the Father, who intercedes for you right now, who is coming again in glory to make all things new.

Three evenings. Three mornings. One covenant. One price. One empty tomb. One story that is not over — that will not be over until he comes again and you appear with him in glory.

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**He is risen.  
He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**