

April 30, 2017, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter

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**Focus:** The word of God makes alive.

We all know the feeling, even in the age of caller ID. We hear the phone ring, and we go to pick it up, and then there's that telling long pause. And then a bright and cheerful voice tells us that due to a recent reservation that we've made, we've been selected out of a million people to receive a SPECIAL deal. And then, annoyed, and maybe with a couple choice words, we hang up on this meaningless babble as quickly as it began. It seems like every day we are bombarded with empty words, and it's not just telemarketers. Words in radio or TV ads tempting us to buy, words posted on signs and billboards urging us to repent before we end up in hell or announcing the latest of Mickey D's Deals, words on the screen that seems to have a creepily accurate knowledge of what we want, words mumbled to one another in the hallway, "how ya doing?" "Fine." Words that you might think would have real meaning like, "I love you," used as a sign-off at the end of a phone call like you're checking out of the grocery store: "love you, bye."

Sometimes those empty-sounding words are enough. A simple signed card thanking you for something is a nice reminder even if the words themselves aren't much. "How are you?" when you pass each other in the hallway is better than determinedly looking down at your cell phone, and I sure love getting even those 2-word "happy birthday" messages on Facebook on the big day. But there are so many times when we need our words to work a little harder.

How do you ask your boss for a raise?

How do you offer someone "constructive criticism?"

How do you tell someone "I love you" for the first time?

How do you say "I'm sorry," or "I forgive you," when it really matters?

What do you say to a friend or a family member who's just lost someone?

Suddenly, those simple words we've learned seem cheap. They seem like "just talk." They are cold, dead words.

Martin Luther, always one for choice words himself, once wrote, "the church is not a pen-house, but a mouth-house!" What he meant is that in the church, it's a place where God speaks to us. We hear the truth preached about God, we hear words sung to us by choirs and by ourselves, we hear the holy scriptures read, we lift up our voices in prayer to God: asking God for maybe the most mundane things: for favorable weather, to the most important things: praying that he will raise us all on the last day to eternal life. The Church is a mouth-house because, as our Bible study group discussed last week, we have a God who speaks.

The Church is no place for meaningless language or dead words. It is a place for the word of God. 1 Peter says that the word of God is "living and enduring."

Do we believe that? Do we believe that the word of God is living and enduring? Or is it just more words?

Ask yourself: when we go through the lessons, does every paragraph, does every verse, does every word come alive? When we say the prayers of the people, are you always all-in praying for every person in every place in the world, near and far? Are you eagerly anticipating the next note in verse 3 of that slow plodding hymn from the 4<sup>th</sup> century or from that new African hymn that we're struggling to figure out the beat to? Are you hanging on to every word of this sermon on the edge of your seat, not chancing even to breathe, lest you miss some sacred syllable, or are you just waiting for me to GET TO THE POINT?

Truth be told, those words may not seem as loud and "lively" every week. Truth be told, we're not going to hear every word spoken in this mouth house as if it were chanted by angelic hosts. We don't always hear the God who speaks loudly and clearly. Sometimes God's words may be just checking in and hearing him say, "how are you?" as we shake each other's hands and share the peace. Sometimes, it's just that simple rote, "I love you," when we hear the words, "this is the body of Christ given for you."

But even in these words, even in words that we've heard a thousand times before, God is still speaking. Those words are living because Christ is risen from the dead and his same familiar words of promise are alive and bring life. Even when we're not entirely listening, like a mother humming a lullaby as a baby falls to sleep, God is still speaking to us. God is nurturing us to be a people who not only hear him, but who *feel* his presence. God is still holding us and whispering the living words that we have heard so many times before, words like: "in the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake, God forgives you all your sins," or, words like, "the peace of the Lord be with you always," or, "do this in remembrance of me." These are the living words of God that announce a new birth in our lives even if we aren't yet spiritually mature or old enough to fully understand them. Even when we're not fully tuned in, these living words shape us and form us as a risen people. Sometimes, God's word is whispered.

And every now and then, there are times when there is no doubt. If you have ever been to a baptism, and you hear the words, "so and so, child of God, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit," or "let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to you Father in heaven," as the entire congregation welcomes with loving hearts this newborn baby or this adult who has finally felt God's call, you know you have heard the living word of God. You know that you have seen the new birth that this word has brought, not only for the baby or the newly baptized, but for the new community that it has created. Not a changed old community, but one born anew. A new living community that will listen for the word of God in the voice and actions of this new person among us throughout the years to come.

Life is full of those moments and those words too. At a wedding, at a confirmation, at a celebration of a birthday, at an ordination or installation, out in the glory of God's green and good creation, on a bright and cheery Easter morning, or on a cold and dark candle-lit Christmas Eve, we, all of us at different times, can hear the word of God. Spoken by to us by a voice that did not die forever when it was crucified on Good Friday, but lives through every cross.

In those moments of the cross, we learn that God's living word endures. As a pastor, I have the awesome and holy privilege of being at a bedside when God's saints breathe their last. At this moment, I am usually asked to say a prayer. I never know what to say. But God's word does. If

you have ever been at the bedside with a family of Christians gathered when someone is preparing to face death, you have heard God's voice. You have heard God's **living** voice. God's living word that endures even against the cold bite of death. God's word that endures and even finds its consummation at the grave, "Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled."

Sisters and brothers, everything around us is perishable and so are we. Our words are what they are: sometimes meaningful, sometimes cheap, sometimes full, sometimes hollow, sometimes memorable, more often than not here today gone tomorrow. But the word of God is imperishable. The word of God gave birth to our moms and dads and our grandparents and Christians hundreds of years before them when they were baptized. It nurtured them through their lives, and promised them when they were older a home that would endure even when their bodies did not.

That living word is spoken for us, too. Today, tomorrow, and always. When Jesus fell silent in the tomb, God's words spoke once again on Easter morning and made him alive. God's word brings life wherever and whenever it is spoken. It makes us alive as Christians: baptized and forgiven. It makes us alive as Christians: who love each other as brothers and sisters. And the living and enduring word of God makes us alive as Christians: whom the ground will not hold as perishable. But who will rise up to hear God's living and enduring word anew. **Amen.**