

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2020
1 Peter 3:15

“The Best Offense is a Good Defense”

It's the middle of May, and sports lovers are wondering what the summer – and even the fall – is going to look like. The coronavirus has changed many things in life, including sports on all levels: high school, collegiate, and professional. What about our hometown team, the World Series champions Washington Nats? Right now, as we all know, there are no Major League Baseball games being played. But there is hope, sports fans! “The most realistic time range for Opening Day — somewhere between mid-June and July 4, in the view of most officials — would allow for an 80- to 100-game regular season, with the schedule running through October. An expanded postseason at neutral sites might follow, with the World Series ending in late November or early December” (<https://www.cbssports.com/mlb/news/mlb-could-start-2020-season-with-opening-day-by-fourth-of-july-report-says>). Wow – the World Series in early December? That would be weird, but then again, everything is weird right now. In any sport, whether it's baseball, football, basketball, soccer, or anything else, the old adage holds true: “The best offense is a good defense.” That's how many teams become champions. You can excel offensively and score all the runs in baseball, or wrack up points in football, basketball, or soccer, but unless you have a good defense against the opposing team, it's all for nothing. Today on this Sixth Sunday of Easter, we will focus on that verse from Peter in today's Epistle lesson: **“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentles and respect”** (1 Peter 3:15). We're going to overlay this against the first Scripture reading (Acts 17:16-31) where Paul is at the Areopagus in Athens giving a defense of the Gospel, and apply this to our own lives today. Today's sermon is entitled, “The Best Offense is a Good Defense.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Peter's epistle was originally written to newly baptized believers. Here, Peter provides post-Baptismal instruction on how they are to live as those who are marked with cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit for life eternal. Peter prepared his hearers for the very real possibility that they would suffer for the sake of their faith. They might well be slandered or reviled for their good behavior (1 Peter 3:16). But they are to remember that our Savior Jesus also suffered for our sins, **“the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God”** (1 Peter 3:18). Further, Peter explains that Jesus, following his crucifixion and death, **“went and proclaimed [preached] to the spirits in prison...”** (1 Peter 3:19). This is a reference to what we profess in the Creed when we say, “He descended into hell.” Many people think this to be part of Jesus' suffering; his humiliation. That may be what it sounds like, but it's not. In fact, this is the first part of Jesus' exaltation. Think of Jesus' humiliation as descending steps: “He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” Down, down, down. From the utmost heavenly heights of glory and eternal majesty, Jesus descends into the darkness and despair of our human condition, taking the crushing burden of our fallen human nature – our sin – upon himself. But that ends with his cry on the cross: **“It is finished”** (John 19:30). The entirety of our redemption was fully and forever finished there at the cross. Everything thereafter is about Jesus' exaltation. Think of it as ascending steps: “He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” Jesus' descending into hell was a victory parade in enemy territory! Jesus entered into hell itself to preach, to proclaim, that he himself was the champion, the victor, over sin, death, and hell. And so when we confess that part of the creed, “He descended into hell,” we should do this with joy and thanksgiving. Peter goes to liken Noah's rescue through water to our rescue through the waters of Baptism. To all those who say that Baptism is just a symbol and nothing more, the Word of God says this: **“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as removal**

of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him..." (1 Peter 3:21-22). This reminds us of Jesus' ascension, which we will celebrate this week on Ascension Day (May 21), 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead (Acts 1:3). Join us for our Ascension Day online service at 12 noon on Thursday.

Our Scripture memory verse this week is from Peter's epistle: **"But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you"** (1 Peter 3:15). But the first part of the following verse is also important: **"yet do it with gentleness and respect"** (1 Peter 3:16a). The original word for "defense" here is *ἀπολογία*, where we get our word "apology." Huh? Like being sorry? Nope – not regret for something, but a formal defense of what you believe, as in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, one of the chief articles of faith in our Lutheran Church. Peter is telling us to always be ready to make a defense for what we believe in. And what we believe in is Jesus Christ is Lord. Paul the apostle was doing this very thing in today's first Scripture lesson (Acts 17:16-31). Paul was in the center of culture and thinking in the ancient world, and that was the city of Athens. Atop a rocky hill in Athens was the Areopagus, which was the home to the highest governmental council and judicial court. It was the place people came to discuss and debate thoughts and ideas. All around were idols from the whole pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses: Zeus and Hera, Poseidon and Hades, Aphrodite and Apollo, just to name a few. As Paul walked about and spoke to people, he stirred up interest in this message he was proclaiming. Standing up in the Areopagus, Paul proclaimed: **"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you..."** (Acts 16:22-23). And he went on from there to proclaim God as the Creator of all things, pointing them to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul met the people of Athens where they were. He addressed them in the context of their own unique situation, and that is key. The best offense is a good defense! Paul was making his defense of the good news of the Gospel with gentleness and respect. He used that altar to an unknown god as a springboard to preaching about the truth of Scripture, and the Christ of Scripture.

In our own day and age, there are "altars to an unknown god" all around us, if we have the eyes to see them. As we get to know people, in person or virtually, we get to know how they live and what is important to them. We find out who or what their god is, which might be very different from our own God. We can choose to be offended, insulted, and upset by how they are worshiping or not worshiping. Or we can choose to look for the springboards to **"make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, doing this with gentleness and respect"** (1 Peter 3:15-16a). No one is ever argued or berated into the kingdom of God. But people are attracted to a message that is made with gentleness and respect, especially if it comes from someone they know and trust. And we have the message, the good news, that makes an eternal difference. It is the message that we have a God who is God-with-us, Emmanuel. We have a God who did not withhold the life of his only Son, but freely gave him up for us all; who suffered and died on the cross, and rose again from the dead to redeem us from futility, hopelessness, and despair. That is the message we bring to the world one person at a time as we join Jesus on his mission in daily life.

May our risen Lord Jesus Christ open our eyes, our hearts and minds, to recognize these springboards for conversations about faith. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we always be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks us about a reason for the hope that is in us, doing this with gentleness and respect. God help us to do this for Jesus' sake. Amen.