

Text: Luke 13: 22-30

"Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. 23 Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' He said to them, 24 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. 25 Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' 'But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' 26 'Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' 27 'But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' 28 'There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. 29 People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. 30 Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.'"

Sometimes surprises are good and exciting, and sometimes they are things you'd like to forget, but can't!

In 1936 Ralph Neves, a famous jockey, was riding his horse in a race at Bay Meadows. The horse tripped as he entered the stretch and threw Ralph headfirst into the rail. The track doctor rushed to his side, but he was too late. He could find no pulse; Ralph was dead. The ambulance came anyway and rushed Ralph Neves to the hospital. After several attempts to revive him, he was pronounced dead and covered with a sheet. The people at the racetrack were in shock. Ralph's wife had been called to meet with the president of the racetrack. The jockeys were taking a collection for the widow. Then, to everyone's complete surprise, Ralph Neves came walking through the door into the clubhouse. The jockeys screamed, his wife fainted, and Ralph told his story. He said, "I knew I didn't feel dead, even if I was sore all over." He spoke out to the doctor through the draped sheet, so they rushed him on a gurney into a room. Ralph thought that was a waste, so he put on his clothes, rode to the track in a cab, and rode the horse, Instigator, in the seventh race that same day. Surprise!

Jesus, it seems, was talking about surprises -- the kind of surprises people might face when they get to a different door. And when that day comes, He doesn't want us to be caught by surprise.

Today He teaches: **Don't be surprised when you get to Heaven's door.**

1. Be reminded, it's the narrow door that leads to heaven.

If you want to go to Los Angeles, you'd likely go to the closest major airport -- let's say, Milwaukee. There are a lot of planes there, you know, and they're all heading in different directions. You hardly need to be a Rhodes scholar to figure out that you have to get on the plane that's going to Los Angeles to get to Los Angeles. Sincerity is a wonderful thing, but you have to have more going for you than to say, "I really, truly believe that this plane is going to Los Angeles." You can be as sincere as the day is long, but if the plane is heading for New York, that's where you'll end up.

People don't seem to have much trouble understanding that kind of logic when they're at the airport. They know that not just any plane will do. Bring those same folks into church, however, and things suddenly become more complicated. Any plane will do. Any religion is OK. Any door is fine. "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." Even some well-known TV preachers -- who claim to be proclaiming a Christian message -- get it confused. Robert Schuller once said, "You just gotta have faith, good old-fashioned faith. It doesn't matter what you are. Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, atheist, God can save you too. But you gotta have faith in something."

If that's what you believe, then it must come as quite a surprise to hear Jesus say: *"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to."* Jesus said something quite similar in His Sermon on the Mount: *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and may enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* Jesus said: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Peter said: *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* The only way to a happy eternity at the Father's side is through Jesus.

Please don't be surprised when you get to heaven's door: **Be reminded, it's the narrow door that leads to heaven.**

It isn't enough just to be sincere. I admire sincerity as much as the next person. But it's possible to be zealously, devotedly, sincerely, embarrassingly wrong. While I was at the seminary the Milwaukee Journal carried an article about a Japanese soldier -- his name was Hiroo Onoda -- who spent 29 years in the jungle on an island in the South Pacific. He refused to believe that Japan had lost the second world war. He refused to surrender until his former commander came to the island in person to convince him the war was over. He finally surrendered on March 9, 1974! (TMJ 1-15-75)

It may be the more convenient thing to say when you're in mixed company -- "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere." "All church are pretty much the same." "One religion's as good as the next." You'll hardly get yourself in any trouble. No one will call you narrow-minded. The only problem is, IT'S NOT TRUE. And given a choice, wouldn't you rather be surprised here, than be surprised when to get to heaven's door. **Be reminded, it's the narrow door that leads into heaven.**

2. Be advised, the door won't stay open forever.

There's another important point in Jesus teaching this morning. Someone in the crowd had asked Jesus, "*Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?*" It was an appropriate question, I suppose, -- an interesting question, the kind, as a preacher, you expect people to ask you. But Jesus made it plain that this whole business of salvation -- where you and I are going to spend eternity -- is more than just a theoretical question. You can't be a spectator. If you don't want to play softball or basketball or baseball, at least you can enjoy the sport as a spectator. But there are no casual observers of salvation. It's not a spectator sport. "*[You] make every effort to enter. . .*" Jesus said -- not just to the person who'd asked the question; "*All of you make every effort . . .*" Christianity is just not something that you can do half way!

And so it's important that you and I aren't surprised when we get to heaven's door. God wants us not only to remember that it's the narrow door that leads into heaven. Be advised, the door won't stay open forever." "*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door . . . Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door . . .*"

When will "*the owner of the house close the door*"? Finally, it will be Judgment Day, which could be any day. It could be the day that you or I die, which also could be any day. But it could also be the day that God decides to take His Gospel from one place to another -- from one people to another. God does that? Sure He does. When people despise the Word, grow disinterested, think it's boring, don't bother to read it, put up a fuss about studying it, God finally says, "You don't want my Word? Fine. Someone else will." Luther used to compare it to a summer thundershower. The sky darkens, the lightening flashes, and the rain pours down. But soon it's gone, and you'd better have caught the rain in a rain barrel while it fell. We'd better hold onto the Good News of Jesus while have it. If we don't, it will move on somewhere else.

Be advised, the door won't stay open forever. And isn't it interesting? Jesus said that now, after the door is closed, suddenly there are people on the outside, pounding to get in. "*Once the owner of the house gets up and closed the door, then you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door to us.'*" Isn't it fair to ask, where were they before? What were they doing all those years when parents and grandparents and relatives and in-laws and pastors were begging them to come in? What were they doing during all those years when God was giving them their "time of grace." They weren't knocking on heaven's door then to get in. It seems like there are a lot of people who don't want to talk or think much about where they are going to spend eternity. Now there are always more interesting things, more important things to do. Now they're just too busy. Now the store has to stay open on Sunday, every week of the year, and there's just not time to hear the Word. Now there's no time for Bible Study because there's just too much going on. After all, there will be time tomorrow. But Jesus gives us a glimpse of what it's going to be like when the tomorrows run out, when the door slams shut. Then it won't matter if you're interested or not. Then it will be too late.

3. Be prepared: You'll see some people you didn't expect to see.

Don't be surprised when you get to heaven's door. But **be prepared: you'll see some people you didn't expect to see.**

Jesus was issuing a warning that some people who everybody expected to be there, won't be there! "*Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'*" *But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'* 26 "*Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'* 27 "*But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'"*

Obviously, this was a special word to the Jews. Of all the people in the world, in all the history of the world, no people had Jesus the way Israel had Him. He ate and drank at their tables. He walked their dusty streets. He visited in their homes. He took their children onto His lap. He taught in their synagogues. He went to their weddings. But did they believe in Him? They said they knew Him, like a celebrity, like a famous personality. Jesus said, *"I never knew you.."*

But while it's a special word to the Jews, it's also a word to us. If Jesus were preaching this sermon to us He might say it like this: "I'm a member of the Wisconsin Synod. I have the Word in its truth and purity! I have my name on the membership rolls of Trinity Lutheran Church. I was confirmed in that church. Why my picture is with my class in the confirmation file. Pastor so and so used to come to our house and play cards. I even took a bus trip to New Ulm to see our college once!" But the real question is, "Did you believe in Jesus as your Savior!?"

Be prepared: you'll see some people you didn't expect to see: *"There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. 29 People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God."* Jesus didn't come to be the Savior of only Israel, and Israel -- physical Israel, the Jews -- mostly turned their backs on Him, the Good News went other places -- north and south, east and west. The Good News went out that Jesus is *"the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world"*, that *"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,"* and *"that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life."* Believers from every corner of the world, every color in the world, all are united by the common faith that Jesus took their guilt to His cross.

You'll see some people you didn't expect to see. But don't be too surprised when you get to heaven's door. They might be just as surprised to see you! Jesus, in fact, meant to say it will never be quite the way we think it will be: *"Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."*

We can survive the surprises at bad motels, at horrible meals, at disappointing movies. Keep in mind what Jesus has told us today: **1.) Be reminded, it's the narrow door that leads into heaven. 2.) Be advised, the door won't stay open forever. 3.) Be prepared, you'll see some people you didn't expect to see.**

The last place we'd ever want to be surprised is **at heaven's door.** Right?

Amen.