

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Step by Step

Lesson: Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Today is Ascension Sunday and also the seventh Sunday of Easter. It is the last day of this year when we say Easter's greeting in the church. Throughout Easter, we have been greeting each other by saying, "Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed."

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Personally, my favorite month of the year was September. Firstly, because my birthday falls in September, and also because the weather in September is generally neither hot nor cold. Additionally, the colors of the trees become colorful during that time. I still love September, but I have also grown fond of another month. That month is May.

Particularly, since I started living in Wisconsin, I feel that May is a blessed month. Firstly, May is a month where you can bid a definite farewell to the cold winter and feel the energy of spring. Until April, there can still be snow, rain, strong winds, and many cloudy days. But when May arrives, the grass starts to grow, leaves emerge, and everything becomes lush. Moreover, May is a great month for enjoying barbecues and S'mores.

Additionally, in May, we have Mother's Day, where we express gratitude for the love and dedication of mothers and also appreciate wives. Furthermore, Memorial Day is approaching. Especially today, at Willow River Parish, we observe Graduation Sunday, where we celebrate the achievements of high school and college graduates and offer recognition for their accomplishments.

Graduation! Every time I hear this word, it fills me with excitement. Attending school diligently, submitting countless assignments, passing numerous exams, and finally experiencing graduation is undoubtedly one of the most thrilling moments in a person's life. Graduates deserve to be celebrated and congratulated for their achievements.

The word "graduate" comes from the Latin word "gradus," meaning "step." In other words, the word "graduate" contains the meaning "step." We often metaphorically compare life to a series of steps. Life consists of many steps, starting from the first steps a baby takes on their own, the step of speaking their first words, the step of entering kindergarten, the step of meeting friends and developing social skills, the step of graduating from school, the step of starting work in a career, and the step of meeting a loved one and getting married. After marriage, life continues, and we continually encounter countless steps, and with each step completed, we face new ones. In this sense, likening life to steps seems appropriate, and being a graduate is one of the many steps in one's life.

Next, let's watch a performance art piece about life by Yoann Bourgeois, a performance artist.

It seems that all of you have also gone through numerous steps in life to get to this point. When I look back on my own life, I have experienced many steps as well. I completed kindergarten, graduated from elementary, middle, and high school, entered college, took a break during my university years to fulfill my military service, returned to university, graduated, entered the seminary in Korea, felt called to multicultural ministry, prepared for studying abroad in the United States, got married while preparing for my studies abroad, pursued my studies in Southern California, and around the time of my graduation, Evan came into my life. Then, I received an appointment from the Wisconsin Conference of the UMC and started serving as a local pastor, and after passing the Provisional Membership interview, I was commissioned as a Provisional Elder.

Looking back at the many steps I have taken so far, I realize that each step marked the end of one phase and the beginning of the next. We encounter numerous steps in life, and with each step's completion, we embark on a new phase. As we move forward through these steps, we accumulate experiences and wisdom, deepening our understanding along the way.

Similarly, just as life consists of many steps, faith also encompasses various steps. The Gospels record the birth of Jesus Christ, His purpose for coming to this world,

and His ministry. Jesus came to this earth as a vulnerable baby, born in humble Bethlehem. He began His public ministry by receiving baptism from John the Baptist. Throughout His ministry, He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and befriended those who were socially marginalized.

Jesus explained and taught His disciples the reason for His coming to this world. He showed them numerous miracles and imparted teachings to them. However, His disciples failed to comprehend it all. They were solely focused on gaining wealth, power, and worldly success through Jesus.

Therefore, one of His disciples betrayed Jesus to the soldiers, and when Jesus was being led away to the cross, there was no one by His side among His disciples. However, as Jesus had prophesied, He endured suffering, died, and after three days, He rose again. He appeared to Mary Magdalene and later to His disciples. Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, calling them by name, opening their eyes and ears, and touching their hearts. It was then that the disciples finally realized and believed that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.

When Jesus opened their eyes and ears, and touched their hearts, the disciples finally realized that Christ had come to this earth, lived among them, and truly resurrected. They remembered their past denial of Christ and repented sincerely, becoming followers of Christ.

We call it prevenient grace, the fact that God loved us and sent His Son Jesus to us, who was born on this earth, suffered and was crucified for us, and rose again. God loves us unconditionally, without any conditions.

And when Jesus Christ opened the eyes and ears of His disciples and opened their hearts, the disciples realized their wrongdoings and repented. We call this repentance.

We are sinners, but through Jesus Christ, we receive forgiveness of sins from God. In other words, we are justified by Christ. We call this justification. And at the same time, we are born anew by the Holy Spirit. Christians who are born anew enter the step of sanctification. This step is a process of progressively drawing closer to perfection in Christ.

Even as we enter the step of sanctification or perfection through our faith, we remain vulnerable and prone to sin. Therefore, I refer to sanctification as the process of confession and absolution. Put simply, although we believe in Christ and have become His children, we are still susceptible to sin and capable of

committing sins. These sins include lying, anger, jealousy, hypocrisy, hatred, disgust, and discrimination.

As Christians and children of God, we must strive to avoid committing sin. However, if we do sin, we repent and seek forgiveness, ensuring that we do not repeat the same sin. As we progress through the steps of our faith and deepen the process of confession and absolution, we bear spiritual fruit and our journey of faith draws closer to perfection in Christ.

Friends, Just like the various steps in life, the journey of faith also encompasses numerous steps before reaching perfection. What step of life are you currently passing through? And what step of faith are you currently traversing?

In Acts 1:11, as the disciples were gazing up at the sky after Jesus' ascension, two angels asked them, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" To me, this question resonates as follows: "Why are you still here? Get up! Get going! Make disciples as witnesses of Christ and bear spiritual fruit."

May God bless our lives and open our eyes, ears, and hearts so that we may sincerely confess to God, receive forgiveness, and bear fruits in our lives and faith as true followers of Christ. Amen.