If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

I was recently having breakfast with some friends at Madelyn’s when I noticed a sign across Huron Street advertising something called “Escape from Reality.” While I must admit that there are times when I would gladly welcome such an escape, I had no idea what this was about, so when I returned home I Googled it to discover that it is a local version of an “escape room,” which is a physical adventure game in which teams of players attempt to escape from a room in which they are trapped by solving a series of puzzles and riddles. The message on the home page of the Stratford Escape Room summarizes the experience: “One Room, One Team, One Mission, One Hour …”

Frankly, I don’t find escape rooms very appealing; the thought of being trapped in an enclosed space, even for a game, fills me with anxiety. But I can understand the appeal for people who are looking for a team-building experience or who enjoy solving riddles that unlock the clues that will lead to an escape. I can also understand the appeal of escape rooms serving as a metaphor for an escape from whatever may cause a person to feel trapped: a dead-end job, an unhappy marriage, overwhelming family commitments, or a sense of hopelessness about the future. Whenever we may feel trapped or imprisoned, the opportunity to escape from reality is very appealing.

One place where people have sometimes turned to escape from their present reality is religion, which offers us a glimpse of a reality beyond what we experience in our everyday lives. Indeed, the Christian faith speaks of a hope that gives us “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,” the good news that in Jesus Christ we have God’s assurance that “nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). In the midst of the bad news that assaults us on the regular basis, the Christian faith proclaims the good news that “this is my Father’s world; o let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

On this Reformation Sunday, we commemorate the 500th anniversary of a movement that began when Martin Luther experienced liberation from the weight that had entrapped him for most of his life. For Luther, his bondage was caused by his belief that his sinfulness had made him unacceptable in the eyes of God, and that it was his responsibility to escape from his bondage to “sin, death, and the power of the devil” by his own efforts of atonement. But such efforts only led to further despair and hopelessness, because the harder Luther tried to make himself right with God the more alienated he felt from God’s presence:

> “My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.” – Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther.

But Luther had one advantage that most people of his time lacked: the ability to read the Bible in its original languages. It was through his study of God’s Holy Word that Luther experienced a new understanding that transformed not only his own understanding of Scripture but escape from the bondage in which sin and guilt had imprisoned him:

> “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by faith.’ [Romans 1:17]. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that
righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.”

Luther’s liberation – his escape from his feelings of bondage because of his sinfulness – came through the power of the Word of God, which would be central in his preaching and teaching. It was through is study of the Bible that Luther began to understand that our justification, being made right with God, does not come through our own efforts, but is a free gift of God that is rooted in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not by accident that one of Luther’s most important writings is The Freedom of a Christian (1520), because at the heart of the Christian faith is the good news that Jesus Christ has “freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but by his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.” (Small Catechism).

· “The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.”

At the heart of our commemoration of this anniversary of the Reformation is the Word of God that is at the heart of our faith and life as Lutheran Christians. God’s Word “is our great heritage, and shall be ours forever”; the Word of God is at the heart of our worship and is “the only source of the Church’s doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the Church.” (Constitution and Bylaws, Article II, Section 3). When we bring our children to the waters of Holy Baptism, both the child’s family and the family of faith promise to “bring them to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer” (ELW Holy Baptism). It is through Holy Scripture that we receive the Word that is our means of escape, the Good News that we have been liberated from all forces that seek to entrap us, alienate us, and deny us the blessings that are ours as beloved children of God.

This message of liberation and freedom is at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson (which is always the Gospel lesson for the Day of Reformation). Jesus’ message “to the Jews who had believed in him” (a reminder that the earliest followers of Jesus were from the Jewish community) is a conditional clause, in which the result of following the condition is three apodoses that will follow: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31). To “continue in” (meno) denotes a permanent relationship between Jesus’ listeners and his word, which is the proclamation of the Good News that Jesus himself embodies as “the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14). All that Jesus promises depends on his listeners’ continuing relationship to Jesus and his Word. The promise for those who fulfill this condition is that they “are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” A “disciple” (mathetes) is not merely one who is a student, but a person who had made a commitment to the one who is called to discipleship, an example that is seen in Mary’s response to the Angel Gabriel’s announcement concerning the birth of her son:

· “Luke solves the tension between a family constituted by discipleship and the natural family of Jesus by birth. He does this in the account of the annunciation where Mary hears the word of God from the angel and says ‘Be it done unto me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38). Thus if a disciple is one who hears the word of God and does it, Mary becomes the first Christian disciple because she is the first one to hear the word of God and to consent wholeheartedly that it be done.” – Raymond Brown.
The liberating power of the “truth” (aletheia) is unknowable apart from being Jesus’ disciple, which in turn depends on one’s relationship to Jesus’ word. The truth and freedom that Jesus promises are not abstract principles but, like light and life (“... in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” – 1:4) are bound to the Word. The truth is the presence of God in Jesus: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.” (8:28).

As wonderful as Jesus’ offer of freedom may sound to us, it was not embraced by those who first heard his words. Jesus’ reinterpretation of freedom evokes resistance in his listeners, who interpret Jesus’ words as if those words were a misreading of Jewish heritage: “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” (8:33). Jesus’ Jewish audience interpret their descent from Abraham as already guaranteeing their spiritual freedom, so they have no need of what Jesus offers. Somehow, they have forgotten the periods of Israel’s history in which they were enslaved (especially in Egypt and Babylon) as well as their present subjugation under the Roman Empire. “In their desire to distance themselves from Jesus, they have already begun the process of distancing themselves from their own history.” (Gail O’Day).

Jesus’ response to his audiences’ basing its claim to freedom on their heritage is proclaim that freedom is a gift that cannot be claimed by one’s lineage; one’s identity as slave or free is determined by what one does, not by what one claims to be. If one recognizes the truth of Jesus’ identity, that he is the “Son [who] makes you free,” then freedom is possible: “you will be free indeed.”

Even as we celebrate the liberating power of God’s Holy Word and our freedom from the bondage of “sin, death, and the power of the devil” on this anniversary of the Reformation, we may also find ourselves in the place of Jesus’ original audience. We may feel that we also have no need of his offer of freedom; after all, for many of us our heritage as Lutherans goes back generations. We have been brought up in the church: baptized, confirmed, regular in worship, active in the congregation’s life and ministry. We have never been enslaved or imprisoned; we have never needed a liberator to free us from bondage. We may also wonder what Jesus means by “you will be made free.”

This is where the truth of the Word of God confronts us with the truth of our condition. Our Lutheran understanding of God’s Word is that it comes to us as both Law and Gospel; according to Luther, “the preservation of pure doctrine absolutely depends on the accurate theological statement of the nature and meaning of both law and gospel; they must be carefully distinguished and their true relationship to each other must be rightly understood.” (Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther). The function of the Law is to hold a mirror before us so that we can see the unvarnished truth about ourselves: that we are “by nature sinful and unclean,” that we have not loved God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, nor our neighbor as ourselves. The Law convinces us of the reality of our bondage to sin and our inability to make ourselves right with God; as Paul states in Romans, “there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:22-23). It is the Law that accuses us and convinces us that “by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him” (Small Catechism). The Law’s purpose “is to teach men to recognize sin, that they may be made humble unto grace and unto faith in Christ.” (Luther, Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, 1523).

But the Law is only one part of the Word of God; it would not be God’s Word if it did not proclaim the Gospel, the good news that we “are now justified by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). As the Law convinces us of our bondage to sin, the Gospel proclaims our means of escape, our liberation from that which would separate us from God’s love that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- “The gospel contains God’s promise in Christ. It proclaims that all the law’s demands have been met in Jesus Christ, that it, it preaches forgiveness of sins. ‘The gospel is the preaching of forgiveness of sins
through the name of Jesus Christ.’ [Luther]... The law leads to death; the gospel proclaims eternal life by the power of Christ’s redemption. The law places a man under the wrath of God; the gospel brings grace.” – Althaus.

When we lift our voices together in our prayer of confession, we face the reality of the bondage that we share as a community that has not lived as God has instructed us; but we also face the reality that we are a community of faith that has been brought together not by our own efforts or choices, but a community that was instituted and into which we are incorporated by the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We become members of the Church through baptism, which is God’s gracious act in which “our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (ELW Holy Baptism). Holy Baptism is a sacrament, a means through which God’s grace is bestowed upon us. It does depend on our own efforts, understanding, or decision; God is the one who acts “through water and the Holy Spirit [as] we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ.” Our escape from all that seeks to enslave us is through God’s gracious love for us, the good news that “a person is justified by faith apart from works required by the law.” (Romans 3:28).

· “Luther insisted that matters of salvation revolved around God’s actions, not human activities. Thus, justification – being placed into a right relationship with God – was totally God’s activity ... A saving relationship with God is totally dependent on God. We cannot buy God’s favour, no matter how many good actions we do, because that would put us in the driver’s seat, leaving us in control and God simply an observer.” – Gordon Jensen, “Luther’s Legacy,” Canada Lutheran, September 2017.

Finding one’s way out of an escape room depends on the success or failure of a team’s finding the right words and solving the riddles successfully; it is totally a human effort. Our escape from the forces that seek to entrap and enslave us, on the other hand, have nothing to do with our own efforts, understanding, or abilities, because our liberation is totally dependent on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This Word of grace – the good news that “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5) – is the Word that is our great heritage, that which is our greatest treasure as Lutheran Christians. But this liberating Word is not merely our possession; it is a Word that we must share with others, because the central purpose of the Church is to share this liberating Good News which is meant to bless all people. As “this focus on the gospel – the good news of what God does for us and for all creation through Christ – became the hallmark of Lutheranism” (Jensen), our call as Lutheran Christians in this and every age is to make certain that the proclamation of God’s liberating Word is at the heart of our life and mission as Christ’s Church. As we commemorate this milestone in our church’s history, our task as God’s people is clear: “We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.” Amen.