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The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,
it is only a few days since I stepped on to Pakistani soil for the first time. I am particularly happy to end my stay here with a Church Service. And I thank you with all my heart for the kind welcome you have given me. For my part, I bring you the greetings of the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck, where many Christians are also worshipping in their churches this Sunday. Many thousand kilometres lie between us, but we are united with one another in praising God. That is the expression of our spiritual fellowship, and it is always an experience which strengthens us in our faith. We are not alone: others celebrate with us - and Christ is present everywhere.

Our churches in Pakistan and Germany are in very different situations. But we all live on the same promise from God! For that reason it is important to remind ourselves now and again of our common origins. That is why I would like to join you today in thinking about a story from the New Testament, a story which speaks of the early days of the Christian church and yet can tell us a great deal about our present situation. For we continually find that the message of the Bible is relevant and up to date.

Acts of the Apostles 2:22-23,32-33,36-38

"Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:

Him, being delivered by the determinate council und foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

That is the decisive story of a new beginning, dear sisters and brothers: of the beginning of an unprecedented movement. That is how things began in the Christian church: the first believers were filled with enthusiasm and the power of persuasion, others were filled with amazement and consternation. There was more than just superficial interest. The crowds standing around soon noticed that as they listened to what Peter had to say. He spoke about God's promises to his people and about Jesus Christ, who had been crucified and raised from the dead. Peter started with the words of the prophet Joel: "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" - and then he traced a curve reaching right down to Christ, in whom all these promises had now found their fulfilment. Peter did not bother with trivial details, he placed the essentials in the foreground: namely God Himself, his faithfulness to Christ - and therefore his faithfulness to the promises he had made to His people. That was a moving sermon that left nobody cold; as it says so graphically and expressively, they were "pricked in their heart". That is how it all began with the Church of Jesus Christ!

In Germany we often wonder what has become of that power and enthusiasm, when we look at our churches, our services and our congregations. Certainly, the Church still exists after nearly two thousand years, in spite of all contrary opinions. And certainly a great deal of effort is made. More often than we imagine, we touch a nerve somewhere and people are taken aback and notice: "That concerns me directly." But where I come from, in Central Europe, the mood is usually moderate and reserved: we are not exactly wrapped in deathly silence, but we also do not break out in exuberant rejoicing. Emotions are largely banished from our churches and are to be found in other places. People are moved to tears, if their favourite football club is relegated from the First Division, or 500,000 fans shout and jump for joy and fall into one another's arms because the German national football team has won the World Championship. That obviously does "cut to the heart"!

It would be really tragic if we could only think back to the wonderful times in the past, to those impressive speeches and magnificent deeds. Everything would be touched with a golden glow, and our present day would seem very drab by comparison. But when we repeat the stories about the early days we are not just preserving happy memories. The story of how it all began also contains the germ of the promise which can also be a present-day reality in the same way as it was then: the reality of the Spirit of God, the gripping effects of that Spirit on hearts and minds of the believers. If that were not so, then we could give up going to church. That all happens in the hope that God will show Himself to us.

There are two things which we can learn from the Acts of the Apostles for our churches today:

(1) The first thing which the story of the church origins has to tell us is:
The Church is and remains the creation of the Holy Spirit!

That sounds enormous, but it is true. How terrible, if it were different today. Suppose we were to see the Church simply as an institution which managed to collect enough money to survive and more or less defended its status in society. If that thinking were to gain the upper hand, then we would be listening to the death rattle of the Church instead of the living breath of the Holy Spirit. For then we begin to try to save the Church by all the means at our disposal, instead of relying on Christ as the Lord of the Church to lead and guide us through His spirit. As bishop I know how important it is to make plans about the structure of our church in the coming years. For me there is no question of this necessity, and we need a great deal of imagination in order to react to the challenges presented to us. But our own efforts can and may not be put in God's place. Sometimes it appears to me as though we would mistrust the great promises God has made to His church, and would rather count on our own activity and hard work. However, that is "unbelief" in the most literal sense of the word: We no longer reckon with God and His Spirit, which points us along untrodden paths and works wherever He wants. The account of the first beginnings of the Church lays a finger on the spot where this unbelief, which does not allow God to be God, is also widespread among us. It may be unbelief with the best of intentions, but it nonetheless remains unbelief, because it does not take God's promises and deeds seriously. The story of the beginning of the church makes it clear to us: It is the resurrected Christ who stands by His church. Martin Luther expressed this thought inimitably - and I regard it as one of the most beautiful texts in all Luther's writings: "It is not we who can preserve the Church, and our ancestors were also not able to do so. Our descendants will also not preserve the Church, for only He could, can and will do it who said: 'Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'"

(2) The second thing which this story of the origins of the Church has to say to us today I would like to put as follows: **The message entrusted to the Church is something absolutely crucial!**

Peter talks of nothing other than Christ, he speaks of His death, of His resurrection from the dead, of His exaltation to God beyond our boundaries of time and space. He speaks of Christ's presence in the Holy Spirit, of sin, repentance and forgiveness. That is all expressed in a few simple words. How terrible, if it were different today: If we were to speak many words, but always failing to mention the central points of our faith. That is not just a danger to which we are exposed as individuals, it also threatens our church, I believe. It is a strange thing, but the Protestant churches in Germany issue more statements, communiqués, pamphlets and other documents than ever before, and our churches are certainly not afraid to defend their positions on many issues. But at the same time we Protestants are reproached from all sides for failing to speak out clearly and recognizably. Can it be that this impression has to do with the fact that there is no longer a clear connection between all these church declarations and the foundations of our faith?

I also realize how dangerous and deceptive it can be to talk firmly about sin and forgiveness without applying it to oneself personally. If one does not take care, it is possible to confuse one's own opinion with the Holy Spirit and to set oneself in His place. Such a person is therefore more prone to unbelief than he would like to admit. But even if weighty words may sometimes be misused, it does not prevent us altogether from speaking of crucial matters - of those matters which constitute the life and being of the Church. Peter had certainly not started to speak with the intention of preaching a great sermon at that time. But it became a great sermon, because it went to the very heart of the faith, to Christ, and because God let His Spirit work through these human words. They became the Gospel truth - making men joyful and free. The account of the origins

of the Church reminds us that the gospel of Jesus Christ is entrusted to us now as it was to them in those days, and that we are called to proclaim it: in a friendly way, showing genuine interest and kind attention to the people around us and trusting in the Spirit of God. Then we do not need to worry about the effect of our words. In an unexpected way they go "cut directly to the heart".

So the story of our origins is a sermon for us all, dear sisters and brothers in Christ. This is what unites us as the Christian Church at all times and across all continents: God's Spirit working today as it did then and cutting men to the heart. The Spirit gives us a perspective which moves us and gives us hope with regard to the future of the church. It keeps us close to Christ and His gospel. It binds us together in a worldwide fellowship transcending all differences and borders. There is no more to be said, more does not need to be said, and above all: More does not need to be done by us. We can safely leave everything else to the Spirit of God, who fulfils His purposes wherever and whenever He wants.

May He bless your church and your congregations here in Pakistan, may He bless our church and all its members back in Germany.

And may the peace of God, which is higher than all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

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