

Easter People

By
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from the pulpit of
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Isaiah 51:1-3

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. ²Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. ³For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

The Acts of the Apostles 2:14a, 36-41

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

³⁶Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”³⁸Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

What does Easter mean for the community of the church? Beyond the empty tomb and the declaration that “Christ is Risen!” What is the Easter message and what are we going to do with it? Does the big day which packs the church and lifts our mood while the seasonal flowers burst into bloom, give us only a momentary, hopeful respite from the drudgery of the weary world? Or does Easter’s good news have the power to enliven us to be change agents for good?¹ Today, and in the coming weeks, we are going to be guided by the testimony of the earliest witnesses to the Risen Christ in order for them to help us claim our identity as Easter People.

As you know, Luke was the only gospel writer who gave us a sequel. The same gospel that centers our hearts on the birth of Jesus at Christmas with a choir of angels hovering over a midnight field of shepherds, is also the one which narrates the birth of the church. And what a story that is! The Acts of the Apostles will show us how disciples of Jesus Christ assimilate the resurrection into our lives and our community together. These glimpses of the early church have the power to shape our Christian witness -- how does Peter put it? *To save ourselves from this corrupt generation* in order to continue God’s good work as a Spirit filled church.

We begin today at the end of Peter’s first sermon proclaiming that God has made the Risen Christ Lord of all creation. Then, his Amen corner of listeners say, *What should we do?* First, Peter says repent. Biblical scholar Scott Shauf notes that the call to repentance here is not quite the same as John the Baptist’s fire and brimstone shouting to turn around from all your sins, so much as it is setting the church in the right direction. He writes: “There is no suggestion that they are especially immoral or otherwise bad sinners.” Rather, this call to repentance is for a basic re-orientation of their lives with respect to Jesus. “Formerly they were witnesses to Jesus’ death; now they are to base their lives on his identity as Lord and Messiah.”² This repentance... entails a change of lifestyle, daily commitment to further the love and justice of God in accordance with Christ’s new reign over the earth.

Secondly, Peter says be baptized. In Acts, the usual response to orienting your life in accordance with Christ is to be baptized. In baptism, these early Christians came to see themselves as forgiven people, and thereby they became agents of forgiveness.

Third, and finally, Peter says, remember. Remember *this promise is for you and your children, and everyone* -- even those *who are far away*. With these words the church’s first New Member Committee was created, and set about the charge to become a welcoming, inclusive, diverse community. This is the organizing Charter of

¹ Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa and Newsome, *Texts for Preaching*, p.273 helped shape these opening questions.

² Scott Shauf, Workingpreacher.org, May, 2014.

the church: Reorient your life around the Risen Christ. Submit to the baptism of forgiveness so that you may be an agent of forgiveness and mercy and remember the good news of resurrection is not for you alone – it is meant to be shared with your children, and with everyone to the ends of the earth.

With that initial sermon, charge and benediction, the church was born and it began with a bang. We are told three thousand people were baptized right then and there. We are beneficiaries of that explosion of excitement about the good news of resurrection. This passage of scripture is calling us to be Easter People; people who look around at this weary world, at our own sinful and corrupt generation and say, there is another way.

I recently read an article in which one keen observer of the Mainline church noted that we have really great theologians and scholars whose work we can read and be filled to the brim with their insight and understanding. From Luther and Calvin to Neibuhr and Barth, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day to Rosemary Radford Reuther and Martin Luther King, Jr. We – at Bryn Mawr - are good at reading and thinking deeply about what others have to say. However, this author noted that after the resurrection, God did not choose to pour out the Spirit on just the disciples, on just the church scholars, but on all people.

He writes: “This is the great teaching of the Bible and certainly of the Protestant Reformation. God’s Spirit is poured out on all people. We cannot ask others to carry God for us, to be spiritual for us, to make moral choices for us, to think for us. The supreme glory and staggering burden of being human is that we each bear in our mortal bodies the spirit of the eternal. We bear in our limited minds the spirit of God’s wisdom. We each bear in our flawed souls the spirit of goodness. Who speaks for God?” he asks, “the religious giants do, without a doubt, but not only them.” Who speaks for God? You do, we do. You and I are meant to be no bystander, just reading and hearing the words of the wise and soulful, admiring them from afar.” He concludes: “You and I are meant to be the wise and the good and the soulful, to stand on our own feet as children of God... You and I are meant to speak the truth of forgiveness, to be the truth of peacemaking, to do the truth of good news for the poor.”³ That, my friends, is what it means to be Easter People. Every day, in every way imaginable, we live and share the hope of resurrection.

Glaucia Wilky, a native of Brazil, worked on the staff of the Presbyterian church’s mission agency and has written about the cross-cultural experiences of the Christian faith. She has vivid memories of the place of her childhood where baptisms

³ James Gertmenian, “Who Speaks for God?” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2023, p. 26.

were celebrated. Her father was an itinerant preacher in the heartland of Brazil. Once a year, instead of congregations getting together in small groups for worship as they ordinarily did, the people in that region came to one place, a slice of one of the farms in the area. It was chosen because it was accessible to all; and it had a clean, living stream of water running through it. Someone had painted a big sign at the gated entrance that read simply “The Gathering Place.”

Wilkey remembered it this way: “In that Gathering Place we quenched our physical and our spiritual thirst. We bathed our bodies and we cleansed our souls, we splashed and played, we children grew up together, and the water was the beginning and the center of it all... We heard the story of the baptism of Jesus year after year, and finally it dawned on me: If baptism for Jesus implied changing the world, reordering its values – rich made poor, poor made rich, well-fed made hungry, hungry made satisfied, blind made to see, the wise made foolish, and children seen as role models for the world – then there must be more to baptism than I glimpsed in my childhood. If baptism for Jesus Christ meant the coming of the Spirit, empowering him for gracious living, then there must be something more to baptism than the beauty of water and the joy of friends at the Gathering Place.”

She recalls the gate again, the one that marked the entrance to this wonderful annual gathering. “As we came in we read the words, “The Gathering Place.” Someone, however, scribbled two words on the back of that sign, so that when we left that place of new creation that scribbled message sent us out in the manner of Jesus Christ. For the gate as we left to go back to the world read, “Servants’ Entrance.”⁴

As in Wilkey’s childhood Gathering Place, we congregate every year for Easter, for the cleansing, renewing, refreshing good news that Christ is alive, and even in our weary world we have new life through him. What does it mean when we leave Easter Day behind us for another year? We are called to live our baptismal identity under the Lordship of the Risen Christ. In our sinful and corrupt generation, we repent by reorienting our lives around Jesus Christ. We speak the truth of forgiveness. We become the truth of peacemaking. We do the truth of good news for the poor. We remember *the promise of resurrection is for us and our children, and everyone -- even those who are far away*. So we go forward as Easter people by walking out into the world through the Servants’ Entrance.

AMEN.

⁴ Glauca Wilkey, “Baptism of the Lord,” *The Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual, Series 2, Year B*, p. 53-55.