

Easter People

Easter, Year B, April 4, 2021

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; I Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

St. Paul's Free Methodist Church

He is risen...he is risen...he is risen! This morning I had the joy of waking up my boys to the same jarring proclamation my dad woke me and my brother up to every Easter morning of our childhood - long before the sun had come up. On this day, more than any other day of the year, the church is reminded that we are an Easter people – a resurrection people.

Each of our texts today show us something different about what it means to be an Easter people. What I'd like to do this morning is to show how our readings from John, Acts, and 1 Corinthians all help us sing the words of Psalm 118 that *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!*

Our lessons this morning serve as testimonies that reveal something about the risen Lord we follow, so let's start with John's Gospel.

Here Mary Magdalene is our Easter person and what we learn from Mary is that Jesus can be hard to recognize. Two questions prepare Mary for her revelation. The first question – *Why are you weeping?* was posed first by the two angels and then a second time by Jesus. The answer, it seems, is that Mary is weeping because her Lord has been taken away from her. John's story is dripping with irony because Jesus is standing before her as he asks her this question.

The challenge for Mary, it seems, is that it's hard for her to recognize Jesus as a gardener. The Jesus she knew was not a gardener. Whether Jesus actually looked like a gardener is beside the point. What I think John wants us to understand here is that the resurrection obliterates our neat categories of who Jesus is and where he can be found. This can be deeply troubling for those of us who think we have a handle on God, who think we have God pretty well figured out.

So when Jesus asks the second question, Mary's response reveals how she became an Easter person. *Whom are you looking for?* Jesus asks. This question is the very same question he asked Judas and his entourage in the garden a couple chapters earlier. And the difference between Judas and Mary's responses makes all the difference.

Judas, it seems, was looking for Jesus, the man from Nazareth. This is why he, the soldiers, and police all fell to the ground as though struck by lightning when Jesus responded by saying *I Am*. This is the very same name God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 through a burning bush. Judas was looking for a man, but he found God. He didn't recognize God in Jesus.

Mary, on the other hand, was not looking for a man; she was looking for her Lord. And even though she had a hard time recognizing him as a gardener, she did recognize him when he said her name. This is significant because earlier Jesus identified himself as the good shepherd, and

the sheep follow him because they know his voice. While Mary may not have recognized Jesus's appearance, she knew his voice, and because of this she was able to exclaim, "I have seen the Lord!"

Probably those of us who only want to see Jesus as an especially good fellow, like Judas, will miss or deny him. And probably those of us like Mary who think we know what the Lord will look like, may miss him too. But that's not where Mary ended. She's an Easter person.

So the first thing we learn about being Easter people, we learn from Mary. And Mary shows us that Easter people recognize God even when God changes things up on us. Easter people know that God is always up to something new, and we also know that God comes to us as people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, in prison, and even gardeners. Easter people are on the lookout for God in every shape and size because we know that God has promised to be with us.

The second thing we learn this morning about being Easter people, we learn from Peter. Like Mary Magdalene, Peter thought he had God pretty well buttoned up as being for the people of Israel only. But what the lesson in Acts shows us is that God is for *all* people.

This story is one of the most significant accounts for the early church. We know this because Peter took major heat for baptizing Cornelius and his crew because they didn't look like, speak like, or live like Peter and his church. So much heat, in fact, that Peter went on trial and had to retell his actions at Cornelius' house several times. This story is the pivot point of Acts as well as the pivot point between the life of Jesus and the church of the New Testament. Peter's revelation in Caesarea was church-shattering because here Peter learned that the church did not have the corner on God. God was no national deity – God was bigger than Israel. God is for the *world*.

So Peter shows us that being an Easter person requires ongoing conversion. Once we decide to follow Jesus we are not done. We've just begun a life of ongoing transformation and revelation. Saying yes to Jesus gets us mixed up with God, and the Holy Spirit won't stop until our lives are turned upside down. For Peter, this meant that the church's demographic was way too small and needed expanding. God's children are all over the world, it turns out, and embracing people from every nation is what Easter people do.

The third thing we learn this morning about being Easter people, we learn from Paul. Paul shows us that for Easter people, our past does not define us. Paul tells us he was a persecutor of God's church. His story is a dramatic one, and his actions top every sin list out there. *Paul killed Christ*. That's how Luke puts it in Acts when Paul gets struck blind and hears God's voice saying, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). Not only did Paul not recognize Jesus, not only did Paul wrongly think that God was only for the Jews, but Paul *killed* Jesus, who identified himself with the church.

Our reading today from Acts states that Jesus was put to death “by hanging him on a tree.” Theologian James Cone could see that Jesus was lynched. For Americans, the lynching tree is our version of the Roman cross. And Paul was guilty of perpetuating this lynching of Jesus in the lives of his followers. Every time he authorized a killing of a Christian, Paul recrucified Christ.

But when God appeared to Paul, he received God’s correction and so became an Easter person. Easter people are people who repent when they discover their own sin, and through this repentance experience God’s resurrecting power.

In Paul’s testimony to Jesus’s many post-resurrection appearances, he counts himself in that number: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me,” Paul says (1 Cor 15:1-11). Jesus appeared to Paul and Paul course corrected. He did not allow his persecution of the church, his killing of Christ, to define him. Rather, Paul experienced God’s resurrection power in his own life and so became a child of God. Because of the resurrection, the past, our pasts, no matter how terrible, will ever be the end of the story. Paul’s life, and the lives of every Christian everywhere and at every time give witness to the reality of the resurrection.

Today we are invited to become Easter people. Through the witnesses of Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Paul we discover that becoming Easter people is all about embracing the Crucified Savior and his resurrection power in our lives. Like Mary, Easter people recognize Jesus in others. Like Peter, Easter people embrace ongoing conversion and a larger table. And like Paul, Easter people celebrate that God’s future is bigger than our past.

My hope for us this Easter Sunday is not only that we would proclaim the resurrection of our Crucified Savior, but also that we would become Easter People whose lives daily announce, He is risen...he is risen...he is risen!