



Where Do We Go From Here?

John 20:1-18 & Acts 10:34-43

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Happy and Blessed Easter! Even with this change of pace, this socially distant and virtual gathering, Easter is worth the celebration and joyful proclamation. We gather on Easter Sunday not to pretend like everything is right in the world, but to proclaim that in God's love, through God's power, through the witness of the resurrection of Christ, death, sin, evil, loss, grief, pain, viral pandemics, hatred, white supremacy, vitriol, gun violence, brokenness, sickness, and all the -isms that are found in bigotry, do not have the final say. Love wins out. God's glory triumphs. The Divine Witness declares, love overcomes hatred, life overcomes death. Yes, my friends, even from the relative quiet of our socially distant gatherings today, Easter is worth the celebration.

John's gospel tells the story of the Easter morning with Mary Magdalene being the first to preach the good news of the resurrection. She had found the temple empty, and had run to get the disciples, who were all hiding behind closed doors for fear they might face the same fate as Jesus. She told them Jesus' body was missing from the tomb. Two disciples, Peter and the one whom Jesus loved – likely John – went to the tomb, and found it empty. They saw the clothes that had been used to wrap Jesus' dead body just a few days ago lying in piles where Jesus' body had been.

I've never been a grave robber, but do you take the burial clothes off the dead body if you've set out to steal the body?

Nevertheless, the two disciples, seeing the empty grave, seeing the burial clothes lying there, they thought Jesus' body had been taken. Likely heartbroken, still not understanding all Jesus had taught them, they returned to their homes.

But Mary, Mary had made it back to the tomb, and there, she began to weep. Two angels appeared in the tomb sitting where Jesus' body had been laid. They asked her, "Why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord." Like the disciples, she thought the body had been stolen.

She then turned around, away from the angels in the tomb, and behind her was standing a man who, at the moment she did not recognize. The man asked her, "why are you weeping?" Thinking him to be the gardener – the one in charge of the tomb – she said, "if it was you who took his body, just tell me where you took him."

The man, whom we know to be Jesus, called her name, "Mary." "Mary." ... "Mary."

She knew her name; she had heard him call her name before. It clicked. She looked up to him and cried out, "Rabbouni!", which mean teacher. She knew it was him. And he told her to not stay with him, but

to go preach the good news, to go to the disciples and say, “Jesus is ascending to the Father, to our God.” And she went, and she told the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” She proclaimed the promise of new life for Christ.

The Easter story carries so much weight. It speaks hope and promise into the lives of those who are hurting and broken. From Mary, who was weeping in the garden, to the disciples, who were huddling in fear behind closed doors. The good news of Christ’s glory brings a renewed hope for abundant life.

But can I be honest this morning? If you said no, remember, I’m sorry I can’t hear you. It’s one of the few benefits of preaching to a camera. So here we go: I don’t want to put a damper in our Easter celebration, but honestly, I think we severely misunderstand the power of the resurrection. I’m not sure we fully comprehend the glory of abundant life that is promised in the power of life over death, in the glory of Jesus over the grave. I think we’re still trying to figure out what it means for us, in there here and the now, in the life that is today, to really live in to the hope of the gospel proclamation when we say, *He is Risen!*

But, this is not a condemnation. Our confusion is perhaps to be expected. Even the early disciples, those who had been present at Jesus’ crucifixion – those who had seen Jesus in resurrected form – struggled to fully grasp the glory of Jesus’ victory over death. Not only did they not understand at first, but even after seeing Jesus in the resurrected flesh, they still didn’t quite get it.

I want to fast forward a few years after Jesus’ resurrection. In the book Acts, as we learn about the early church that was formed by the gifting of the Spirit after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, there’s a story about Peter preaching a sermon on the power of Easter.

In Acts 10, there’s a Roman Centurion – a Roman Soldier – named Cornelius. Cornelius was a man of faith, who “feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” Cornelius had a vision, in which an angel from God told him to go find Simon Peter, who was staying in Joppa. Cornelius sent two servants and another soldier to go find Peter and bring him back.

These three men go find Peter, who, while they were on their way, had a vision of his own. In Peter’s vision, he saw a large blanket falling from heaven, on which were all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds. And Peter heard a voice telling him to kill them and eat them. In his dream, Peter said “no, Lord, for they are not all kosher.” Peter, while faithful to Christ, is still a Jew. He still follows all the Jewish customs in which he was raised. He’s so Jewish, that even in his dream, he was refusing to eat the non-kosher animals on the blanket that had floated down from heaven. But the voice said to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Peter, known for his stubbornness, put up a good fight in his dream, for the events of the dream happened three times before the blanket wrapped the animals up and took them back into heaven.

When he awoke from the dream, the three men Cornelius had sent were standing at his gate. A Roman Guard with two servants was standing at the gate asking for Peter.

Just think about the anxiety of this moment for Peter. Peter, one who was associated with a man crucified for his being a threat to Rome. Peter, who is a known accomplice of a man who posed a threat to Roman power. Peter, who denied his association with Jesus three times on the night Jesus was arrested for fear of what might happen to him. Peter, who hid in the house with the disciples after the crucifixion in fear of Roman retribution. This is the same Simon Peter who ran to the tomb on Easter morning, and left in dismay for fear they had taken Jesus' body.

The last thing Peter wants to see standing outside his house, calling his name, is a Roman Centurion who brought soldiers with him.

But the Spirit said to Peter, "Go. Go with those men outside without hesitation, for I have sent them."

So Peter goes, and they went to meet Cornelius, who, by this time, had called a gathering together of all his friends. Peter goes into the house, sees all these non-Jewish people gathered, and Peter's first response is, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, right?" Cornelius and those gathered with him were all Gentiles.

Peter has been raised from child to adult, he had been taught in all of his schooling, that Jews and Gentiles do not belong together. He had been taught of God's favor for the people Israel. He had seen the mocking of Gentiles by his elders. He'd heard the stories of Gentiles being less than favorable. He had seen the division of Jew and Gentile reinforced at every turn of his upbringing. The division between Jew and Gentile makes the rivalry of Dallas and Washington, or Virginia and Virginia Tech, or Michigan and Ohio State, or Nationals and Phillies Fans ... it makes these rivalries seem tame. It was not just a disagreement, it was a hatred, a despising of, a refusal to embrace one another as kindred of any kind. Peter knew it wasn't just wrong for him to be there, it was unlawful for him to associate or visit a Gentile.

And yet, Peter, having named he knows he should not be there because of cultural expectations and norms, continues by saying, "but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So I was sent for, and I came without objection. Now, why have you sent for me?" Regardless what the cultural expectations might be, God has called Peter to a new understanding, and Peter has responded in faith.

Cornelius tells Peter of the vision he had, in which God called him to send for Peter. And, now that Peter is in his presence, Cornelius invites Peter to speak, saying, "We are now in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Peter begins to preach. His sermon is found in Acts 10:34-44: "Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God

was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

In this moment, Peter not only preaches the Easter message, but he begins to understand it in a way he had not understood before. Professor Willie James Jennings offers that "Peter is at a threshold of revelation. That revelation is not of God's wider palette for people, but that Peter's range of whom to love and desire must expand until it stretches beyond his own limits into God's life."ⁱ

Peter had been faithful and devout his whole life. But as a Jewish child growing up in the 1st Century, his beliefs about God and other people was shaped by the cultural norms and expectations around him. (Not unlike our own experience, how our expectations of those around us are shaped by how we see one another portrayed in film, or in cartoons, or in books, or how we are taught by our parents and teachers.)

In the best of intentions, Peter had been taught to avoid those outside of the Jewish realm for fear of personal and communal safety. In the worst way, he had been taught about cultural exceptionalism, something that is seen in almost every culture, certainly in our faulty belief in American exceptionalism. Even as Peter encountered the resurrection of Christ, he still believed that to be a faithful follower of Christ, one must first be a faithful Jew. He expected that to be welcomed into God's family, one must first accept and practice the Jewish customs and laws that go along with being a follower of God according to Torah.

His expectation was limited because of humanity's limitations, but God's love is expansive. "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race,"ⁱⁱ not just those who look, think, and act like Peter ... or you ... or me.

As Bishop William Willimon states it, "Peter's sermon is an attempt to struggle with his recently received new perception of the movement of the gospel. He has no proof text to justify himself. He is out on risky terrain without tradition or Scripture to back him up."ⁱⁱⁱ But what Peter does have, what Peter does know, is that the presence of God cannot be denied. Even before he finished speaking, we reading in Acts 10:44, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

Even if Peter wasn't quite ready to believe the words he was speaking, God showed up, and made clear the invitation of Easter, the promise of the Resurrection, the glory of God's love, the power of the good news. This is an expansive and invitational love that reaches beyond our limited capacities of understanding.

And friends, this is why I saw I think we've misunderstood the power of Easter. The glory of Easter is not limited to this single day of the year, where we get to decorate the cross with flowers, and search for eggs around the house. Nor is the hope of Easter simply that we have some future promise of an

eternity in heaven. No, the promise of the Resurrection is not limited to just offering new life after death.

The glory of God's power over the cross is that sin cannot limit us in the here and the now. Our cultural norms do not define God's unending splendor. Our *limited* capacity does not limit God's *heavenly* expanse.

With so much division going on in the world today, with so many echo chambers being formed to limit what we hear and who we hear from, with such animosity being encouraged toward the *other* from both politicians, family members, and so-called preachers of the gospel, the promise of Easter is as necessary to proclaim today as it has ever been. We need more Marys to proclaim the truth, that Christ is Risen. And we need more Peters, to acknowledge with humble declaration, "I might just now be getting this, but let me tell you how great is God's love. Let me tell you how wide is Christ's glory."

For this is the promise of Easter, that we are no longer held captive to the sins of exclusion and derision, but that in the great glory of God's love as witnessed in the resurrection of Christ, Easter allows us to proclaim that *all* are welcome in the family of God ... no binary exclusions apply. No matter your race or ethnicity, no matter your sexuality or gender identity, no matter your wealth or class, no matter your education or occupation, no matter your means for housing or transportation, no matter your national residency – all worthy in the Body of Christ – all offered new life – each and everyone one of us is freed from the bonds of human oppression.

So, for the Glory of God, let us proclaim, and let us understand the depth and the width of God's mighty love. For Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

ⁱ Willie James Jennings. *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary On The Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1958.

ⁱⁱⁱ William H. Willimon. *Acts: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.