

Easter 5      May 14, 2017

Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

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What words or images come to mind when I say the word “Easter”?

I’m sure at least a few of you immediately thought, “Bunny!” — and that’s ok. But what else comes to mind? An empty tomb? A resurrected body? Joy and lilies and the promise of new life? Maybe that old song, “Victory in Jesus...”

I’ll hazard the guess that none of you quietly whispered, “Martyrdom,” or “Jesus’s last night on earth.” And yet, this morning, five weeks into the Easter season, where we especially celebrate Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, these are the Bible readings we are given: the killing of the very first martyr, Stephen, and a brief sound bite from Jesus’s last words to his disciples before being arrested and executed. Weird, right? Yet for some reason, within the last few decades a bunch of bishops and pastors and scholars got together and decided that every three years our churches should read these stories during the Easter season. Why might that be?

Well, your guess is as good as mine: which is to say, you can probably reflect on what these readings have to teach us about living in the time after Jesus’s resurrection and come up with some pretty great thoughts of your own. But for me, the fact that these readings come during the Easter season kind of shocked me into thinking about what we expect from God because of Jesus’s resurrection. What do we expect the Christian life to be like? What does it mean for us that Jesus has won the victory over sin and death? Hows does the resurrection affect our lives?

It can be tempting to focus on the parts of the Easter message that we really want to hear: You are saved! Death is defeated! The victory is won! It can be tempting to think that those messages are the whole of Christianity, and then turn the gospel into something like, “Now we can take it easy, because Jesus did it all.” Or “God will give you so much happiness and success.” Preachers have been getting away with that stuff for a long time.

Today’s readings remind us that part of the meaning of Christ’s resurrection is that we are raised up to be the Body of Christ. Jesus ascended to the Father; we — the church — are here to represent him, to be his presence for one another and for the world, to continue his mission. The reading from 1 Peter tells us this with some metaphors about being living stones “built into a spiritual house.” In the gospel reading, Jesus says it a bit more straightforwardly: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

And the story of Stephen's martyrdom in particular reminds us of something that it is easy for us to forget in the comfortable times of our lives as American Christians: if we are the Body of Christ, then we are a crucified body. We are a body who has faced

ridicule, persecution, and violence for speaking truth, for staying faithful to our God, for caring for those whom others would rather push away.

Jesus's first disciples could not have forgotten that, even if they'd tried. Even prior to the crucifixion, they knew they were walking a dangerous path with Jesus. And then after the resurrection they faced trouble and persecution, and almost all of them died martyrs' deaths. And yes, they preached about all that Jesus gave them: peace, healing, power, hope, a sense of mission, forgiveness, love, a more intimate knowledge of God. But they also did not shy away from the fact that being a follower of Jesus cost them dearly, too, in life and in death.

We don't hear that preached on too often — at least not so starkly; we usually don't bring that up when we talk about what being a Christian means to us; we hardly ever sing about it. Yet in the last ELCA hymnal — the green one — there was this beautiful, haunting song that captured that truth perfectly:

They cast their nets in Galilee  
Just off the hills of brown  
Such happy simple fisherfolk  
Before the Lord came down

Contented peaceful fishermen  
Before they ever knew  
The peace of God That fill'd their hearts  
Brimful and broke them too.

Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,  
Homeless, in Patmos died.  
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,  
Head-down was crucified.

The peace of God, it is no peace,  
But strife closed in the sod,  
Yet let us pray for but one thing—  
The marvelous peace of God.<sup>1</sup>

Being people of the resurrection means that God comes into our lives with peace and with purpose. It means that God messes up our lives by making us part of God's plan and God's work in the world — which sometimes means we will have to set aside our own comfortableness or our own desires; which calls us to give more and love more and sacrifice more; and yes, sometimes, this may get risky or painful or even dangerous.

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<sup>1</sup> William Alexander Percy, "They Cast Their Nets in Galilee" (1924), *Lutheran Book of Worship*, #449.

Those first disciples — the ones who kept this whole “Jesus” thing going — knew this well. They were hurt. They were imprisoned. They were killed. And yet through it all they continued to call Jesus their savior. They continued to talk about “the peace of God which passes all understanding.” They waxed poetic about their personal experiences of the love and grace of God in their lives. Something about following Jesus made all their sacrifices *worth it*.

I’ll confess that even though I’ve thought about this weird phenomemon of the Easter joy and the Easter call to sacrifice a lot (especially in these last few days, as I’ve tried to come up with a nice pretty bow to tie on to the end of this sermon for you), and even though I often feel a sense of joy in the moments where I have felt called to sacrifice as part of my discipleship...despite all of that, what it is about following Jesus that makes sacrifice worth it is hard to put words to. It’s something of a mystery, by which I mean — something I know to be true, but also unexplainable.

Another martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, tried to make sense of that tension between the experience of the gift of grace and the simultaneous experience of the cost of following Jesus in this way:

“Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘Ye were bought at a price’, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The closest I can come to explaining it, is that it must have something to do with love. I mean, it *almost* makes sense to us when a mother sacrifices for her children, because of her love for them.

Maybe, in a similar way, it is the love of God for us and our love for God that fills us with all those wonderful Easter blessings: love, joy, peace, meaning, life — and that same love that makes us part of the crucified Body of Christ, and makes us more willing to do what God asks of us, even when it is difficult. Maybe there is not a contradiction there, between the gifts of God and the call to sacrifice — maybe it is just part of the mystery of love...that same mystery of love that caused God to take on flesh and sacrifice for us.

Let us pray. Holy God, in the times where we feel mostly clearly your blessings and in the times when we feel most clearly the cost of following you, may we always know your love, your joy, and your peace. In the name of Jesus Christ, our way, our truth, and our life. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *the Cost of Discipleship*.