

If We Solved Racism... [OR Easter Faith in Holy Week Realities]

Luke 24:36b-48 and 1 John 3:1-7

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on April 18, 2021

Easter has a once-and-done feel to it – a vibrant crescendo after the introspection of Lent and passion of Holy Week. Trumpet fanfare and lilies and a zillion alleluias increase the sense of hitting the loudest, brightest, and highest point of the church year. Interestingly enough, Easter is such a big deal in the Christian calendar that Easter Sunday kicks off 50 days of feasting and celebration—not a single event but a season. As a season, it gives us time.

Time to wonder about Easter as a process of discovery rather than a single event.

Time to hear the stories about the earliest Jesus followers teased by Easter faith.

Time to immerse in the mystery of the empty tomb.

Time to turn from death into new ways of living.¹

Turning from the dead end of the tomb sounds a lot like the repentance that Jesus talked about in our reading. He stood his resurrected-self among the frightened disciples announcing “Peace,” soothing them with the unique strategy of showing them his resurrected wounds. The Bible story says that “in their *joy* they were *disbelieving* and still *wondering*,” so Jesus ate some fish to really highlight his liveliness. But he didn’t beat around the bush for long. He “opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and announced, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”

Jesus commissioned and sent them to proclaim repentance, to turn from death to new ways of living. A different way to think about Jesus’ call to repentance is to ask, “How will you live, now that you know there is nothing you can do or not do to make God love you any more or any less?” The Easter stories about the disciples and the resurrected Jesus are a process of discovery for each one of them. The disciples are frightened, joyful, disbelieving, and wondering all in just a few minutes. It seems that Easter faith doesn’t mean having it all together. In fact, Easter faith seems determined to live in joy while grappling with Holy Week

¹ Rev. Benjamin Perry, Ministry of Outreach and Media Strategy. Tweet on April 11, 2021 at 7:59 a.m.
<https://twitter.com/FaithfullyBP/status/1381245413341200384>

realities like fear, disbelief, and sin. Otherwise, Jesus wouldn't need to name repentance and forgiveness of sin.

While the church calendar suggests that Easter is one long party, Holy Week realities seem determined to intrude.² Repentance means naming those realities and our part in them while the Easter season reminds us that joy is possible. Individually, the Easter process looks as many different ways as there are each of us. Joy looks different for me than it does for you, so does fear, so does disbelief, and so do our sins. Individual struggles that result in sins hurting either ourselves or someone else often need individualized solutions and support to make life changes.

Churches are uniquely positioned to think about collective sin. Often at the beginning of worship together, we pray and confess our sin against God "by what we have done and by what we have left undone." And that "we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves." There is an individual meaning and there is also a collective meaning by our use of the word "we" as we repent and confess. Jesus' ministry regularly yoked his listeners to each other and to their neighbors that they didn't know. Think the parable of the Good Samaritan and the second greatest commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself."³ And early in the Gospel of Luke, Mary sang about God's lowering of the powerful, scattering of the proud, and filling of the hungry.⁴

One example of this is our national conversation about systemic racism. Systemic racism means that "what we have done and what we have left undone" embedded early, sinful behaviors and thinking about race into our founding documents and institutions, hence the need for those constitutional amendments abolishing slavery and instituting voting for freed Black men and ultimately women. We remain challenged by racial inequities in our government and private institutions, so systemic racism is obviously not solved. If it were solved, we wouldn't be talking about it ad nauseum.

² Bishop Jim Gonia referred to "Holy Week realities" in RMS Metro East Conference Text Study on April 13, 2021.

³ Luke 10:25-37

⁴ Luke 1:51b-53

If it were solved, we wouldn't continue talking about what we have failed to do when law enforcement policies and training continue to lack safeguards against racial bias that research reveals in each one of us.

If it were solved, we wouldn't once again be weeping over yet another dead black man killed by a community member or law enforcement.

If it were solved, we wouldn't still be explaining his death away as if he were the one on trial.

If it were solved, we would be living well with each other, each Black life mattering as much as each White life.

Our resolve as Christians against these Holy Week realities is fueled in part by Jesus' promise to humble our pride, to reveal our sin, and to lead us from death into life through repentance and the forgiveness of sins. In that freedom we are released from self-serving denial to work for the good of our neighbors whom we are called to love. Not a love that is distant and neutral, but a love that advocates and does the hard work of changing ourselves and institutions in service to our neighbors in the pew, in the house next door, in the next town, and around the world.

From the changed lives born out of repentance, we experience the joy and freedom of the forgiveness of sins. Being joyful comes more easily to some of our personalities for sure. And God's reassuring love in the face of failure and sin is a bright spot of joy as we walk by Easter faith even when that Easter faith can feel like a constant process of lather-rinse-repeat as we continue to repent and try again.

At the start of worship today, we affirmed our baptisms by thanking Jesus for leading us from death into life. I invite you to look at that affirmation of baptism again. Print it out, cut it out, and put it in on your bathroom mirror this week as a baptism reminder for when the water flows out of the faucet or shower. Because in our baptism we are called the children of God. Children of the same God who revealed the depth of divine love through the Holy Week realities of vulnerability, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness. Children of the same God who asks us to love ourselves and our neighbors with an Easter faith in the same manner of love.

Song after the sermon

Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us.
Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us.
That we should be called the children of God.
That we should be called the children of God.

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