

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 11, 2014
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Texts: Acts 2.42-47;
Psalm 23;
1 Peter 2.19-25;
John 10.1-10

I had a moment this week when I ***almost*** wished we were a congregation that uses a screen in the sanctuary. Don't worry, it was a fleeting thought. But because we don't, I need you to work with me. I need you to visualize with me a lush green pasture with rolling hills settling into a quiet valley with several trees lining a cool babbling brook. I need you to see a gathering of happy people lounging by the creek with picnic baskets overflowing; gesturing to those who have nothing to come and join the feast and to become part of this loving gathering of happy people. This is the tableau that came into my mind when I first read Psalm 23 alongside Acts chapter 2 this week. And the sound track would of course be soaring violins as the scene fades into happily ever after.

If you just read Acts 2 and Psalm 23, you might be tempted to let your mind drift into that kind of fantasy so that this fourth Sunday of Easter becomes a kind of nostalgia for the good old days just after the resurrection when the church was new and life was good. That is until 1 Peter interrupts that idyllic scene with its talk of suffering. You can hear the abrupt screech that signals an end to the fantasy and drags us all back to reality.

In all fairness, neither Psalm 23 nor Acts chapter 2 should be read in such a way whether on their own or paired together. The experience of resurrection - of new life - certainly changed the people who were touched by it. And what we read in Acts chapter 2 is an attempt to describe some of the contours of that change. But it did not fundamentally shift the realities of the world in which we all live. Suffering, sin, brokenness...all of these realities continues to shape the world we inhabit.

What does fundamentally shift because of the resurrection is *how* God's people *face* the suffering, sin, and brokenness that continue to shape the world in which we live. For that reason, I am grateful for this buzz kill of a passage from 1 Peter today. I have to confess that after 1 Peter chapter 1 and the lovely passage on the "living hope" which Gordon preached so beautifully two weeks ago, the rest of this book has never made it to the top of the list for me.

There is some dicey stuff in some of these pastoral letters from the New Testament. I'm not a big fan of the household codes as they are sometimes called – the passages that command wives to be submissive to their husbands; slaves to submit to their masters. The lectionary committee obviously felt some of that same resistance because they cut out the verse that introduces the section we read today. It really begins with vs. 18: "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." This is one of those verses that you know the white church in America stood on when resisting the end of slavery in this country. And it is a verse that makes very clear why scripture must be read together with the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order for us to hear the Word of God as we read these words on the page.

The longer I spent time with this text reading about its context and uncovering its inner logic – the more grateful I became that this text stands to this day and that we can read it together. I think it has something very important for us to hear. When the writer of 1 Peter offers this reflection on suffering, he is writing to a community that included the full range of social and economic conditions. The early Christian community included wealthy, elite, educated powerful people worshipping right alongside people who were poor, uneducated, slaves even. Some of those slaves were serving in pagan households where they were harassed for their Christian faith. The purpose of this letter and of this passage was to encourage them to trust God in the midst of their suffering and to stand strong in their faith despite the pressure to abandon their convictions.

We know the oppressive history of interpretation for texts like these: the way that slave holders justified the evil of slavery; the way women in particular have been told to accept abuse as a form of suffering that brings them closer to Jesus who endured the cross for our sake. That is **NOT** the logic of this text. Those are **NOT** faithful readings of this scripture. There is no glorification of suffering for its own sake here. There is no call to be passive in the face of injustice.

We are, however, called to look to Jesus as our example when we find ourselves suffering. The example has to do with how Jesus faced the suffering that he met. The key is in verse 23: “When he was abused, he did not **return** abuse; when he suffered, he **did not threaten**.” Jesus did not retaliate. He refused to engage in the never-ending cycle of violence. When Peter took a sword the night of his arrest, Jesus clearly, strongly said “No.” He was not passive; he actively, courageously stood up for his convictions in the face of their accusations. He did not let them shame him despite all the ways they tried.

That’s the other important piece of logic operating here; the final phrase of verse 23 “but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.” That’s the other important piece here. Not only are we encouraged to step out of the vicious cycles of revenge and retaliation. We are also encouraged to stand tall, with our heads held high knowing that we are God’s beloved. And as such, there is nothing anyone can ever say or do to us that can diminish our value, our dignity, our humanity.

I read a piece this week that sought to show what it looks like for the logic of this passage to be lived out in the face of suffering and injustice¹: the author quoted from Howard Thurman’s autobiography. Howard Thurman was a powerful theologian, preacher, and civil rights activist in the 20th century. He wrote in his autobiography about the moment when his young daughters learned about the segregation of the south. He had taken them to Daytona, FL where he grew up and was walking with them along the path from his church to the riverside where baptisms were held

¹ The place where I read this was an article in *Feasting on the Word*: Joy Douglas Strome, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 440.

when he was a child. They passed a public school along the way and his daughters asked to go and swing. He told them that they couldn't. They asked why. He said he would tell them after they got home and shared some lemonade. When they were done, they asked again why they couldn't play on the swings of that school. This is what he told them:

“It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. Only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriff and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of FL – it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls.”²

He does not incite them to hatred, he does not call on them to retaliate, but he also does not allow them for one second to accept the shame that those in power were seeking to inflict on them. And he worked to change those laws. He invited his daughters in that moment to know who they are as God's beloved.

The reason we celebrate Children's Sabbath flows from this conviction. We want our children, we want ALL children, to grow up with that kind of security knowing that Jesus calls them by name, that they are deeply loved, and that they are therefore able to trust God no matter what life may bring them. That's why the children hear the story of the Good Shepherd each and every year in our worship centers. The story is actually a hybrid of Psalm 23 and John 10. We know that children need allies and advocates who *show* them as much as tell them what it looks like to be loved in such a way. It's something we pledge as a congregation to do for each and every child that comes through this place.

² Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1979), 97

It is perfect to me that we are celebrating Children's Sabbath on Mother's Day this year. Each of these observances points to the truth that we need each other if we are to become resurrection people. We cannot live this life of faith alone. That really is the heart of what Acts chapter 2 is seeking to show; the early church made its way forward through their deep and abiding connections to each other. It's the way people stay whole even when the sin and suffering and brokenness of the world presses in.

Now that I think of it, figuring out how to do that - how to stay whole no matter what the world throws at you -- maybe the resurrection does fundamentally shift the world in which we live.

Or at least it should! So we keep celebrating, we keep singing:
"Jesus Christ is Risen!"

And because he lives, we can find the abundant life he came to give.

Amen.