

“Easter People”

I am praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me.

John 17:20

April 28, 2019

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Prayer: Dear God of Open Tombs, Help us remember Easter is never over. That everyday is filled with your Easter hope. May we fulfill Christ’ prayer and make his joy complete. Amen

Message:

I call it “the day after.” And it pretty much illustrates how a few of us on staff, felt the Monday after Easter. A week ago today was a big day in the life of the church and believers everywhere. With seven services over four days. Perhaps you were one of the 900+ people who walked through the doors of Grace and remembered, rejoiced, and proclaimed “The Lord is risen!”

Response: “He is risen indeed.”

How do you follow that? What do you say after a weekend like last weekend? With all the music, children’s activity, and packed pews? What else can be said? You say it’s not over. Yes last week was “Christ the Lord is risen - He is risen indeed.” Today is, Ok, Easter people, let’s do this? Today, I want to unpack that and talk about what it means to live as Easter people.

Afterall, we do all the preparing, 40 days of reflecting, surrendering, and meditating. We do all the heart work to get us through the wilderness of Lent. We struggle through the emotional roller coaster of Holy Week, experiencing Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. It takes us

40 plus days to get to Easter, so why then are we so quick to say its over?

Why are we so quick to breathe a sigh of relief, sit back and act like it's a done deal?

Instead of “the day after,” I want to hold on to the day of (SLIDE of the garden cross). I call this one, “while it was still dark,” and many of you saw it on my facebook post Easter morning. It was a little after 6:00, maybe 6:30 and I was walking down the hall right outside the sanctuary. It was cold outside, remember? Thick fog blanketed everything. Not the kind of morning we wanted for Easter perhaps but just the kind of morning for Easter we needed. I looked out the hallway window at the garden, saw the lights backlighting the cross and it stopped me in my tracks. I told Titus to stay by the garden door and I snapped the photo. Isn't it just like God to take what we think is cold, ugly, definitely inconvenient, unpleasant and uncomfortable and bring forth life?

Today, I want to remind you of something you already know, Easter is never over for those who follow Jesus. As Easter people, we continually live into what Jesus prayed for so long ago. Did you know that Jesus prayed for us, for those of us in this room right now today? The final prayer before his betrayal. His heartfelt words spoke to God of all he had done, how he revealed God's authority and splendor, and how intimately connected he and God had always been. Jesus then turned his attention to his followers and eventually to you and to me. For all those who have ears to hear, let them hear these word from John 17 select verses.

This is a passage, like many, is packed with truths so great that we can grasp only fragments in the time we have. This text is part of what is called the farewell discourse (NIB), and is a part of Jesus' final scene with his disciples. Catholics call this prayer the Lord's Prayer as it is the Lord who is praying. What we call the Lord's Prayer, they call the "Our Father." It is also called Jesus' priestly prayer - indicating his role as our high priest and intercessor. Whatever it is called, there is a lot in it and would take several sermons to unpack the whole thing. For today's purposes, I want to focus on who Jesus is praying for and what that means for us today.

After he gives thanks to God and for the relationship he has with God, he speaks to God honestly and wholeheartedly, telling God "It is time, I have done what you asked, I have stayed the course...you have given me these followers and now I ask you, protect them." Jesus asks for the hearts of his disciples, those who were with him, to be guarded by God. He then includes another group, and this is where you come in. Jesus prayer for all "*those who will believe.*" That's you church. That's me.

Jesus includes us in his prayer. His prayer is that we would be one heart and mind, like God and Jesus are of one heart and one mind. He prays that we, like his early followers, would be evidence to others of God's love and grace, so that the world might believe God is real and active in their midst. I don't know about you, but to truly take in the fact that Jesus, the son of God, the one who brought Lazarus back from the dead, walked on water,

commanded the wind and sea, and fed 5,000+ people with 5 loaves of bread and two fish, prayed for me, kind of blows my mind.

The question this side of Easter is, what difference does it make for you? How do we, a week later, refuse to let go of Easter and live into the prayer Jesus prayed for us? How do we become one heart and mind in a world so full of division? How do we take a stand yet love others as Christ loves us? How do we serve others without expecting anything in return. How do we grow together and care together without comparing, judging, or putting more or less value on one thing over another? How do we show our world who Jesus is when that same world continues to fracture, judge, and polarize? How do we see God in others when we assume or expect God to look and sound a certain way?

The hardest part of living as Easter people, is living as Easter people. Living as if what happened a week ago actually matters and makes a difference in our life. Living as if Easter is not the end but the continuation of the story. Living as if the prayer Jesus prayed for us can become reality. It is more than an antiquated drama. It is more than family dinner, chocolate bunnies, pretty Easter baskets, and trying to figure out what to do with leftover eggs and bits of ham and sweet potatoes.

We know this right? Tell me we know this church. Then why do we so often fail to live it after Easter is done? Why do we work so hard, pay better attention, and seek deeper understanding during the 40 days of lent, only to

walk right back into our old practices after we shout “he is risen”? Why are we so eager for the day after (SLIDE) when it is what takes place while it is still dark (SLIDE) that changes everything?

Easter is not over. Easter should make us want to be a better people. It should inspire us to draw close to God and recognize the ways we keep God at bay. It should motivate us to seek the risen Jesus and recognize God’s presence when things are good, rather than always questioning, doubting or even blaming God when things are tough. Easter should bring us out of our emotional and mental tombs of darkness and into a place of gratitude, service, and hope.

More beautiful words cannot be found than those of Jesus praying for his followers. Praying that their hearts be guarded and that his joy be made complete in our coming to know him. Wait, what? His joy made complete in us? Yes. We complete the joy of Jesus Christ, the risen son of God, the miracle worker, healer, preacher and teacher, when we follow his example and live in relationship with him and one another. That was the Easter truth Jesus prayed for even before the Easter moment happened.

When Jesus prayed for unity of heart and mind, it was a not a unity of administration or organization; it was a unity of personal relationship. Jesus isn’t about organized church, well he is but not like what we box him into. Jesus is about relationships. We see that union between Jesus and. God. It was a unity of love for which Jesus prayed we would have, a unity in which we

love each other because we love Jesus, a unity based on the relationship between heart and heart.

This will never happen. At least according to one commentator, because he says, “Christians will never organize their churches all in the same way. They will never worship God all in the same way. They will never even all believe precisely the same things. But [TRUE] Christian unity transcends all these differences and joins them together in love” (Barclay 218). That is what Jesus prayed for before the finale of his life on earth - that his followers then and now would seek a unity they did not fully understand but was being lived out in front of them.

The problem is, this unity at the present time and all through history, is wounded, stunted, and often prevented because people love their own ideals, creeds, rituals, and expectations more than they love one another, dare I say more than Jesus. If we really loved each other and really loved Christ, no church would exclude anyone who was another follower, believer, and disciple. If we really loved each other and really loved Christ, no believer would stumble over the things we put in place to stumble over because they wouldn't be there - well maybe they would be there, but they wouldn't trip us up like we allow them to today.

Like Andy said last week, when the sacred happens, when a holy moment takes place amidst tragedy or disaster, people don't stop and ask, oh wait, are you liberal? Conservative? Believer? non believer? educated? They

don't verify titles, experience, or credentials? They see a basic need between one human and another, and they come alongside each other to make things better. They put themselves aside and stand together - united.

Last Thursday in my women's book study, we had a great discussion about beliefs, faith, grace, salvation and love. You know, just a little light hearted theological conversation. At some point, one of the women said, "the more I see and hear what is happening in our world, in politics, in our country and others, the more I have to believe God is in control because that is how I hold on to hope." That church, is Easter hope.

How do we hold on to Easter hope? What does it look like to live as Easter people? Is it learning to forgive when we are hurt? Apologizing when we would rather not? Raising our children with love, kindness and direction in a world that seems to teach the opposite? Loving our enemies, both personal and national? Having courage to face impossible odds and uncertainty? Keeping the faith when so much in our world seems to be falling apart? These acts take courage, grit and perseverance. It takes holding on to the hope that God is in control and not the loudest political voice, latest voting poll, or breaking news story. It takes the power and presence of Easter. And it takes us, Easter people, being willing to love with the love of Jesus, not the love of self.

I spoke at a women's retreat yesterday and at the table I sat at, a woman shared how much she enjoys retreats because it brings her back up,

lifts her spirits and energizes her faith. She went on to say how hard it is to go home after because it's like we are up here and everyone else is down here - down here is where the Easter message is needed most and as Easter people we are called to bring that energy, passion, truth, and life to them. To make the ordinary extraordinary! That is what Easter people do. That is completing Christ' joy, fulfilling and living out his prayer.

Easter people, don't settle for the day after (SLIDE). Keep alive that sense of anticipation, mystery, excitement, promise, and hope found the morning of (SLIDE).

AMEN