

Are We Resurrection People?

Preached on the Third Sunday after Easter
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
April 25, 2021
Text: 1st Pet. 2: 11-17

As we proceed through this season of Eastertide, we continue to look at what it means to live as Easter people—as People of the Resurrection. Last Sunday we heard St. Peter telling us that to follow Jesus means to pursue holiness and to be persecuted for it by the world. Given who Peter was when Jesus called him, the person who wrote the Epistle we read last week and again this morning was a transformed man. Thirty or so years earlier, people who knew Peter probably would have laughed if you'd told them that he would write these words about enduring suffering with grace, living with honor and restraint, and submitting “to every ordinance of man.” Peter was a man of passion and strong opinions. He was certainly no pushover. When Jesus said that his mission was the cross, it was Peter who shouted, “No Lord! Not you!” When the soldiers came for Jesus, it was Peter who expected trouble and was wearing a sword. It was Peter who attacked the soldiers rather than let Jesus be taken away to suffering and death. And now, thirty years later, he writes to his fellow Christians that to follow Jesus is to take up our own crosses—to endure suffering faithfully, even unto death.

What a change in that man! And yet, this is the change that distinguishes the early Church from the modern Church in the West. In those early centuries of Church history, Christians drew others to Jesus in amazing numbers. They converted an empire to the cross, mostly by being willing to take up their own crosses, by being willing to set aside their own rights and desires and ambitions, and instead desiring to live by the example of Jesus, and if need be, to be martyred. They understood the cost of discipleship, but they were willing to pay it because, as Peter puts it, they had put themselves in the hands of “the Shepherd and Bishop” of their souls. They were effective witnesses because they were a people truly, visibly, and dramatically reborn in the likeness of Jesus—people like Peter, the rough and tough fisherman, always ready for a fight, who changed his life and took up the cure of souls and eventually was crucified for his faith.

They were lights shining brightly in the darkness. By contrast, the Western Church's light is dim. And because our lights are dim, fewer are attracted to the Church. Our churches are too often more obsessed with putting on a show, checking certain culture war boxes, and judging others than they are with truly living the Gospel. Committing themselves to holiness and showing love to all men is often not on the menu. What does the secular world see when they look at us? Unfortunately, they often see people who worship power rather than Jesus. They see people who present themselves as victims, feeling perpetually embattled because their values aren't universally praised. And they see people who are not above using lies, manipulation, and even violence when things aren't going their way. In short, when secular people see us, they see people an awful lot like Peter *before* he was *Saint* Peter. And the end result is that the Church looks

more and more like the world, her distinctiveness greatly diminished and her light fading. The Church, whether composed of liberals or conservatives, is now reduced to being a cheerleader for certain political ideologies that ignore God's ultimate aims for the world. Man-centered politics is now our true religion.

But for Christians, man-made realities don't command their highest allegiance, no matter how lofty we might believe them to be. St. Peter in the Epistle exhorts us to follow Jesus and live truly transformed lives—to witness the resurrection life of Christ to the world. In effect, he is saying, “Be different.” Let your light shine brightly even though it means putting up a fight against all the worldly things that pull you in selfish directions and make your light dim. The Kingdom is your purpose in life.” And that why the early Christians were so effective: they knew to whom they ultimately belonged and they made that their business. God is the King above all kings, and he is our ultimate authority. Anything that we put in place of that is an idol. As Resurrection People, we know that all nations, policies, power structures, and economic systems have to answer to God, and that because we belong to him, their authority is limited. They might kill us; but they cannot snatch us from God's hand. Our allegiance to them cannot be absolute. Jesus is our treasure, not any creature.

Following him, being his disciples, is our ultimate calling. But we need to count the cost. One day a scribe came to Jesus and said, “I want to follow you.” And Jesus told him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8: 20). Even when it came to family, Jesus knew that his Father's kingdom was more important. When his mother and brothers wanted to visit him, he instead put his arms around his disciples and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” (Matthew 12:48). Jesus's point wasn't that we should abandon our worldly obligations, but that following him truly means putting him *first*. It is a matter of ordering our loves. What you love most is revealed by what you are willing to give up in order to pursue it. Family, friends, reputation, comfort, power, influence, and pleasure. If any of these is placed above Christ, that becomes your highest love and therefore you cannot be his disciple. You must lose your life for his sake in order to truly find it.

How are Christians doing in this task? Well, many claim Jesus is their Lord on Sunday mornings, but upon leaving, they revert to their standard narrative of embattlement, seeking the destruction of those bad people who are ruining “their” country and attacking their irreproachable values. Instead of loving their enemies, and maybe trying to understand them, they dismiss them as wicked and plot against them, slander and curse them. And then we wonder why so many people are done with the church.

Peter goes on in verse 12 to say “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” In Peter's day there were all sorts of false accusations that were made against Christians. Because we worship only one God—something the Greeks and the Romans just couldn't wrap their heads around—Christians were accused of being atheists. People heard that Christians ate the Body and Blood of

Jesus in the Lord's Supper and accused them of cannibalism. Because Christians were truly committed to Jesus and refused to declare the emperor as their lord, they were accused of being disloyal. The list goes on and on. So Peter advises that even as the pagans around you accuse you of all sorts of evils, making all sorts of false accusations, nevertheless, live "honorably". Literally, he says, live lives that are good and beautiful. Live good and beautiful lives so that by your example, the pagans around you will see Jesus at work in you. When Jesus was dying on the cross, he looked at the people gathered around him—the people who had crucified him and were jeering at him—and he cried out to his Father, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." And as we bear our own crosses in the world—as we face the world's scorn and false accusations—we should have the same attitude that Jesus did. As Kingdom People with our eyes set on the New Jerusalem, our first thought shouldn't be how our rights are being threatened, but rather on the fact that if the secular world doesn't see Christ in us, where will they see him?

Peter goes on and gives us a practical example of what this looks like:

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. (1 Peter 2:13-15)

The Roman emperors and governors did many evil things. We think our society is evil with its focus on death and violence and sex, but the Greco-Roman world was much, much worse. And yet Peter says that God's people aren't going to change the world by flouting the law or even violently resisting governing authorities. Peter adopted Jesus's understanding that God's kingdom isn't one of coercion. That is not how God works. His Kingdom comes not through violence, but through God's manifestation of himself to the world through his own people.

So, he says in verse 16 to "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God." Through his Passion and Death, Jesus bought our freedom from spiritual bondage. But Christian freedom is not mere license. We forget that true faith *always* shows itself in works that are good and beautiful, because Jesus didn't just die to save us from the penalty of our sins—he also died to save us from our *actual* sins, to make us holy.

Peter saw that some people who claimed to be followers of Jesus weren't showing that they'd made him their Lord, nor were they living the new, risen life that true and saving faith brings with it. They were basically using the salvation that Jesus offers at the cross as a "Get Out of Hell Free" card. "I can do whatever I want now, and because I'm a Christian, I don't have to pay the eternal consequences." And Peter reminds us, "No. If that's how you live, you bring shame on Jesus and his Body, you drive people away instead of drawing them in, and ultimately you just prove that your faith isn't real."

This is one of the paradoxes of Christianity: Through the shed blood of Jesus at the cross we are made free and yet at the same time we are made servants (literally, Peter says “slaves” in the Greek). Jesus frees us from our sins, but if we’re free from our sins, that means we’re also freed to do what we were never able to do before: to love him, to serve him, and to live a life of truth and beauty, a life of good works pleasing to him. And that kind of life commends itself to others.

“Honor everyone,” says Peter. Treat others as you would have them treat you. As you deal with other people in the world, remember that Jesus loves them and died for them just as he loves you and died for you. It’s amazing how this works to change our attitudes toward people. Pray for your enemies and do good to them. It’s hard to feel self-righteous toward, or to judge and condemn people for whom you’re praying. Instead, you remember that they’re people who need Jesus in their lives. It reminds you to shine your light brightly—and all the more brightly the more they trouble and persecute you.

St. Peter says also that we should love our brothers and sisters in Christ—love the Body. Show the world what it means to be in love and fellowship and communion with each other. Too often people look at the Church and they see fights and splits and people who don’t get along. The first place to witness the love of Christ is right here in his Body.

God wants us to be his ambassadors. He wants us to show the world what his Kingdom is like and to draw others to it. Show the people around you respect and honor. Obey the laws and rules. But remember that God is your final authority. If there comes a time when you have to make a choice between obedience to him and obedience to the worldly authorities, always follow him—but as much as it is possible, be a good ambassador of the kingdom of God and don’t give anyone reason to despise it.

In our collect this morning we prayed “grant to all who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ’s service that they may renounce those things that are contrary to their profession and follow all such things as are agreeable to it.” We need strength to persevere in the face of suffering and persecution, but should always be living as Christ would have us live. This should not be a joyless moralism, but a life manifesting the fruit of the Spirit. That is how the Light of the Lord will shine out through us to a spiritually hungry world.

In the Name...