

Easter People: Resurrection Isn't Easy Sunday, 5/1/22

It was Saint Augustine, the 1st Century theologian, who first wrote “We are Easter People, and Alleluia is our song.” It’s a catchy quote, one made popular again by Pope John Paul II,¹ but what does it really mean? We’ll spend the weeks between Easter and Pentecost exploring that. One Catholic bishop suggests that it means that “we must actually live like Easter makes a difference in our lives” and more specifically, that our “faith in Jesus Crucified and Risen must be lived by imitating Him in daily life by the way [we speak, think, and act].”² And the alleluia part? That simply means that we live and sing songs of praise to God. Putting the two parts together, then, we are Easter People, living lives after the pattern of Jesus because, even though the world is full of brokenness and pain, we choose to see with the eyes of hopeful faith, eyes that have seen our Risen Lord and can’t help but praise God for what God has done and continues to do in bringing new life through the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

While the idea of resurrection is wonderful in the abstract, it’s rather a different story when it becomes tangible and personal. Peter discovered that when he and some of the disciples met Jesus on the beach after Jesus’s Easter resurrection. Peter, like all of us, wasn’t in need of a physical resurrection yet so much as a spiritual one, and his conversation with Jesus surely did just that. Peter, you’ll recall, is the disciple who bravely bragged about his great faith and loyalty to Jesus, only to deny him three times after the arrest of Jesus. But John didn’t relate this beach conversation in his Gospel just to close up that dangling part of the plot. Peter’s story is our story. Each of us had denied Jesus in thought, word, and deed. The question for us today is this: Now that Easter has come and gone, are we ready to endure the pain of resurrection in order to follow Peter in proclaiming ourselves Easter People, living lives of praise to God?

You’ve probably heard in Sunday school or in a Bible study an elaborate analysis of Peter’s conversation with Jesus, focusing on the different words John uses for love, as well as the differences between sheep and lambs, as well as the difference between feeding and taking care of sheep. I invite you to set all of that aside. It makes for an entertaining analysis,

¹ <https://aleteia.org/2020/04/11/when-and-why-did-john-paul-ii-call-us-an-easter-people/>

² <https://bismarckdiocese.com/news/what-does-it-mean-to-be-easter-people>

but it also distracts from the main idea of this encounter. The truth is that John uses the various Greek words for love interchangeably throughout his writings, and the plain meaning of Peter's encounter with Jesus doesn't require a knowledge of Greek to get the point. Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. But why? As Peter himself said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."³ Peter's confession of love was necessary not to inform Jesus but as a remedy for his previous denial of Jesus. Three times he denied that he knew Jesus, and so three times he was asked to confess his love for Jesus.

None of us stood in that courtyard with Peter, and so none of us knows what we might have done when faced with the same situation. But all of us can mostly likely recall a time in our lives when we've done something similar. What might that have looked like? Perhaps it was remaining silent in a conversation rather than speaking up and offering Christ's perspective. Or maybe it was choosing to engage in behaviors that you know are hurtful to yourself or others. Or failing to offer hospitality or comfort to someone who is hurting. This list could go on and on. But we're not meant to dwell in our failures. As Easter People, we confess our sins and then confess our love for Jesus anew, each time a rebirth by the mercy of God and the power and promise of Christ's resurrection. Do you have something on your heart that you need to confess to Christ today, so that your faith in Christ can be reborn?

Confession is not as easy as it sounds. Imagine the shame Peter must have felt, both in confronting his risen savior as well as his fellow disciples. If somehow it was possible to be reborn without first dying to self, then resurrection would be easy. But confession of our sins and flaws requires the intentional sacrifice of our pride and will for the sake of Christ's kingdom, the kind of dying to self that's symbolized by our going under the waters of baptism, but repeated over and over again as we navigate our days of discipleship.

The good news is that if Peter could do this, surely we can as well. The good news of the resurrection begins with Jesus, but it continues with each of us in the present life as well as the next one. Being Easter People means that we are not afraid to face the tomb of our sins. We face them head on, knowing that our Lord has promised that no matter how dark the circumstance we find ourselves in, no matter how profound our sin and rejection of

³ John 21:17. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

Christ, we can always find hope and new life in the name of Jesus.

But resurrection is also difficult because it's not given without expectations. Peter was expected to feed the sheep of Christ's flock. But what does that mean? We'll rejoin the disciples and the risen Christ in our next reading from Matthew 28, beginning with verse 16 in the New Living Translation. {Read Matthew 28:16-20 NLT}

If there was any doubt about what Jesus had in mind when said, "Feed my sheep," then surely this passage puts the expectations of Jesus into sharp relief. The sheep, it turns out, aren't merely meant to remain fattened and secure in one of the shepherd's fields. Resurrection has a purpose, and the sheep that are the disciples of Jesus have been saved to make more disciples. Easter People are disciples who make more disciples of the risen Christ. These last words of Christ to his disciples are pretty unambiguous, and yet for all of their clarity, the modern Christian Church has a pretty sketchy track record of living them out, starting with the very first action word of this Great Commission: "Go!"

Why is it so very difficult for us to go places for Jesus? The average US household has almost two cars, with around 90 percent having at least one.⁴ Granted that some of us have physical or mental infirmities that make travel untenable, the fact remains that most of us can easily find the means to travel, with the average American travelling about 40 miles per day.⁵ Easter People go for and with the Risen Christ, whether it's to worship, to learn about their faith, or to serve their communities and world. You'll have an opportunity to go and serve on May 22 when our church travels to Delano UMC for the Feed My Starving Children food packing event. Call the church to sign up ahead of time, as there are a limited number of spots available.

The next action words in the Great Commission are "make disciples." Disciples in the Jewish tradition are the students of a rabbi, with the presumption that they themselves will come to embody the teaching of that rabbi and carry on the tradition of making new disciples. The first disciples of Jesus went on to become leaders and teachers of the church, and so on, and here we are today. We stand on the shoulders of giants, heirs to the teachings and examples of the generations of Christians who came before us. And now it's our turn.

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/551403/number-of-vehicles-per-household-in-the-united-states/>

⁵ <https://www.bts.gov/statistical-products/surveys/national-household-travel-survey-daily-travel-quick-facts>

Easter People make disciples of Jesus. But how are we to do that?

Jesus gives us a two-part prescription of disciple making. Baptism is the entry point of discipleship, that ritual of dying to self and being reborn by water and the Spirit. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because Christian baptism is an initiation into a faith in the triune God. Baptism is normally presided over by an Elder in the church, like me, but it really belongs to God and Christ's Body, the church. We are Easter People when we bring ourselves and others to the Church to receive baptism, and also when we receive others into the Christian Church, promising to surround them with love and teach them to obey the ordinances of God.

Which brings us to the second essential part of how Easter People make disciple of Jesus. We teach them to obey all the commandments of Christ, not out of obligation alone but with joy and praise, confident in the power and the ongoing presence of the one who gave us those commandments.

Something implied but not stated is that it's quite impossible for someone to make a disciple if they aren't living as a disciple themselves. Any parent quickly learns, often to their own dismay, that children are much more likely to imitate their behavior than their instructions. Perhaps one reason we're making fewer disciples of Christ is that there are too few disciples available to model in a compelling way what following Jesus looks like. Easter People actively seek to allow their lives to take on the shape of their savior, knowing that becoming a disciple of Jesus is the only effective way to teach new disciples. No Sunday School or Confirmation curriculum will ever take the place of spending time with living, breathing disciples of Jesus who are committed to living as Easter People.

Easter is the pinnacle of the Christian calendar and the primary focus of our faith, but it's quite meaningless without the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of those who follow him. The good news of Easter isn't in the Easter baskets, it's the invitation to live as Easter People for the other 364 days of the year. It's the resurrection we find when we confess our sins to Jesus and renew our confession of faith. It's the live of joy we find in serving others in the name of Jesus with praise always on our lips. We are Easter People, and Alleluia is our song

Please take some time now to reflect on your need for confession and resurrection.



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