

2020 04 12 Easter Sermon John 20:1-18, Romans 6:3-11, Acts 10:34-43  
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I had to let out a little laugh when we heard the Acts reading in our lectionary study 10 days ago.

It seems hard to find a chapter in the book of Acts where Peter isn't giving another summary of the death and resurrection of Jesus, another defense of the faith. In this case the context to the sermon is missing - it's worth reading the entire chapter 10. What happens before and after this speech is as important as the speech itself.

A Roman Centurion (therefore an unclean Gentile, in Jewish perspective) named Cornelius had been told in a dream to summon Peter. Meanwhile just as the centurion's messengers were on the way, Peter had dream where he was commanded to choose something to eat from a great cloth come down from heaven filled with every known animal. The kind of buffet you can only have in a dream. Of course it was full of things Peter's religious worldview deemed unclean but the voice from heaven trumped Peter's religious objections. Okay, "dig in!" as it were.

When Cornelius finally gets to ask Peter to spill the beans, in the kindest possible way, this address is Peter's response. It all turns on the phrase, "God shows no partiality." Having been told in a dream not to make a distinction between so-called, clean and unclean foods he realized God doesn't make a distinction between clean and unclean people either. Immediately following the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, Cornelius and everyone with him was baptized, much to the shock and awe of Peter's Jewish followers. As Peter puts it: "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"  
10:47

I had to tell you the bookends to this reading because it attests to the inextricable link between the Easter story and baptism. When people heard Peter's sermon about crucifixion and resurrection they clamoured to be baptized.

Thirty years before Acts was written Paul had made the same connection in his inimitable rhetorical fashion: there are no dreams of heaven sent smorgasbords filled with strange animals for Paul, just the straight goods: "Do you not know that when you were baptized you were baptized into Christ Jesus' death, and if you were baptized into his death, then also into his new life?" As he puts it elsewhere baptism is dying and rising with Christ.

The point here is twofold: Good Friday and Easter, indeed the whole Passion is one great act of redemption rather than a cause and effect two-part thriller. Good Friday and Easter are far less two chronologically or even theologically sequential events than a religious double helix: strands of God's intertwined DNA & RNA.

Second from the earliest records of the faith, the water washing of baptism makes Christians because the Good Friday-Easter story becomes their story. Baptized people are nothing other than an Easter people and as such a people who know God in sorrow and joy.

The COVID19 crisis is instructive: as I mentioned on Palm Sunday, as the COVID volume started dialling up at the beginning of Lent one could have been forgiven for dreaming that it would have been over by today, and that we would be singing together in our churches and gathering for great dinners. But tragedy, calamity, disasters do not time themselves to the liturgical calendar. Rather the lens of our religious highpoint will give eyes of faith a way to apprehend the unfolding tragedy without despair.

The truth is rather than seeing Easter as erasing death and suffering we must look into the heart of suffering and the moment of death to see Easter, or Christmas for that matter.

While COVID19 has taken all our attention in the past three weeks, think back to Christmas. It seems such a long time ago. Australia was burning: the island continent a ring of bush fires. Human lives were lost and untold millions of sedentary burned to death. And yet in the midst of that inferno animal rescue teams were seen saving koalas and kangaroos who were parched by drought or singed by fire. The animals that welcomed the birth of saviour in a stable became the ones who needed a saviour. Good news of great joy was more than a Christmas card decoration.

We've read a lot and heard a lot about hand-washing in the past two weeks, and hygiene generally. Before every news cast CBC enjoins us to do our part in the war on COVID19 by washing our hands. *The Globe and Mail* ran a fascinating feature on the history of bathing yesterday.

Let me invite you to make hand-washing a spiritual exercise. Try this: every time you wash your hands – an act which may save your life, or someone else's life in this crisis – I invite you to give thanks for the water of baptism which connects you to death and resurrection precisely because this collective handwashing is a symbol of our participation in the greatest effort of human solidarity in modern times. One data source, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation recently predicted that April 12, today, Easter Sunday might be the day that deaths from COVID19 would peak in the USA when 2,000 people would die from this cause alone. Regardless of how reliable or accurate that prediction turns out to be, the juxtaposition of Easter Sunday and the peak of the pandemic in the same sentence reinforces the inextricable link between suffering and hope. If we could imagine a time and place where there is no suffering, hardship or sorrow, the message of Easter would be moot.

This week I received the appeal from Canadian Lutheran World Relief asking for support for its partner agencies in Jordan, Myanmar and Jerusalem to fight Covid19. My contribution, any contribution is an extension of my baptismal washing, and a practical participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and a reflection of Peter's insight, that God shows no partiality. If there was no threat, no danger, solidarity would be meaningless.

John's Easter story is a lot like the other John gospels we've heard in Lent: Nicodemus, the Woman at the Well, Lazarus, the actual plot is complicated with lots of characters coming and going in a frenzied scene, with Mary Magdalene at the heart of the action. She races back and forth from the tomb several times, like an ICU nurse. She incites Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved to run to the tomb, one dares to go in, the other not. Signs of death are everywhere: discarded face masks, and body coverings. And someone who is unrecognizable appears: changed by the harrowing of hell. And then there are angels of mercy flying in to console the disconsolate.

Many of you will have heard the CBC interview with Dr. Nadia Alam, an ICU doctor in Georgetown. She told us about her conversation with an elderly man who realized that he might not survive Covid19 even if intubated. She spoke frankly, gently and lovingly with the man and his family as he chose, with the sun shining into his hospital window, to accept the possibility of death on his own terms. "If I die, I would rather die, looking at the sky," he confided in her.

In a Brooklyn hospital a chaplain named Sharon-Codner Walker described what it's like to be a chaplain now. "'Have I been forsaken by God?' That's the question we tend to hear at the bedside." – Jesus question from the cross.

Hospital ICU wards and ER rooms are places of resurrection and death, Easter tombs where people like Dr. Alam and Chaplain Codner – by the tens of thousands – are the visiting angels.

Easter 2020 and COVID19 are, and will ever be, unforgettably intertwined. The cross and the tomb fused in a moment of history where tragic victims and angels of hope face the baptism of death and resurrection together. AMEN.