

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner

3rd Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14, 22-24, 36-42

Now What?

During 1994-1996, I served as a pastoral intern at St Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston. It was in between college and seminary. Greg and I were newly married. We needed to stay in Houston for a couple of years so Greg could put in a decent amount of time at Price Waterhouse. Then, he could ditch the suit and the tie and head back to graduate school with me. And, I wanted to work in a church just to make sure this call to ministry was real and valid.

As their intern, I went through two Lent and Easter cycles with them, learning about how they did things and why. On Good Friday, they would have a worship service at noon, instead of in the evening like we do. And, during that Good Friday service, they would read the passion story with different people playing the parts, just as we did this past Palm/Passion Sunday. It was a powerful experience both years I was there, but the second year was the one I cannot forget.

Carl Utey was one of the Associate Pastors and the one in charge of Good Friday worship that year. He had a flair for the dramatic so he decided to switch things up. Usually, the congregation always read the part of the crowd. We would always be the one shouting “Hosanna” in the beginning, calling for Barabbas’ release (instead of Jesus) in the middle, and yelling “Crucify” in the end.

During that particular year, however, Carl assigned the roles differently. He had all of us in the congregation read the part of Jesus, instead of the part of the accusers. We identified with Jesus and his suffering, his woundedness and his betrayal; rather than with the ones who inflicted the suffering and the woundedness, the ones who were the betrayers. It was a real shift for all of us. It brought home the vulnerability of God’s love in giving up a part of God’s own heart to and for us—just so we would always know the intensity of God’s claim and salvation. To use words from our reading from Acts, the Good Friday experience of Jesus’ wounds cut us to the heart.

And then, at the end, Carl stood before us and said, “We can linger here in this place of Good Friday, in this place of pain and vulnerability, because we know that the drama isn’t over.” We could experience our own brokenness and could identify with our God because we knew the totality of the Easter story. We knew that it did not end that day at 1pm, when our Good Friday worship came to a close. We knew what came after the cross—the empty tomb.

And indeed, just like always, Easter did arrive and it was glorious. With brass, banners, children and joy, we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord. We ended the worship with the Hallelujah Chorus and all left the sanctuary feeling resurrected and made new. The experience of Jesus’ wounds and vulnerability was quickly forgotten. We have all moved on.

It was how I felt here a couple of weeks ago. I was deeply moved by our Easter service—by the beauty of the lilies, by the crowding of the pews, by the singing of our choirs, by the sharing of communion. I loved leaving this sanctuary and going to the flowered cross to see the butterflies get released to their new lives and beauty. Looking around at your faces, I saw all kinds of signs of resurrection and newness. I saw all kinds of signs of freedom and joy.

And then, the church celebrations were over and we all went home. Some of us had egg hunts; others had family dinners; maybe a few of you took a nap as I did. But it was all over. Easter was accomplished. I crossed the day off of my church calendar and turned my thoughts to upcoming weeks. Like Good Friday, Easter was done. It was time to move on. It was time to get back to normal. It was time to slip back into our regular routines and our regular ways of relating to each other and the world, right?

Not according to Peter. Peter—the disciple who constantly spoke too soon; the disciple who asked too many questions; the disciple who promised more than he could deliver; the disciple who, when pushed, denied Jesus

rather than defend him—**that** Peter refused to move on, to get back to normal, to slip back into old routines. Peter had witnessed God’s Good Friday pain. But Peter had also experienced Easter resurrection. And because of all of that, he would never be the same again. He knew the power of God’s Spirit and let it flow freely through his spirit, coursing through his words like the blood coursed through his body. Peter, the bungling disciple, was recreated into Peter, the powerful Easter preacher.

“All of you here,” Peter preached, “listen to me. Jesus, the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you—with miracles, wonders and signs that all of you know about--- this Jesus was betrayed by people who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and raised him up. Death was no match for him...Know with certainty that God has made **this** Jesus both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross.”

Peter, this bungling disciple turned powerful Easter preacher, was not about to go back to normal. He was not about to just get back to the way things were. It was impossible. He couldn’t even if he had wanted to, which he did not. He had witnessed God’s Good Friday pain and experienced Easter resurrection and would never be the same again. He knew the power of God’s Spirit and let it flow freely through his spirit, coursing through his words like the blood coursed through his body. And Peter he had to tell the story. Peter had to testify.

And the crowd was deeply moved by what they heard in Peter’s sermon. Like we were back in Houston, this crowd was cut to the heart as they considered all that had happened; as they considered Jesus’ pain and his suffering. Peter preached God’s Love crucified and buried, but then also raised and triumphant. And they were almost stunned by the power of his proclamation. I am sure that some of them said to each other “You mean God loves us that much? God went through all of that to free us from the shackles of death?”

And then, some of them called out to Peter and the other disciples, asking “What do we do now?” What is our response to Easter power? What is our response to resurrection newness and freedom? “What should we do,” they asked.

Indeed, what should we do? That is our question, too, isn’t it? We heard the Passion story and were moved by God’s Good Friday pain. But yet, we knew that was not the end of the story. And indeed, Easter Sunday came and it was glorious. We were all deeply moved by the beauty of the lilies, by the crowding of the pews, by the singing of our choirs, by the sharing of communion. We could all look around at each other’s faces and see signs of resurrection and newness, freedom and joy. We have heard the powerful story of God’s Love, freely poured out in Jesus our Christ, crucified and buried, and then, raised and triumphant. We have heard that yes, God did and does love us that much. And, not just us, but all God’s people, all God’s creation. We have heard that God’s arms are long enough to embrace the whole world. We have heard that in Jesus Christ we have good hope for all people. We have heard that God has set us free from the shackles of death and sin and anything else that keeps us from being fully who God has created us to be. We have heard the full Easter testimony, felt ourselves cut to the heart, and now...now we have the freedom to decide what is next.

“Brothers,” the people in the crowd shouted, “Brothers, what should we do?” “Repent,” Peter challenged. “Don’t just stay the same. Don’t go back to the way things were. Don’t go back to normal. Don’t just move on. Repent. Change your life. Turn to God. Be baptized or live out your baptism. Let yourselves be saved from the powers of this world. And, know that this invitation is not just for you alone. This promise, this invitation, is for your children and all those who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.”

For Peter, the bungling disciple turned powerful Easter preacher, the only response to an experience of resurrection power is to change. To change in vision and to change in action. Easter Sunday might be over. The Easter season will come to an end. But being God’s Easter people is never over. For Easter proclaims loudly that God is in charge and God is undeterred in God’s love for us and for this world. Easter is not just something we claim once a year, but something we are called to claim every single day of our lives—in the schoolroom, in the boardroom, in the kitchen and in the marketplace.

“Brothers, what should we do?” they asked after experiencing the power of God’s love revealed through Good Friday and Easter. “You repent,” Peter responds. “You change. You get baptized or you live out your baptisms in a fuller way. You don’t just go back to the way things were. You have seen the promise. It cannot be business as usual, anymore.”

All week long I have been captured by the ministry and prophetic preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. I have found myself drawn to his sermons and his speeches, even though all of that happened before my time. And I have found my eyes filled with tears as I watched and listened and thought about all that had led to that moment and all that has taken place since that time. And as I have thought about Dr. King’s story, sitting beside Peter’s story, I have been surprised by how similar they are.

For Dr. King, like Peter, had experienced Good Friday pain and Easter resurrection power and could no longer be the same. Dr. King, like Peter, knew the power of God’s Spirit and let it flow freely through his spirit, coursing through his words like the blood coursed through his body. Dr. King, like Peter, had been changed by the Easter story from a regular young Baptist preacher into a transformative and prophetic voice for change and justice. And Dr. King knew, just like Peter knew, that you could not travel to the cross, to the empty tomb, and through the power of Pentecost and remain the same, going back to normal, doing business as usual. Dr. King knew, just like Peter, that once you had experienced both God’s pain and resurrection power, you were a changed person and you were called to speak of it with your words and to live it out with your life. And the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached that response of repentance, that response of change, that response of testimony and transformation to all who would listen. These are his words from the sermon he preached the night before he was assassinated:

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism,
but ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here!
It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey,"
but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here,
and his children who can't eat three square meals a day.
It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day,
God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta,
the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee.
This is what we have to doⁱ.

For you see, Dr. King knew that the Easter experience was not just one weekend a year. Dr. King knew that the Easter season was not simply seven weeks in the Spring. Dr. King knew that once God’s Easter power had been set loose into the world, into our lives, that the old ways needed to be finished and gone. God’s Easter people needed to be at work together helping to make all things new. For once you have experienced both God’s Good Friday pain and God’s Easter resurrection power, you are a changed person; and you are called to speak it with your words and to live it out with your life, with our life together. For the cross and resurrection were no accident. Our response to God’s great love fully revealed at Easter should be just as intentional.

“Brothers and sisters, what, then should we do?” “Repent,” Peter preaches. “Do justice, putting hands and feet to Easter faith,” Dr. King calls. But, whatever we do, we cannot faithfully just move on, get back to normal, and pretend we do not know what we know. For we have been cut to the heart. We have experienced Good Friday’s pain and Easter’s new life. We have felt resurrection power and the coursing of God’s Spirit. We have been to the mountaintop and to the empty tomb. And there is no turning back now. It is time to speak of it with our words and to live it with our lives.

We are God’s Easter people. It is who we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ From <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.