

Easter , Year A
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The primary focus of Easter has, so far as I can tell, always been on Christ's victory over sin and death, and the consequent forgiveness of sins that is ours because of that victory. Peter's concluding statement from our passage in Acts for today summarizes this focus well: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Though as I have said before I don't believe that Jesus had to die in order for God to be able to forgive, I do believe in Christ's victory over sin and death, I do believe in God's forgiveness of us all, and I do believe these things are important, vitally so. But I have also come to believe over the past several years that there is a larger context in which - and through which - we can better understand what these things really mean, and so see how that victory over sin and death, and the forgiveness that comes from it, affects us not just in the world beyond this one, but in this world right now. That is what I want to talk about this morning, that larger context.

First, and most important, the resurrection is the complete vindication of Jesus. The person who was tortured to death by crucifixion, who died convicted of sedition by Imperial Rome, and blasphemy by some members of the Sanhedrin, was shown by the resurrection to be very face and presence of God in this world. In the resurrection the one who became the scapegoat, who was

targeted by a mob for death has, in the words of St. Paul, received the name that is above every name, so that “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.” In the resurrection, most simply put, we discover that God does not look at the world from the point of view of Caiaphas and Pilate, both of whom were willing to accept the death of Jesus for the sake of social order. God looks at the world from the point of view of Jesus, the one killed for the sake of that social order.

That is the most startling revelation the world has yet seen. For the truth is we are constantly looking at the world from the point of view of Caiaphas and Pilate. Human history is full of the story of those who for the sake of “progress” or “manifest destiny” or “peace” or “order” or indeed hastening the arrival of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” were not just willing, but eager to dehumanize others and so justify destroying them. In every case their story was presented to people as “the truth” or as the “tide of history,” and so given a patina of holiness even when the violence was perpetrated without any reference to religion at all.

To look at the world from the point of view of the resurrection is to stand all that on its head, and to realize that this kind of dehumanizing violence is not the will of God at all, but rather runs clean contrary to that will. The resurrection of Jesus shows us as nothing else ever has that God’s will is for a world in which people don’t victimize each other, and don’t justify scapegoating violence on the grounds either of historical necessity or progress. The resurrection is God’s call to abandon that whole human tendency, and to seek instead that world in which

peace has come not through the conquest of enemies, but through true justice for all people and the reconciliation of enemies.

To believe in Jesus and the power of his resurrection is thus not simply or only to entertain certain opinions about the relationship between God and Christ. But rather, to believe in Jesus and his resurrection is to look at the whole world entirely differently than you ever have before. It is to look at the sweep of human justifications for violence not as the necessary steps toward a better world they are so often advertised as, but as what happens when people stray from God's will and misunderstand God's purpose for us. It is to recognize that the sin of the world is not simply or only what happens when bad people do things they know are wrong, but rather what happens when good people get caught up in the vortex of the way this world is, and so end up justifying as good the kind of violence that killed Jesus and which is so common now.

And conversion to the cross and resurrection of Christ is not simply the movement from believing that Jesus is not God's Son to believing that he is. Conversion is what happens when, under the sway of the crucified and risen Jesus, people stop dehumanizing other people, no matter what the provocation, and begin to recognize not just in friends, but in strangers and even enemies, real human beings who are loved by God whether they know it or not. By the way, we see this conversion even, perhaps especially, during war. In an essay published by *The Washington Post* on June 6, (an important date in American history 2004) Captain Oscar Estrada of the 415 Civil Affairs Battalion wrote "I

think of my fellow soldiers and the reality of being attacked and feeling threatened, and it all makes sense – the need to smash their cars and shoot their cows and point our weapons at them and detain them without concern for notifying their families. But how would I feel in their shoes? Would I be able to offer my own heart and mind?” There is a soldier in combat coming under the influence of the risen Christ and realizing that there in Iraq in the searing heat and the numbing fear of not knowing who the enemy is, he is beginning to see the war from the point of view of his own innocent victims, and so is beginning to see life completely differently than ever before.

Amidst the welter of differing pictures of God the movement in this direction within scripture is remarkably consistent. Not just the swords beaten into ploughshares and the spears into pruning hooks, but the image of the lion and the lamb together, and the child playing over the adder’s den, testify to a world as pictured by God that does not create victims of violence in order to maintain order and a sense of stability. These are pictures of a world in which all creatures live without fear of one another, and so do not need to demonize each other. Beyond this of course is the whole body of Jesus stories. The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Sheep and the Goats, all point at a world dehumanizing violence has no place.

Of course we are so far from the realization of this vision, and I have no expectation that we will reach it within the span of any foreseeable future, but the resurrection of Christ shows us that this is the direction God is headed, this is

the life God wants for us, and when we imagine any other outcome for the world, a world for example where peace is sustained by violence and not justice, by the making of victims and not the reconciling of enemies, then the resurrection of Christ shows us that we have gotten off track, that we have missed the mind and heart of God for us.

If Christ's victory over death means anything, it must first mean that. It must first mean that the resurrection shows us where real life and truth are in this world, that Christ has risen not just as victor over the end of the biological existence that all of us must one day experience, but has, more profoundly, risen as victor over a whole way of looking at the world which insists upon death for the sake of order, safety, and peace. Only when we can see that this is the primary sense in which he is victor over death can we then see that this victory extends to each of us as individuals as well.

Similarly, when we see that the victory over sin is achieved not just by freeing God to forgive us our individual trespasses where before God was constrained by some cosmic rule, but rather that his victory is over the root sin that arises when we imagine that God sees the world from the point of view of history's power people, everything changes. Once, in the light of the resurrection, we understand the truth of God's perspective, and realize that God sees the world from the point of view of Jesus, then we are freed by the grace given in the resurrection to live completely differently, and to begin to move, albeit slowly and often painfully, in the direction of God's kingdom.

Because the resurrection is God's complete and total vindication of Jesus we now know the perspective from which God views the world. We know that God sees the world through the eyes of Christ, from the point of view of history's preeminent scapegoat. My prayer now and always is that this fact may change us all, so that we may see Christ's victory over sin and death not simply or only as an assurance given about what will happen in some distant future when our days on earth are over, but also as a living power that is slowly transforming this world right now.