

Lectionary Reflections
Season of Easter 2016
Resurrection, the Reign of God, and Us
Peace and Justice Commission
Wisconsin Council of Churches

March 27, 2016 Easter Day

Texts: John 21:1-18; Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:15-1-9

For some, this Easter Day is part of what's been a grand, full, comprehensive—and busy!—week, from palms to supper to stripped arrest through crucifixion and a tomb's loud slamming. It may have included the richness of a Vigil, recounting "salvation history," that God's work for us has persisted and will continue.

Others in our congregations, though, arrive on Easter Day without that background, without the experiences of Holy Week. Yet still, death they get. Bad news is inescapable. They need an alternative.

The truths of those troubles linger and lurk even in the readings of this good news and new life day. Weeping in the garden. Doubts, "most of all to be pitied." We're confronted by "the last enemy." When Peter proclaims that "truly, God shows no partiality," it is a noteworthy statement exactly because we know partiality all-too-well, among people as well as nations.

On Easter—for this day and throughout the season with these lectionary reflections—we celebrate a victory, a new beginning. Life not only bursts the bonds of the tomb but bursts into our own hearts and ruptures the oldness of our lives. Again, Peter's proclamation meets us amid worried lives and hurting world: God has anointed us "with the Holy Spirit and with power; [to go] about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil! The good news takes on flesh in us. Let loose your "Alleluias!" and proclaim that none of those fears and terrors, no weeping or abandonment, no divisions and injustices, not even death itself will have the last word. We are living in Christ Jesus and will not be stopped. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Rev. Nick Utphall, Pastor, Advent Lutheran Church, Madison

April 3, 2016 Second Sunday of Easter

Texts: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

It's Easter evening now... and, even though they have received the good news of Jesus' resurrection from Mary Magdalene, John's gospel reports that the other disciples remain huddled together behind locked doors... fearful, confused, upset, unsure of the future.

When Jesus appears among them, he offers them an antidote to their fear – the gift of his living presence and the gift of peace. Their fear turns to joy. And then the risen Christ boots them out the door, and calls them to take these gifts into the waiting world. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

There is much about which to be fearful these days... things that may send us into hiding, seeking shelter and safety behind our own locked doors. What is it for you? The state of the church, the state of our

nation, the state of the world? Is it the depth of human need and suffering that seems greater than our ability to address it... war, poverty, racism, gun violence? Is it the hateful rhetoric and bigotry that spews from the mouths of those we have been taught to respect? These fears are very real and hiding away to protect ourselves from the ugliness and the overwhelming need may seem a reasonable response.

But the peace that Jesus offers trumps any fear that would hold us back. As disciples of the resurrected Christ, we are called to unlock our own doors so that we can help others unlock theirs... called to bear the promise of his enduring and sustaining presence – and the peace he offers – into this world, so in need of peace.

Rev. Jean Dow, Associate Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Milwaukee

April 10, 2016 Third Sunday of Easter

Texts: Acts 9: 1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelations 5: 11-14; John 21: 1-19

Focus Text: John 21: 1-19

The events of John 21: 1-19 take place after the death and resurrection of Jesus when he appears to Peter and six other disciples as they are fishing. The passage concludes as Jesus tells Peter to “feed my sheep.”

What can we learn about the Reign of God from this story? I see two themes emerging: community and feeding/nurturing. Jesus had gathered together a community of disciples during his ministry, a community that continued after his death, with the exception of Judas. When Peter decides to go fishing, he does not go alone. The seven disciples fish together. After their labors, Jesus invites them to a communal meal. Throughout his ministry, Jesus invited a diverse group into community, often people that society excluded. He commands Peter to nurture that community.

The idea of nurturing and feeding appears throughout the story. The disciples fish, an act of providing food. Jesus prepares a meal, and then invites the disciples to participate in the meal and to bring some of the fish they caught. The disciples become co-providers of the meal, accepting the nourishment offered by Jesus and also sharing nourishment from their own bounty. Jesus expands the responsibility of nurturing one another to beyond their own circle when he instructs Peter to “feed my sheep.”

We are created to be in community with one another. Following the example of Jesus, we are to reach out to others, especially the most vulnerable, enter into community with them, and nurture one another. Like the fishing disciples, we may need to go to unexpected places to find the Reign of God. The Reign of God is not built on division or fear of others. The Reign of God calls us into an ever-including, ever-nurturing community of God’s love.

Gloria Carter, Church Women United

April 17, 2016 Fourth Sunday of Easter

Texts: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

As a non-believer in God, Psalm 23 was the “funeral poem.” It seemed to be read at every funeral. Now, as a woman of faith, I have families bringing in wall hangings of these words asking to use them in the service. They do not recognize that these are words of scripture, only that they are a connection to a loved one. For generations these words have brought comfort and strength, to non-believers and believers alike, in death, and in life.

The Jewish Study Bible TANAKH translation of Psalm 23 offers these words:

The LORD is my shepherd;
I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me to water in places of repose,
He renews my life;
He guides me in right paths
as befits His name.
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,
I fear no harm, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff---they comfort me.

You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my drink is abundant.
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for many long years.

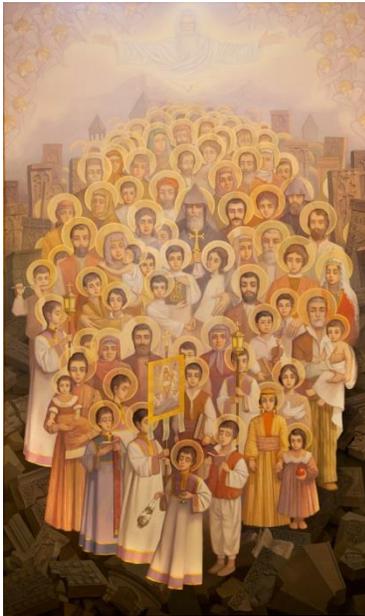
In the midst of these turbulent political times may our awareness increase of the disparity that exists around us and may we renew our commitment to God who will bring all of us through the “valley of deepest darkness.” May we remember that we dwell in God’s world, are not alone, and that we are guided, anointed and supplied to share goodness and steadfast love all the days of our lives. Let us boldly walk together in the power of the resurrection bringing justice, hope, healing and renewal to a broken world.

Rev. Ellen Rasmussen, Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Rhinelander

April 24, 2016 **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

Text: Hebrews 12:1-2

Theme: Martyrs of the 1915 Genocide – Witness to the Resurrection and the Love of God



April 24, 1915 marks the start of the Genocide of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire.

Those ancient people of God, who had been evangelized by the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, the people who accepted Christianity as their nation’s religion in 301 A.D., a people persecuted for centuries because of their witness to the Resurrection and the love of God, were being systematically exterminated. By the end of the Genocide, over half of the Armenians in the world had been slaughtered because they were different.

If you look at this icon of the Martyrs of 1915, you will see peaceful faces gazing out at you, beckoning you to join them in witness. And, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews said, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight....and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus..., who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross...”

We are called to witness. But how can we match their heroism? Let’s remember that martyrs were ordinary and unremarkable people until they were called upon to witness.

Let me use the example of my father, an orphaned survivor of the Genocide. Worshipping the Lord was a big part of who he was. Almost every evening, at the dinner table, he would witness his Christian values, in his simple and heavily accented English.

- **Racism.** To any negative talk about “Negroes” my Dad would slap his hand on the table and say, “None of that talk. They are people too.” (reminds me of “Black lives matter.”)
- **Gossip.** If we did start gossiping, his hand would come down again, saying, “We don’t know what that person is going through. Every house has four walls.”
- **The working poor.** No need for him to expound about compassion and understanding for them, because “working poor” is what we were.

Dad’s sense of decency didn’t arise out of nothing. It came out of the persecution he had experienced and his deep faith in the One who had shared in that witness, out of love for all mankind.

A lifetime later, dad’s simple code of Christian decency is more appealing—and more necessary—than ever. We are called to take our faith *seriously*: to make it the fiber of our body, mind, and soul. Mostly, we are called to witness the Lord’s reign and presence in our lives today.

Fr. Yeprem Kelegian, Pastor, St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church, Racine

May 1, 2016 Sixth Sunday of Easter

Texts: John 14:23; Acts 16:9-15

Easter is a season of newness. It represents new life, new growth and new relationships. It is a time for us to acknowledge our humanity and our limitations; at the same time affording the Holy Spirit to transform us into the people God is calling us to be. Christ's death on the cross paid a debt to God for the sin of mankind, and the empty tomb, or resurrection is God's declaration the debt has been satisfied; for the wages of sin is death, however the gift of God is new life.

The resurrection of Christ signals God's reign in the lives of believing people. As God has raised Christ from the dead, he resurrects us from our old dead sinful habits and attitudes. Not that we become sinless, but the power of God's Spirit within us enables us to sin less. The Bible declares that any man, woman or child in Christ is new, the old passes away and the new miraculously appears (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now that I have been crucified with Christ, the me that you see isn't me at all; it is a new resurrected life, a Christ alive in my life (Galatians 2:20). In light of the fact that the life I now live is a resurrected life, I can obey God's calling on my life, love others more and share the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the power of God to save and transform.

Charles Colson is a perfect example of a resurrected life. Once a powerful man in the Nixon administration, his involvement in the Watergate Scandal brought his kingdom down. He went from a being a power broker to simply an inmate in a prison. However while incarcerated he began to read a book by CS Lewis and through it, came to know Jesus Christ. His soul was set free, the old Chuck passed away and a new Chuck emerged. No longer seeking or wielding power, he now shares the gospel and is a strong advocate for prison reform. He is the founder of Prison Fellowship.

This is what the reign of the resurrection looks like in those who believe.

Rev. Joseph Baring, Jr., Pastor, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, Madison

May 8, 2016 Seventh Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 16: 16-34

This is Mother's Day and we wish all mothers and those who mentor and care for children a good day. Our text today from Acts is one that speaks of not so happy topics, however.

It would have been horrible for a mother to see her daughter taken as a slave and used to make money as was the case in Philippi. This was so common place at the time, though, that Paul simply ignored her for a long time. Finally, he was annoyed enough that he ordered the demon to come out of her. She was freed, but Paul and Silas were dragged to prison for interfering with the business of the owners. There was no real law broken (it says they were "disturbing the city"), but it didn't matter because the people with money and power were in charge. They were convicted with no evidence and were beaten and chained.

This whole story is sadly too much like our own current "justice" system, according to Michelle Alexander in "The New Jim Crow". She says that ninety percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses in many states are Black or Latino, even though drug use by race is equal by percentage. She says, "Full-blown trials of guilt or innocence rarely occur; many people never meet with an attorney; witnesses are routinely paid and coerced by the government; police regularly stop and search people for

no reason whatsoever; penalties for many crimes are so severe that innocent people plead guilty, accepting plea bargains to avoid harsh mandatory sentences; and children, even as young as fourteen, are sent to adult prisons.” (pg. 59) It's a scary and costly situation in many, many ways. The mothers of so many young black and Latino men are seeing them “possessed” first by drugs and then by the demons that follow them as felons. And their daughters are still being enslaved, also by drugs but also by others to make money from their bodies.

Paul and Silas were freed by an earthquake. Today, we need to be a part of the earthquake that shakes our decision-makers so much that changes are made in how we treat people with drug addiction. We need to believe in the Lord Jesus and do as he taught—to release the captives, give sight to the blind and care for the poor.

Today, Mother's Day, is a good day to care about all mothers' children and advocate for the reforming of our justice system so the demons of our day do not win and all people are treated with compassion.

Petra Streiff, United Church of Christ, New Glarus

May 15, 2016 Pentecost Sunday

Texts: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

Twice I have had the opportunity to learn a new language well enough to function easily in the host country. Some of you have had that experience as well. Speaking in that new language is a thrill. It is like I am a different person, functioning in a different world. I can image that that thrill is a pale sample of what the crowd felt as God's Spirit descended on them after Peter's sermon.

As they understood each other in diverse languages, it was as though they had entered a new reality. Now they were part of the reign of God, a rule in which their individual identities still existed but were now caught up in and superseded by the reign of God in which all are accepted and valued equally.

Recently we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection calls us into this new reality of the reign of God. We are not all speaking new languages, but we can all live into God's reality that confronts injustice and racism and values all people. As we do, we are realizing the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The descent of the Spirit at Pentecost is an undoing of the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). In the Babel story, languages separated people. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God brings people together in a new kind of unity. In the New Testament, this new unity included men and women, Jews and Greeks. And at Pentecost the crowd included people from across the then-known world. Today our unity in the Spirit of God includes the many ethnicities visible in our county, but also our brothers and sisters around the World. That unity should be celebrated as our highest loyalty.

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