

Presence and Proclamation

Luke 24:36-48

We are Easter people. That sounds simple enough when you say it. We are Easter people. While it is a short and simple statement, it is also quite profound. What exactly does it mean to call ourselves Easter people?

For some, it means to believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as an awesome, historical, and life-changing miracle. For others, it means experiencing the presence of the living Christ here with us now, traveling with us through the countless moments of our daily lives. Of course for many it is both.

Two weeks ago on Easter Sunday I said that the Gospel of Mark was the earliest of our Gospels, written around the year 70 CE. This past week I read through an even earlier Gospel which is not included in our bible called the Gospel of Thomas. The one thing that is really odd about Thomas' Gospel is that there is no narrative. It's simply a collection of the sayings of Jesus and lots of dialog between Jesus and his disciples. Apparently, the disciples of Thomas were sharply focused on the content of Jesus' teaching and didn't say much about his birth, death or resurrection. For these early "Thomas Christians," if you will, being a follower of Jesus was just that—following in the way of Jesus.

Close to the end of the century, John picks up a pen and writes his Gospel and casts Thomas as one who doubts the resurrection. Imagine that! Even in the earliest years of Christianity, there is mounting tension over what it means to be an Easter people.

Even today, many Christians disagree over whether the Christian life should be focused primarily on the teachings of Jesus or focused on believing in his death and resurrection.

Luke seems to be telling us that it is both. Luke's Jesus stands right among the disciples and says, "**Peace be with you.**" And he says, "**Why do doubts arise in your hearts?**" That's a good question, considering that Jesus is standing right there! They weren't just doubting the resurrection. They were doubting the very presence of Jesus! Jesus reassures them, "**Look at my hands and my feet. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.**" The resurrected Christ is in the midst of his disciples. Resurrection. Presence.

Jesus says, "**Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day...**" At this point Christian faith could be summarized by confidence in the

presence of the resurrected Christ. But Jesus keeps on talking. He continues, “**...and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.**” There is proclamation-proclamation of the teachings of Jesus. Now repentance and forgiveness of sins are both under the umbrella of a larger theme, the kingdom of God. If you asked any 100 New Testament scholars to identify the main theme of Jesus’ ministry, Christian or non-Christian, they will have one answer: the Kingdom of God. The first thing Jesus says at the beginning of his ministry is, “**The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news.**” The Kingdom is here and it is good news! That is what Jesus proclaimed and that is what we are called to proclaim.

Now, what happens when we forget to hold both presence and proclamation? What happens if we fail to embrace both the resurrection and the content of Jesus’ teachings? Well, we begin to forget things.

Consider the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead...” There is all this stuff about Jesus and not one breath of confession that Jesus had a life, that he was a teacher, a healer, a revolutionary, that someone experienced Jesus. Do you know that Jesus was a peaceful political activist? We like to think that Jesus would have had nothing to do with politics. But doing the things that Jesus did in the Roman domination system that he lived in. He was political. His triumphal and messianic entry into Jerusalem through the East Gate was the most world-changing anti-empire demonstration in world history. What a contrast between Jesus’ humble entry into Jerusalem on a donkey to the mighty entrance of the Roman emperor on his great horse and all of his horsemen and foot soldiers. And the peasants (about 90% of the population) were more excited when Jesus came.

Think about Jesus’ life experience. At Capernaum, he would have had many occasions to go fishing. The trouble is that fish you catch in the Sea of Tiberius is heavily taxed by the Roman emperor, Tiberius. Jesus believed and taught that the earth is the Lord’s and the goodness thereof. Tiberius, then either presumes that the fish are his or that he has the right to tax the goodness of the Lord. Violent Roman domination must have seemed outrageous. Jesus had a lot to say. He had a lot to say about kingdom and justice as a path to peace instead of war and

victory. I can't imagine what my Christian life would be like not being interested in and fascinated by the life and ministry of the historical Jesus.

On the other hand, we could get so lost in historical studies that we somehow become oblivious to the reality of the resurrection. Christ is Risen! Christ is present! When you are anxious about violence in homes, on the streets and among nations, Christ is risen. When you struggle to keep things together during a recession, Christ is risen. When a church member makes your blood boil, Christ is risen. When you struggle with an addiction and you fear judgment from others, Christ is risen. When a school friend turns their back on you, Christ is risen.

Jesus isn't a dead figure from bygone times. He lives! As an Easter people, we are called to proclaim his message of the Kingdom of Heaven and to be attentive to his presence. When two of Jesus' disciples met a stranger on the road to Emmaus and traveled with him, they recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread. Such appearances have been happening from that day until this one. Where have you recognized Jesus?

When I think about our 30-Hour-Famine, it occurs to me once again that our youth and some of their friends were working members of Christ's body as they collected and distributed food for kids who are often hungry here in Evansville, not to mention the money they raised for World Vision, a more global hunger project. The risen Christ has been incarnationally working in Evansville and the world. Christ is risen.

Presence and Proclamation. If you think about Luke's emphasis here on both presence and proclamation, you can find two ways that we can really enrich our Christian faith. One is to practice the presence. Historically, practicing the presence meant striving to constantly be aware of God's ongoing presence. In today's busy world, a few minutes of intentional God-time can be life-changing.

For five minutes each day, turn off the TV, step away from the computer, ignore phone calls and text messages, and either by yourself or with your family, share or reflect on the highs and lows of your day; read and highlight a verse of scripture in your bible; reflect or talk about how the verse relates to your highs and lows; pray about your individual highs and lows, for your family and for the world; and finally, if you are with your family, find ways to affirm one another. In a matter of weeks, you'll be naming moments of the risen Christ's ministry all over the place.

There are many, many types of Christian spiritual practices that can move us in the direction of a God-centered life. In his book, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises*, Joseph Driskill says, “Developing and nurturing a relationship with God both personally and within a community of faith are essential aspects of being human. Human beings have spiritual needs that transcend the limitations of analysis and reason. Mainline Protestant churches are well-positioned to advocate the importance of integrating faith and reason, head and heart, prayer and social action.” Becoming evermore aware of the risen Christ can surely deepen our faith.

Another way to deepen faith is to be actively engaged in the critical study of faith and the bible. A critical examination of the bible, Old Testament and New Testament, peels back some of our historically conditioned notions and uncovers God’s passion for mission. God is passionate about having someone feed the lambs. God is passionate about feeding the hungry. God is passionate about having justice roll down like water. God has a dream for the world.

For over 150 years, Eden seminary has been equipping pastors to be, among other things, resident theologians and bible scholars in churches. A hundred and fifty years ago, such a pastor was most likely the most educated person in his church and town. In small towns, the preacher and the school teacher were the town scholars. The larger cities would also have educated physicians and attorneys.

That was then. Now pastors are in churches with an educated laity. The time is right to raise the bar. Church members are capable of allowing what they know about science and world history to shape the way they interpret the bible’s messages.

One of the emerging tasks of teaching pastors is the theological re-education of church members. That is, it’s time to educate again, it’s time to examine what we think we know, considering what we continue to learn about science and our continuing investigation of history. It seems strange that we would pursue an education, being willing to think critically and carefully about nearly anything except our own use of the bible and Christian religion.

A few days after Easter, I was driving home from St. Louis, and I got to thinking about the decline of membership in progressive thinking churches, churches like the United Church of Christ. For the last few decades, these mainline churches have been losing membership.

At the same time, Christian fundamentalist groups have been getting larger. Another group that is getting larger is confessing atheists. This is alarming to me because neither of these groups really appreciate the need to work with God to change the world. You have atheists, who

think we can do it without God. You have Fundamentalists, who tend to think that God is going to do it for us. God doesn't do it for us. We know that from thousands of years of human experience. Things like the exodus do not happen without people like Moses. God's not going to do it for us. And we can't do it without God. God is the one who casts the vision for change. God is the first to desire justice for all. God is the source of strength and hope and the gifts for the task at hand.

Without a theological re-education of today's enlightened laity, Christian faith will have less and less interest in God's desire establish justice, and more and more emphasis on escaping this world. I can't say enough about the power of biblical studies in a church. It was pointed out to me that 4 out of the past 6 council presidents here at Bethlehem Church have been involved in a small group that critically and thoughtfully studies the bible and Christian faith. Next year it will be 5 of 7. A theological re-education of laity raises up leaders who lead into God's vision with faith that is both reasonable and passionate. Theological re-education creates a church family that takes seriously that someone will inherit the world we leave behind. You can call it stewardship of the earth, stewardship of youth and future generations. You can see that much is at stake.

We are called to practice the presence of the risen Christ. And we are called to proclaim that the kingdom of God is here. Wherever there is obedience to God, there is God's kingdom. We are a people of presence and proclamation. To proclaim without having knowledge of Christ's presence, is to eventually run out of strength during the lonely journey. To practice presence with proclaiming the kingdom is to abandon God's dream for the world. Luke seems to be saying we need both.

This is who we are: Striving to welcome all who seek God, to grow in faith, and to love neighbor as self through action, we are an Easter people. Amen.