

Easter 4b 2024
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
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Acts 4:5-12 Psalm 23 1 John 3:16-24 John 10:11-18

In the (1959) musical “The Sound of Music” (how can that have been so long ago?) there is a song, “How do you solve a problem like Maria?” which asks questions about how to handle a person who doesn’t quite fit into a single mold or expectation. We might describe Peter’s words in Acts 3 and 4: “How do you solve a problem like Peter?”

We remember Peter. On the night of Jesus’ arrest, a servant girl standing near him around a coal fire (Luke 22) says: “*This man was also with him.*” And Peter replies, “*Woman, I do not know him.*” Peter denies knowing Jesus again before the cock crows.

Last week and this week Peter is talking, as a prisoner, to the “rulers, elders, and teachers of the law.” You see, the religious authorities have arrested Peter and John for healing a man who, from birth to adulthood, cannot walk. The authorities ask: “by what power or name did you do this?” And Peter tells a very detailed account of ***how the religious leaders who arrested him*** killed Jesus. And how Jesus, who the authorities discarded as an irritating stone, rose from the dead and is the foundation, the cornerstone, of healing and wholeness. The power is God, the name is Jesus.

Peter risks his freedom and maybe his life by proclaiming the “good news” of Jesus. The religious authorities wield power to jail people; they want to know who is a threat to their power. We can imagine their “dis-ease” with two uneducated fishermen not only heal a man, but that the witness to that healing and to the healing power of Jesus converts first 3,000, then 5,000 people. The authority’s earthly power is under attack. Peter risks everything to stand in the middle of power and proclaim Truth. It is Jesus who holds the real power in this world; Jesus the Son of God pointing us to God’s presence and healing, saving of all of creation.

The power of the risen Christ is not a magic trick or a one-time “demonstration” of power. Peter and John’s healing of a man who could not walk shows us that God carries out God’s purposes through ordinary people – Peter, John, me and you. Such power is not of this world, but of the Holy Spirit, through God in Christ. All of Peter’s words and these comparisons: death to life, rock to cornerstone on which the church universal stands – is very good news for you and I. God uses unliked and unlikely people to show faith to the world. The power of the resurrection is same power that makes broken lives whole.

The Rev. Mark Davis writes: “It is the way. The way is the way of humility and self-giving, it is the way of eschewing coercive power. It is the way of laying down one’s life for others, of taking up the cross, of being a follower of Jesus.” A man who cannot walk dances; a person who is blind can see; we are lifted into the arms of Jesus, into relationship with God. We have abundant life. And abundant life means that of these people, the lame, the blind, you and I and everyone we like, love, and despise are or can be sheep of Jesus’ own fold, his own beloved flock. Healing leads to belonging. Come into the fold. Listen to the message of Christ. Be the one who glorifies God, who finds Jesus in the most unlikely people and places.

When I went to seminary my bishop gave me some wise council. He said that in seminary I would meet someone who I could not even imagine belonged there. Many of us have probably had that same experience at work, in school, in various groups to which we attend or belong. The bishop assured me, and I assure your, that for someone else, **you** are that person. The one who doesn’t belong, the person someone else cannot imagine your qualifications to study, to be in this or that club, let alone be the bearer of Jesus’ good news. The good news is that Jesus chooses Peter. Jesus chooses me and you. The cornerstone has already been laid – two thousand years ago; we are to build on that strong foundation. You are a sheep of God’s choosing, of God’s own fold. I, too, am in that fold; we are all, likely and unlikely, here, healed in some way in Christ, hurting and needing healing still, and belonging to the power that offers abundance and life.

It might be a hard to believe that we are all sheep in that one fold, and to know with certainty every day, every moment, that God loves us. Remember: the greatest powers of the world could not bury Jesus and keep truth silent. We could not and cannot bury him, so we might as well live with him. Walk with him. Be drawn gently into Jesus' fold. We have his promise:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and they know me.... I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold and I must bring them, also.

"I must bring them also," until we are all in the one fold.

Our encouragement for **how** to live a life of love comes from the letter of first John: *Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* Love not only in word or in speech, but also in truth and action. We express our faith in truth and action without fear because: Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life!

How do we solve a problem like Peter? We don't. We see and hear Christ in him and through him. We affirm that he is God's beloved, one of God's own sheep, no matter what. And so are we. Know and trust that God's sheepfold is not yet full, and, like Jesus, is not dead. Tell the story in our actions, in our lives.

Know the peace of God. Our Presiding Bishop addressed the church's Executive Council this past week. He has been very ill, and one night, he writes, he woke up. He remembers waking up, and he didn't know where he was. Sometimes we don't know where we are, or where our church is, in this life, right? Michael finally said, in his words:

...excuse me, ma'am, where am I? And she said, you're in REX Hospital. You're in the ICU unit. You did very well on your surgery. You've come through your surgery, and now you can just rest. And I went back to sleep. I don't remember anything more after that, but I also realized that the power of that word just oriented me to where I was and that you're OK. That is all I needed.

And a lot of times that's all we need. The power of that word that just orients you to where you are when you don't know for sure makes all the difference in the world. You don't have to have all the answers. I didn't have all the answers. I didn't know what they had done. I knew vaguely what they were supposed to do. I didn't know they had more to do than they expected to do. But just that orienting word was enough.

Our orienting words today come from Presiding Bishop Michael:

This great church of ours will sail forward, but not the way it has always sailed. That's just the reality. And that's OK. The movement of Jesus in this world has been through ups and downs. This Jesus thing has been the established church like in the Church of England, and it's been disestablished. It's crowned emperors, and it's been imprisoned by emperors. We've been through it all. But that movement of people who are committed to this Jesus and his way of love, that movement will not stop.

Then he quotes Moses (!): *Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.* See the salvation of the Lord.

Our orienting words today come from the psalmist: *The Lord is my shepherd; he leads me and guides me in his name's way for his name's sake.*

Our orienting words today come from Jesus, who is paraphrasing the ancient prophet Ezekiel:

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.... ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

Our orienting words today come from 1 John:

Love in truth and action. My brothers and sisters, **amen.**