



Gradually Catching Fire

1 Peter 1:17-23; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Luke 24:13-35

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What do the church spring cleaning we had two weeks ago and the church yard sale we had yesterday have in common? Lots of volunteers excited about their faith and wanting to support their church so the gospel of Jesus Christ risen in our midst can be told. Our life in Christ gives us joy and is worth celebrating and talking about. This is what the first disciples celebrated soon after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Surely, it didn't start that way that last Passover they spent with Jesus. After the annual celebratory meal, memorial of the liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery, Jesus led his disciples out to Gethsemane, an olive grove just outside of Jerusalem, to pray. There, after an intense prayer, a number of Temple guards led by Judas came and took possession of him. After a mock trial that lasted several hours bouncing between the house of the High Priest, Caiaphas, and the Roman Governor, Pilate, Jesus was tortured and then nailed to a cross as a common criminal. He was the shame of the people, despised as a blasphemous sinner. His disciples were in disarray: they all fled the scene in fear to be next.

But God rose Jesus after three days: evil, in its most cruel form, was conquered and life triumphed. What followed the resurrection was a series of apparitions to his disciples who at first had a hard time recognizing Jesus, couldn't believe what they were seeing, and couldn't make sense of the whole story. With patience and loving kindness Jesus reinterprets the Scriptures to them and reveals himself in the breaking of the bread (according to Luke's recollection). At other times, he offers peace to the grief-stricken lot. Their understanding needed revision: the failed messiah has triumphed after all, and the friend they had betrayed has come back offering forgiveness.

From now on, they understand their job to be that of spreading the good news and to reconcile all people to God: ambassadors of peace and of a new world.

Peter's remarkable summary of Easter faith demonstrates that he anticipates the imminent end of the world. Having reminded them of Jesus' goodness, his rejection, death and resurrection, Peter summarized it all saying, "It was impossible for him to be held by death."

But how could the disciples celebrate their new life in God through Christ and the realization of being held in God's amazing embrace? If God has demonstrated care and faithfulness through the resurrection of Jesus, would God not hold all those who are in Christ close to his heart? If God has given us a risen Lord, would God not give us anything else we might need?

Peter reminds us that the death and resurrection of Christ are available to the community through baptism and the Word. The passage is filled with metaphors: God as Father, God as Judge, life as exile, salvation as ransom, the lamb's blood, truth as purification, baptism as new birth, and the Word of God as seed. Peter's spiritual bulb went off in the realization that we are here for God and all we are called to do in our interactions with one another and our care of the planet is a priestly offering. And it's not our doing: we are empowered by the grace of God to do that.

"You know that you were ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Peter 1:18-19). What makes the lamb perfect? What counts as a defect or blemish? Is it only about external appearances? It has been said a weed is just a plant out of place. In our efforts to control the world we pull weeds to make gardens perfect. We use fertilizer and chemicals to make lawns uniformly green, without a dandelion to be seen. Still, we come before God with weeds in our gardens, with defects and blemishes, all our imperfections, sins, and failures on display. It is by the grace of God that we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It is by Jesus' mercy that the whole of creation is redeemed.

"Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

Genuine love. Mutual love. Love coming deeply from the heart. These are the relationships to which we are invited to aspire. These are the relationships God has drawn us all into through Jesus. As beautiful as these gifts are they also remain elusive. We humans get in groups and soon enough differences lead to conflict. A shared vision becomes "My Way," which is clearly better than "Your Way." Yet, it is essential to remember that genuine mutual love comes to us through the gift of faith in the truth of the gospel, the hope of resurrection, and the promise of new life coming through the cross of Christ.

Christian identity and purpose? The "Holy Priesthood" into which we are fashioned (or the "Priesthood of All Believers" as Martin Luther used to call it) is the call into a new relationship with God and with all of God's creatures. Peter clearly defines our identity as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," (1 Pt 2:9) a "holy priesthood," "chosen and precious in God's sight" meant to offer "spiritual sacrifices" to God (1 Pt 2:4-5).

As the function of ancient priests was that of offering to God sacrifices of animals, all of us as elected priests offer to God the sacrifice of praise,¹ that is our intimate connection with and genuine concern for all of creation. The integral union of all things created makes us "feel" for all living creatures and for mother earth which sustains us in the web of life.

Our prayer is a "heart prayer" generated out of true and honest hospitality, a welcome awareness of God's presence in our everyday life and not out there beyond us to seek and discover in our good time and at our pleasure. Out of that consciousness a prayer of lament and an ethic of justice are borne. Once we attune ourselves to the Triune God, the "Father and Judge," the Son "lamb without defect or blemish," and the Holy Spirit "Lord and Giver of Life," we realize that God is still active and creating in the world, both within and beyond the human family, and

¹ Hebrews 13:15

draws us near in divine intimacy. God's sacred presence can be found anywhere as long as we are capable of retaining curiosity about people and retain a sense of awe at God's creation.²

May the opening of the Scripture and the breaking of the bread bring us a renewed recognition of the Christ in our midst, of the sacred in our everyday life, and of the joy of giving everything back to God in a prayer of thanksgiving. Amen.

² <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/dont-forget-spiritual-side-earth-day>