

NOW THE GREEN BLADE RISES: Being an Easter People in a Good Friday World *A People Reaching Outside the Box*

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

[Peter asked]:

***"If then God gave them the same gift that [God] gave us
when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"***

Acts 11:17

Four weeks ago today we gathered for worship, and the music was louder, the crowd was bigger, our spirits were brighter. In one voice we sang "Alleluia." In many voices we said to each other, "Happy Easter." Four weeks ago, and here we are today, still at it. From ancient times Christians agreed that we should give not one Sunday but seven weeks – the great 50 day feast – to celebrating Easter.

I'm really glad we have that long. The great surprise of resurrection demands as long a celebration as we can muster. But more important, after the party has settled down a bit, after the great early fun of it and some have gone home, and we've turned the music down, we need some time to talk. We could use some time to reflect on the implications of Easter, to trace how far the effects of this resurrection reality ripple outward. We could use some time to get a better sense of where this thing is leading.

We'd better. Jesus is loose in the world and he is bound to be up to something. In his original ministry Jesus was a kind of earthquake. In his humanity the divine upheaval was moving things, shaking things awake, discombobulating old and tired ways of being and doing. And after Jesus died – SURPRISE! – God raised Jesus from the dead and his earthquake ministry continued to shake things up in the strangest of people and in the oddest of places. It still does. Things still get shook up, threatened and blown apart because Jesus is risen and is loose in the world. Today, we listen to one of the first great upheavals that the risen, earthquake Jesus caused. As our text from Acts begins, the curtain rises on a roomful of early followers of Jesus fighting and arguing with each other. Imagine that – Christians fighting and arguing with each other.

Anyway, people at this meeting are very, VERY angry with Peter. They are angry because he has done a renegade baptism of people who are supposedly unqualified to be followers of Jesus.

At the time, the Jesus movement was a movement *within* Judaism. And it was expected that those who follow in the way of Jesus should also follow Jewish law and practice. However, the whole sweep of the book of Acts shows how the Jesus movement moved from being a sect within Judaism to a movement that would welcome anyone and everyone, even non-Jews, who desired to follow in the way of Jesus. Our story today is an important turning point in how that transformation took place.

The people at the meeting were angry with Peter because he had done things forbidden by Jewish law and practice. It was clearly understood that to be one of God's people you must agree to obey certain Jewish rules. One of them was: if you're a man you have to be circumcised. And another was: if you are male or female, certain foods are forbidden. Jesus was always a practicing Jew and as far as we know he did or said nothing to change Jewish law. In fact, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus even said "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) But Peter, in our story today, went to some people who did not meet the criteria and welcomed them all the way in. He baptized them, and worse, he had joined them in eating their forbidden food.

The people at the meeting are angry and they want Peter to repeal his decision and his actions. We are familiar with this process today. Do something for justice, do something more inclusive and welcoming, do something that gives more people access to the means of life, and you get a backlash: REPEAL! Our congress finally passed an important, But by no means perfect, piece of health care reform that gives many, many more people access to health care, and all we've been hearing lately is "Repeal! Repeal! Repeal!" I think we'll be hearing that refrain a lot this election year!

But please notice that the repeal effort was not centered in the baptism, in the religious, ritual act. The critics did not ask "Why did you baptize them?" The repeal effort was centered in the social aspect of the controversy. The critics asked, "For God's sake Peter, 'Why did you eat with them?'" That's the part of this scandal that galled so many in the early Christian movement. Jewish law had chapter and verse saying, "Don't!" And Peter did, as if keeping the law and maintaining purity meant nothing to him, as if the sacred scriptures meant nothing to him.

I really don't blame those people for being upset. Neither did Peter. "Look," he says, "this wasn't my idea. You think I thought this up? But listen," he says, "to the story of my experience." And he tells them the story...

He'd been minding his own business in a town called Joppa. Joppa. Now here's a Bible trivia question for you: Can anyone recall another Bible story with that town in it? Joppa is where Jonah went to escape God's call to go and preach to the sinful, unclean people in Nineveh.

And here's another Bible trivia question for you: Can anyone give the name of Peter's father? It is Jonah. Well, to be honest, that is at least half right. Matthew's gospel says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!" (Matthew 16:17) But John's gospel says "Simon son of John." (John 1:42) I don't know who is right, but I'm going with Matthew to make a point today. If Jonah happens to be the name of Simon Peter's daddy, then what we have here is a son of Jonah in Joppa once more.

Peter's up on the rooftop devoutly saying his prayers – probably half asleep – when he falls into a dream. He sees a kind of tablecloth lowering down from the sky like an upside-down parachute filled with food for him. He thinks, "Mmmm, food!" But then it opens up and he sees frogs, lizards, snakes, exotic birds, buzzards, and PIGS! "Get up and eat," says the Voice. "No way, it's all nasty," says Peter. "My Jewish law (my Bible) calls it nasty, daddy called it nasty, mamma called it nasty, I don't eat nasty." The Voice replies, "If God makes it clean, don't call it nasty."

And up goes the cloth and down it comes again. Same conversation. "Eat," says the Voice. "But it's nasty!" says Peter. And again the Voice replies, "Not if God calls it clean." And if that weren't enough, for a third time it goes up and it comes down again. This is like dinner in our house. It is the voice as Papa or Daddy trying to get Gideon to eat something other than the ten things, and no more, that he has decided he will eat.

Peter is awakened by a knock on the door. "It is for you, Peter," says the Spirit. "I sent them. Go where they take you and try not to screw it up with your religiously narrow scruples." Downstairs Peter finds three men. Everyone of them are Gentiles. "Nasty!" thinks Peter. These men were Romans. Think Italians: nice suits, bold gold jewelry, dark sunglasses, and talk with their hands. "Our employer wants you to come with us," they say. Peter thinks, "Definitely not Kosher." But the Spirit has spoken and according to the instructions, he is not to make distinction between them and us.

They take Peter to the national headquarters of the Roman Empire in the area, a place called Caesarea, into the house of a career military officer named Cornelius. The house is crammed with the whole big, Italian family, including the cousins. He walks into a room full of Italians all looking at him. Of course, the house smells of garlic. And Peter, with a typical reaction to that which is strange and different, says "I shouldn't be here." "Well, an angel has been here," says Cornelius. "And the angel said you should be here and talk with us. Talk with us, please."

So Cornelius says what he knows, so Peter now starts to say what he knows. He begins to speak of Jesus. But he hardly gets started. He has only begun to speak when the Spirit interrupts and takes over, falling on the Italians with the same power that fell on Pentecost. This was a Pentecost redo, but this time with people who didn't keep the Jewish or biblical law.

Most portrayals of Peter depict him as bald. And legend has it that it was because this kind of thing kept happening to him and he just couldn't stop scratching his head. The history of the Spirit is largely the story of community of the risen Jesus – the Church – being baffled by the blowing down of walls, the forging of unforeseen family and the radical revision of old scripts. Old Peter scratched his balding head and went to the Jesus followers back in Jerusalem saying, "Who was I to hinder God?"

On one level the story tells us that the church of the risen Jesus has no business being, in any sense, exclusive. The only condition for belonging here is to be a total mess, to be completely human, or in biblical terms, a sinner. This is the church: we are a collection of humans, with all our faults and foibles, with all our stories and experiences, a land of misfit toys, all amazed by how loved we are by a gracious God, devoted to living that gracious love like Jesus, and willing to share that gracious love with the world. So all of those labels that the world is so busy manufacturing and perpetuating – poor and rich, white collar and blue collar, righteous and wicked, young and old, liberal and conservative, female and male, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and straight, abled and disabled, immigrant and citizen, educated and uneducated, black, white, brown, yellow, you name it, none of it has any business separating us, for CHRIST IS RISEN, CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED and the only operative word for humans and sinners alike is grace, amazing grace. The story of what happened at Cornelius's house is the story of the church learning what it means to be a people reaching beyond the box.

At an even deeper level, the nascent church was learning that the Still Speaking God, discovered again and again in the risen Jesus, revises old scripts. Even some scripts written on the pages of sacred scripture, the risen Jesus was, and is, quite big enough and free enough to revise. Now, that can sound kind of scary, can't it? It can sound kind of dangerous! And it is because if we are not held to the letter of what is written, we could make mistakes, we could go too far, we could be too free and too inclusive and...and... And that seems to be what the Jesus followers in Jerusalem, who were very angry at Peter, were so worried about. It is understandable, and some Christians still worry about it too, even some of us here at Cross Creek.

But here it is in our expanded Bible, what we call the Christian scriptures, or New Testament, a story that an ongoing experience with the risen Jesus can abrogate paragraphs of scripture, can teach us to read the Bible in radically new ways, in keeping with God's demand for love and justice. And if the risen Jesus can revise that script, what other old scripts – assumptions we've always held, behaviors we've always repeated – is the risen Christ calling us to let go of and replace with new assumptions and new behaviors?

We are like Peter, more than we might care to admit, sitting on our rooftop saying our prayers and, if truth be told, half asleep. We don't intend to be exclusive. We don't intend to be uncaring. We don't intend to be unconcerned people. We've been mostly boxed in by a sad failure of imagination. Like Peter, we could stand to be shaken by strange new dreams. We could stand for the Spirit to blow new winds into our sails and push us out of our passive, comfort zones.

Recently, I came across a peculiar prayer that someone prayed long ago in a Scottish church: "Lord, we pray that we never find ourselves in battle on foreign soil. But if we do, and if our maps do not match the terrain, help us to believe the terrain." Or, as Peter put it to the Jesus followers in Jerusalem, fresh back from the terrain that didn't match his maps, "Who was I to hinder God?"

Then, out of the stunned silence, the meeting turned doxological: "They glorified God." So do we. For the unhindered God, for the risen Christ who outruns us and continues to earthquake among us, for the Spirit who still calls from new terrain, we give glory to our Gracious, Living, Loving God, not out of fear, but out of sheer, head-scratching awe.

This week, in our liturgy writing team, Janice Kemp shared a wonderful poem with us written by a friend of hers. You'll find it on the front of the bulletin, but I also thought it was a fitting ending to this morning's prompting. And in keeping with the tradition of Jesus, may her words and vision help shake things up among us as we seek to be an Easter people in a Good Friday world:

"Living God," we say,
even as we bury you
deep within the leaves
of sacred texts, as if
you suddenly stopped speaking
when the canon was closed.

"Living God," we pray,
even as we confine
you in a box—the ever
present vault of "I believe..."
"*This*," we say, "I believe!
But *only* this—no more."

"Living God," we pray,
even as we block our minds
to change, to things that challenge
and threaten your release
from printed pages and cultural cages
in which we'd have you stay.

"Living God," we say,
even as we turn away
from folks to whom our minds
and doors are barricaded.
To let you out—to let *them* in—
our hearts would have to melt.

Great Living God—we *pay*
with bound-up, boxed-in lives
for our closed-mindedness.
Help us to think outside the box.
Help us to live without the locks
that separate "us" from "them"
—us from you.

— "God in a Box" by Rev. Dr. B. Kathleen Fannin, October 22, 1997

Amen.