

Psalm 23
Acts 4:5-12
“On Trial for Easter”

April 22, 2018
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I've been listening in this week, trying to pay more attention than usual. To pay attention in the world is to live patiently, but to live patiently is not to sit on your thumbs, just waiting for someone else to make the next move. Like a child sitting in the backseat of the family station wagon who keeps asking, “Are we there yet?” And dad keeps responding, “Not yet. Just be patient.” Patience is not to sit passively, helplessly, with nothing to do. No, patience, which comes from the same root as the word *passion*, and is also contained in the word *compassion*, means to live in the world with your eyes wide open to the needs and sufferings of others. With your hands and feet in ready position, to be patient is to expect that any minute everything could change, and will change, for the better. That just when we think we've still got miles to go, we look up and we're there. To be patient is to feel within yourself a deep sense of passionate purpose, and to have the will not to rush ahead, not to act too quickly, but to take the time to observe, to watch, and to discern that place where, in the words of Frederick Buechner, your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. I don't know where that place is for you, or who lives in that place. If we went around the room and everyone gave an answer to the question, “Where does your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?” that could make for a good sermon. I wouldn't have to preach. I could just sit down and listen to you and then we could go out together to that place. It might take a while, getting to that place. We rarely arrive in places of great gladness all at once. We hardly ever meet the deepest hungers of the world overnight.

Scripture records that after Jesus had been raised from the dead, he appeared to his disciples and told them to go and wait in Jerusalem, that he would send the Holy Spirit to them in Jerusalem. “And the Holy Spirit will come and be your advocate.” Because now that you have seen the resurrection of the dead, you can't just sit around at home dusting the shelves. You must go outside and give witness to what you have seen. You must show what is now possible. But make no mistake, you won't want to do it, and it will require patience to do it anyway. You won't want to step into the darkness with your little light to shine. You won't want to step into the masses of hunger with your little bread to offer. You

won't want to step into battle with your little word of peace as your only weapon. Because it won't feel like enough, and the world will laugh at you, and crucify you, and bury you a fool. So, I am sending you the Holy Spirit to be your advocate, to help you speak the truth when no one wants to hear it, to help you pay attention and see what others cannot, or will not. It's the same Spirit that went with me into the grave to wait out death. You go to Jerusalem and wait for it.

So, Peter and John are in Jerusalem. It's been more than 3 days—some 8 or 9 weeks—since Jesus has been raised and since the Spirit has been given, and just yesterday they were walking through the city on their way to worship when they came across a crippled beggar sitting by the gate leading up to the temple. He had sat there every day, in the same spot, ever since he was old enough to sit up. Having been born in his condition, no one believed there was anything anyone could do for him except carry him into the city every day and prop him up with his little tin cup in the same spot. God must have made him a cripple to punish his parents for some evil they did earlier in life, and if God wanted him that way then what could anyone do to change it. That's when Peter and John come along.

“Please sirs, do you have a penny for the poor?”

“A penny for the poor?” Peter tells the man. “Even if I did have a penny, why would I give you only what I can afford? What is there in that?”

And looking at the man intently, which means, seeing him not only for who he is but also for who he can become, Peter tells him, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

We don't know if Peter actually thinks the man can, or will. We don't know if the man laughs at the incredulity of Peter's command. All we're told is that the man does get up and walk, leaps actually. And the next day Peter and John are arrested and brought before the authorities to give an explanation for what happened.

“By what power or by what name did you do this?”

It's not so much that they want to know how they did it as it is that they want to know who gave them permission to do it. “For all these years, this man has never been able to walk. And as far as we're concerned, it's because that's the way God wanted it. Now you come along and make him walk. Are you greater than God?”

This is the question we have to answer on this third Sunday of Easter. Did you notice I didn't say on this third Sunday *after* Easter? Because Easter isn't over. Despite the fact that the pews are emptier now, and all the lilies and hyacinths have withered, the people of God are being put on trial today for Easter and how it is that we can make the lame walk again.

"Where did you get the power to do that?"

"It's simple," says Peter, "we called upon the name of Jesus, the one whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead." Peter might as well be saying to them, "Don't you know what time of year it is? You know that when it's winter, the snow will fall, and when it's September the children will be going back to school. You know that in the spring the flowers will return. How do you not know that when it's Easter, the dead will live and the lame will walk again?"

Listen, look, pay attention my friends. Peter stands on trial today as a witness for all who would live again, because he stands on trial for all who have been condemned. "I have done this in the name of Jesus of Nazareth," he tells the jury, "the one who was condemned."

"Condemned by who?" the jury asks. "Not by us."

"Yes. Condemned by you," Peter testifies. "And condemned by me. When I betrayed him, when I would not speak up for the poor and innocent, when I said I did not know him, I condemned Jesus. But I will not do it a second time. I will not betray and condemn and kill Jesus again by now saying that this poor, innocent, cripple of a man deserves to be crippled. That he is the way he is because God doesn't love him. That's what we said about Jesus. He tried to tell us that God loves us all, and we told him that God would never love him. We spit in his face. We turned him out. We hung him on a cross. You and me. But not again. Not this time. For how can we say that anyone should be condemned when the One whom we condemned has now come back to us to love and forgive us?"

Peter stands on trial today for Easter and as a warning sign that we should be careful not to hate or condemn anyone ever, because we never know when the very people we stick at the roadside or stuff into tombs to forget about—the very people we call dead—we never know when they'll come back to us, asking to make peace. And when they do, we don't want to have to hang our heads in shame.

I'll tell you that in my efforts to try and pay better attention lately, I went with Lillian and Rowan to Gettysburg National Park last week. (Moira couldn't go because she had to stay home and work, so I went alone with the two kids. 5 days without me and the kids—Moira didn't seem to mind.) Neither I nor Lillian nor Rowan had ever been to Gettysburg before and naturally they had some questions about the place and what it was all about. I told them a bit about civil war, about the north and the south, and slavery, and at one point, Rowan asked, "Will people be fighting there today?" I told him what I think he wanted to know, which was that there would be no shooting or canon fire to have to worry about.

"No, no," I assured him, "people aren't fighting anymore. The civil war was over a long time ago."

After going through the museum, we drove along some of the battlefields, getting out here and there to take a closer look. There were monuments everywhere, inscribed with the names of various states—mostly northern states—and some with the names of people who fought and died there. After leaving the park, we went into town to see what Gettysburg is like today. There were some lovely shops and restaurants to check out and at one point we came across what looked like another monument, only it wasn't made of stone or marble and it wasn't on any battlefield. It was on the sidewalk. It was a poster board pinned to a piece of wood and on the poster was a picture of a rifle that had been twisted up so that it would not shoot again. At the bottom of the poster was the name, Alabama, the date 2018, and the words, "never again."

Will people be fighting there today? No, people aren't fighting anymore. But you and I know that's not entirely true. And so there's still a need to make posters. There's still a need for Easter. There's still a need to call out condemnation and call forth peace. There's still a need for Jesus and for his story to be told. And so there's still a need for you and me.