

Where Easter Gets Real

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Acts 2:14a, 22-36

"But Peter..." The first two words of today's Scripture text from Acts say a lot. "But Peter." Now, in our Third Church context, the name Peter conjures images and sounds of glorious Easter music, energetic youth musicals, deep spirituality, and worship integrity. (Thank you, Peter DuBois!).

Of course, in the New Testament context, it's a little different. We're talking about Simon Peter, the fisherman. The one who Jesus first saw out on the lakeshore, fumbling with his fishing nets. And although the text doesn't say it, I quite imagine he threw in a few colorful words as he was unable to catch a single fish – until Jesus told him to take his boat out to deep water. Remember what happened then? Peter caught so many fish that his nets broke and his boat almost sank. What was it Jesus had said that day? "Don't be afraid, Peter, from now on you'll catch people." So Peter left his family and his livelihood to follow Jesus. Despite all that, he never quite got what Jesus was about.

But Peter... He was the one who was always front and center wherever the disciples were concerned. Whenever the Gospels list the twelve disciples, Peter is always first. When it's Jesus' inner circle of three – it's always Peter, James and John. Never John, Peter, and James, or James, John, and Peter. It's Peter, James, and John. And despite that, he never quite got what Jesus about.

But Peter... According to the gospels, Peter had the inside view to every special occasion. When Jesus raised a synagogue leader's daughter from the dead, Peter was there. When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, Peter was there. When Jesus taught, Peter was there. He even was one of the ones Jesus sent ahead to prepare the last supper.

And despite all that, Peter never quite got it. He was the one who constantly questioned, incessantly objected, annoyingly challenged. He acted impulsively, leaping into the sea, trying to walk on water, and all the while never quite got what it was that Jesus was up to. He could never quite live up to the expectations that Jesus had for him.

But Peter... And then there was the night he witnessed Jesus' agony and arrest in Gethsemane. It wasn't just that he'd failed to speak up that night in the high priest's courtyard; it was worse. It was that he actually denied following Jesus. Three times, no less. We know the story of Peter's despair at abandoning his beloved Lord. The night tears of bitterness drenched his heart, drowned his soul, and

destroyed his spirit. The night the sound of the cock crowed over and over and over again. The night that that Peter was silent.

“But Peter.” Those two little words at the beginning of today’s Scripture text from Acts say all that – impulsivity and hesitance and bravado and cowardice all at once. “But Peter.” Flawed, outspoken, and oh, so human, like us. It’s ironic, isn’t it, that this pre-Easter Peter is the same one who now post-Easter raises his voice before the multitudes and says, “God raised Jesus up and broke death’s power.” “But Peter.” And that gives me great hope.

Recently, I attended a beautiful wedding. And every time I go to a marriage ceremony, or officiate at one, or plan one with a couple, I think of the wise words of that great theologian named Oprah. “It’s not about the wedding,” because the day after the ceremony is when that covenant gets really real.

I think it’s not so different for Easter, I think. Today is the second Sunday of Easter. In the ministerial world, it’s sometimes called “Low Sunday.” An anti-climax to the glory of Easter. We have finished all of the ham leftovers, eaten all our Easter candy; we have put away our Easter baskets, and cleaned up the strands of Easter grass that found their way into all the corners of the house. And for the record, I would like to challenge that notion of Low Sunday, of Easter being over, and do away with it entirely.

Look at the evidence, right here in front of us. A commissioning class of eight young people – Liam, Michael, Kelly, Danielle, Harrison, Maisie, Miranda, and Hannah. Eight young people with hopes and fears and faith and doubt all at the same time. And eight faith partners who just like them have hopes and fears and faith and doubt all at the same time. Easter is not over, not by a long shot. This is where Easter gets real – where people of faith are flawed and impulsive and unsure and even fail sometimes, just like Peter, and yet in that Easter faith step forward and live and even speak the claim that God is up to something that’s stronger than death. That God goes beyond “out of the box” thinking to “out of the tomb” thinking.

Lord knows we need Easter voices to challenge what’s dying in our own community.

And the good news is that I heard Easter voices this week in Raleigh, North Carolina. A community delegation led by Third Church and Urban Presbyterians Together traveled there to learn how their community brought life to a city and school system that 30 years ago was dying – dying because of increasing racial segregation and high concentrations of poverty. Sounds achingly familiar.

We were eleven – some of us religious types (including Beth Laidlaw, Don Pryor, Corni Labrum, and John Thomas), some of us not. We went to see if we could learn anything from their experience of

economic integration to improve educational achievement. We went to see what we could bring back and share in Rochester. We did learn things. A lot. We came away with questions, too. And we came away with a resolve that we need to revive justice in the city. As I put in a Facebook post a couple of days ago, our heads are spinning, in a really good way. And we will be sifting and sorting out our insights and ideas into something cogent and inviting conversation with them everywhere we can – city and suburb alike. Stay tuned for much, much more.

Near as I can tell, collectively we talked to and heard from at least 75 different people – from civil rights leaders to elected officials to administrators to members of the media to students and parents and policy analysts and business leaders and community activists. We listened to all of them tell their shared story. Their story was one of triumphs and setbacks, of tension and unity, and the messiness of finding a common goal. And in the middle of all of that we heard voices that, to me at least, sounded like Easter voices. Because I believe God’s tomb-busting power is not limited to self-identified Christians, whether they were religious or not, they were voices of new life.

We heard the voice of people who grew up in segregated schools, so grateful that now their children didn’t have to. We heard how a sense of community began to take shape, a sense of the common good, as people began to think beyond “my house and my street” and made conscious sacrifices as they realized “it’s not just about me.”

And we heard the voice of one white woman who grew up in a family that was, in her words, “dead-set against integration.” She said told us, “When I first saw an African American in class, I thought I went to hell and back. But then I realized, I liked it.”

We heard from other ordinary parents who became community activists when a few years ago, threats of re-segregation came perilously close. We heard how faith communities, businesses, the educational community, and civil rights organizations came together for the cause of justice and the greater good.

We heard the compelling story of a man who grew up in the projects, and when assigned to a school away from his neighborhood, was trained by his own family and his own community in the projects that he had something to give to those who seemingly had everything. He wasn’t “at risk,” he was “at promise.”

We sat at the feet of civil rights leaders, legends in their context, who lifted their voices and said “separate is not equal.” We learned how leaders in faith communities brought together churches, temples, and mosques, black, brown, and white, to commit themselves to deep engagement and social justice.

And we saw the grief in their faces when they heard that in Rochester, the graduation rate of African American males is only 9%. And after three short, yet jam-packed days, we came away knowing we have partners in Raleigh who genuinely care about and are genuinely invested in the community of Rochester. They tell us we have a long road ahead of us – real, lasting change will take 15 to 20 years. And they tell us that if they hadn't taken big and bold steps 20 years ago, they would be in the same boat.

We will need every ounce of Easter faith we have for us to commit to the long haul. Easter life is risky, and it's also joyful. Walter Brueggemann writes, "Practicing Easter life continues to be risky because it contradicts the deathly commitments of our world -- one devoured by greed, anxiety, and violence. A practice of Easter life continues also to be one of joy, as attested to by contemporary witnesses who are freed of ancient fears and live by Jesus' command that we "love one another."

The first verse of Hymn 421 in our hymn book says: "The church of Christ in every age, beset by change but spirit led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead."

Scripture's witness to the life of Simon Peter gives me hope, for I imagine that night he denied Jesus, it felt like his soul died right along with Jesus until he experienced the empty tomb for himself. And he, too was Eastered. May we, too, be Eastered, as we pray a portion of one of Brueggemann's Easter prayers:

*O God, "look upon us in our deep need,
mark the wounds of our brothers and sisters just here,
notice the turmoil in our lives, and the lives of our families,
credit the incongruity of the rich and the poor in our very city,
and the staggering injustices abroad in our land...*

*You defeater of death, whose power could not hold you,
come in your Easter,
come in your sweeping victory,
come in your glorious new life.*

*Easter us,
salve wounds,
break injustice,
bring peace,
guarantee neighbor,*

Easter us in joy and strength.

Amen.