

## SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 24, 2022

ACTS 5:27-32 | PSALM 118:14-29 | REVELATION 1:4-8 | JOHN  
20:19-31

This Easter season, we're going to be hearing some stories from Acts of the Apostles. As a reminder, Acts is written by St. Luke. Luke's gospel is the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. And Acts is the story of the risen Jesus's continuing presence in the life of the early church. Which is why we hear from Acts during Easter. So we're dealing with questions like *How does this community of believers exist in the world? How does the good news about Jesus spread? How does the resurrection change how we live?*

And you're going to notice that Luke has a real interest in geography, where these stories take place. For Luke, setting isn't just background, it's content. The setting is the message. Today's reading from Acts is a good example. This is a story about John and Peter preaching about Jesus shortly after the resurrection. And there doesn't seem to be a whole lot going on in what you heard. But notice where this is all happening. It's happening in Jerusalem. In Luke's story, Jerusalem is symbolically important for two reasons. The first is that Jerusalem is the city that crucifies Jesus. And the second is that it is where the Holy Spirit calls these apostles to preach the good news first.

Put those together, and you get a dramatic story. The first place the church is called to go to is the place that killed Jesus. You notice how Peter explains who Jesus is to the religious leaders. Not as "a man I knew." Or as "a teacher some other people knew." But as "the man that you had killed." When Peter invites these men to repent, to turn, and find their salvation in Jesus, he's not talking about some theoretical person they've never heard of. Maybe that would be the case in Damascus. But it lands different in Jerusalem. He's telling them that their salvation is going to be found in and through their victim.<sup>1</sup> If you want to find redemption and wholeness, you are going to find it in those you seek to cut off. Turning to Jesus is going to involve turning to our victims.

It's important to pause here and make sure we get this exactly right. Because there's an exceedingly foolish way to interpret this. And that's to say that the Jews in Jerusalem who killed Jesus, and they need to repent of their ways and get right with God. The problem with this, in addition to being theologically incoherent and based on an impossibly shallow reading of Luke's passion narrative, is that it only serves to create a new set of victims. By trying to extricate ourselves from any responsibility (i.e., this other group of people is responsible), we end up becoming responsible for

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<sup>1</sup> There's a good discussion of this in the first chapter of Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Pilgrim Press, 2002).

the suffering of others in the process. When we seek to identify others as the sole perpetrators of evil, we often end up making them our victims. We'll come back to that later on.

The better way to read this is to ask what it says to us. Most weeks, we begin worship by confessing our sins. And when we do that, we're acknowledging that our actions or lack of action can harm others. When we confess our sins, we're not just confessing to victimless crimes. We didn't just jaywalk a bunch last week. Our actions affect others. We create victims. And "victims" might sound dramatic, but it isn't meant to be. There are other people, living creatures, and communities that bear the negative consequences of our choices and actions in life.

And oftentimes our innate instinct is to flee from or avoid the people that we've hurt. Maybe because they remind us of a part of ourselves we'd rather not think about. Maybe we feel a sense of guilt when we're around them. Or it could be that we're afraid that they could hurt us, too. We're afraid that our victims might turn into perpetrators if given the chance. They might get back at us.

And this is why the victimhood of Jesus is so unique. This was captured well in an old Saturday Night Live sketch where the Easter story is reimaged as a Quentin Tarantino film. Jesus rises from the dead and sets off on a donkey to get revenge on everyone who wronged him during the passion narrative. It's a joke. But it's a joke that gets the point.

Because even though he bears the wounds of his crucifixion, the stigmata of his victimhood, the risen Jesus never seeks revenge or leverages the past or resorts to the same tactics as those around him. Jesus never responds in kind. To use Rene Girard's phrase, Jesus is the "pure victim."<sup>2</sup> The victim who refuses to become a perpetrator. The victim who stops the cycles of violence that we create. When the risen Jesus encounters people who failed him during his passion, what does he do? We heard in today's gospel reading from John. He prays for their peace. He forgives their sins. He gives them his Spirit. He invites them to belief and trust. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

St. Peter invites the religious leaders in Jerusalem and us to turn to Jesus not because he seeks retribution, but because the risen Jesus still promises us life. Yes, Jesus reveals our pasts. Peter of all people knows that. But he does so not to cause us harm or guilt but to invite us into a different future.

And that should give us the courage to look at our other victims, too. To see our salvation as bound up with those who are cast aside. There's been an awful lot in the news recently about trying to get to salvation by getting rid of people. Arguments about whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be considered genocide or not. Similar legal parsing of the oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province.

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<sup>2</sup> I think this is in Girard's *The Scapegoat* (1989). But the point here is that Jesus absorbs and rejects the scapegoating mechanism that humans use that only creates more violence.

Debates over banning conversion “therapy” in the UK. The return of firing squads in the American criminal justice system. They’re all different. But deep down, they’re really about a common belief that we could make the world’s problems go away if we only got rid of certain people.

It's obviously wrong. But St. Luke pushes it a step further and says that whenever we try to bring people together by pushing someone else away, whenever we say that we have no use for certain people, we are—like the religious leaders in this story—pushing away God’s relentless gift. Whenever we try to find fullness of life by drawing a line between ourselves and other people, God is always on the other side of that line.

That’s why Peter’s invitation still has meaning for us today. Because we still try to find salvation by creating new victims. And yet, the risen Christ is always nearest to those we seek to distance ourselves from. The marginalized. The outcast. The vulnerable. And so to be in relationship with the risen Christ means constantly turning back to those we have harmed. There is no such thing as a “victimless” resurrection.

For as Peter sums it up, God has exalted Jesus not to cause us shame and guilt, but to give us the gift of repentance. And what a gift it is. New perspectives. New identities. New relationships. New life together in the wounded and risen body of Christ.

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