

“THANK GOD FOR PETER”
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43
Easter Sunday – April 16, 2006
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I'm not sure Peter thought it was good news at first. Imagine yourself in Peter's shoes. On Thursday night at supper, in the fullness of that moment, he had promised that he would go with Jesus anywhere, even to the grave. He loved Jesus. He truly wanted to follow in his steps. But later that night, fear overtook his love; and not once, but three times he denied not just that he was one of Jesus' followers, but that he had ever known the rabbi of Nazareth.

Can you imagine what that felt like? Can you taste the bitterness in Peter's soul as from a safe distance he watched his beloved master stagger through the streets, beaten, bloody, and alone, then saw him lifted up and hanging from the cross? I think Peter was, at some deep level, relieved when Jesus died, hoping that his—Peter's—sin died as well on that cross. He would never again have to look at Jesus' face, and see in Jesus' eyes the knowledge of his betrayal.

So when the women came back Easter morning and reported what they had seen and heard, I can just see Peter's face going white—joy, shame, fear warring within him. Jesus was alive, and he said he would meet them all. . .oh, and especially you, Peter; he said specifically he would meet you in Galilee.. How could this be? What did it mean? And why, oh why, had Jesus singled him out?

Nothing more is told us about Peter's first meeting with the risen Christ, but this we do know: We know that something happened when Peter met his Risen Lord. And we know that that something turned the wavering, often obtuse, timid disciple into Peter, the super-apostle, Peter who became, in fact, the foundation of the church—open, articulate, faithful, and courageous. What a change. Peter met the Risen Christ as a vulnerable, conflicted man, a man in whom sin warred with goodness, and strength with weakness—a man very much like most of us; and somehow, when Peter looked in the face of the Risen One, he was transformed. He was made new. He became Peter “the rock,” the one in whose strength the newly formed church would find its spiritual beginning, the rock on which the church has stood, so far, through two millennia.

So what changed Peter? I believe that when the Risen Christ met up with him, Peter was initially terrified of rejection—or worse, some sort of punishment for his betrayal; and then, after that, there was a moment when he thought maybe he had gotten away with it, that somehow this new Jesus did not know what he had done. But then Peter looked again into the transformed face of his beloved master, and he saw that Christ did know—the savior of the world knew it all—but still accepted and still loved. At that moment, something new burst forth in Peter's heart, a sense of safety so profound that it left no room for fear. He was known and he was loved, valued beyond measure, valued beyond measuring despite every mean and miserable thing he had ever done. He would never be the same again.

The story could have been told differently, don't you see. If we follow the story of Christ's passion, we are to notice that systematically everyone deserts, or turns against, or betrays Jesus. Peter is picked out for us explicitly as the worst of these in all four gospels. Not once but three times he denied his beloved teacher. So; now ask the questions: "Who is the resurrection for? What are the limits of the community of God's beloved ones?" See that if God had meant to insert any qualifiers to that community, it is Peter who would have stood beyond the pale. If God had wanted to tell us: this much I can accept; these are the rules for inclusion into those I hold to me, and these are the ones who lie outside, then it is Peter who would have been made the example of separation.

In fact, Peter is made an example for us, but not an example of separation. The risen Christ deliberately sought out Peter, and in that gracious act, we are brought to see that prior to any action or word of faith on our part, God accepts us. No matter what we've done. No matter what we've believed. No matter what we've feared or coveted or failed to do. God accepts us. Peter is the outlier case to demonstrate that there are absolutely no limits, no qualifiers to God's love. God knows every broken, battered, doubtful, or fearful inch of the landscape of our hearts. Nothing is hidden. Not Peter's sin. Not ours. And the good news of this day is that the resurrection is for us just as it was for Peter. The resurrection is our reassurance that we are always—no matter what—loved and held dear and valued beyond measure. We are safe, absolutely safe, in God. Or in the particular language of Christianity, we have been saved.

Yes, I said the "S" word. Saved, salvation, savior. I know those words give some of you palpitations; and others of you are now eyeing the nearest exit, wondering if you can get out of here without anyone noticing. We are hesitant in the liberal church to use "salvation" language; we've given that language and the right to define the meaning of those words over to conservative Christians. Well, I want them back. I want them back for myself and for all of us. And I would suggest to you all that, from my theological perspective at least, what it means to be saved is simply that we are safe with God. Nothing we can do—not even abandoning, betraying, denying, killing God's son—will cause God to let us go. Nothing. We are safe with God. In fact, we have always been safe with God; but like Peter, how many of us know it? How many of us allow that knowledge to seep deep into our souls and change us? What is difficult about salvation is not God's end of things. The question is not whether God's love can stand wide enough and deep enough to hold us all safe. The question in the salvation equation is whether we will allow ourselves to know it, and accept it for the gift it is. We are skeptical in the face of God's abundant grace. In fact, ever since the very early days of the church, there have been those who would trivialize God's great gift by holding it to themselves, by qualifying that which God has left so profoundly unqualified.

Christ died alone, we are told, when all had forsaken him, fled him, denied him, betrayed him. Everyone. And if the resurrection came as gift only to those who earned it, believed it, deserved it, then it has come to no one at all. That's the point. The power of the resurrection, the center of our faith, is that God's love is stronger always than our ability to flee, deny, betray, even ignore it. We are all safe with God, and therefore we are all saved by God.

So what is the meaning of our faith, you might ask? If our particular faith is not our ticket to

salvation, then why does it matter that we come to church ? Or that we celebrate this Easter day?

The answer to that question is knowledge. Every Easter we are told again to what lengths our God has gone to assure us absolutely that we are God's, known and beloved for all our frailty. Every Easter, we are invited to open our hearts just a little wider—or maybe a lot wider—so that the reality that we are safe—ultimately completely safe—will flood our souls, and we will be transformed. Like Peter. And after him, the other disciples. Like the other first Christians and thousands upon thousands since. That great preacher and prophet of our age, William Sloane Coffin, was fond of saying that hate is not the opposite of love; instead it is fear that is love's opposite. Perfect love casts out fear. When we understand there is nothing more powerful than God's love, and we stand always safe in God's embrace, then our hearts, too, like Peter's, will burst wide open; and we, like him, will find the courage to love, the courage to change, the courage to stand for and with God's people everywhere. Imagine it: living without fear; living so secure that we care less for things and more for justice; living so joyfully that generosity is become our will and our delight. That's what we get in the resurrection: the possibility that as we come to believe this heroic story of God's love, we might find born in ourselves the capability to live heroically in response.

We are safe with God, loved with a strenuous unyielding love that will not ever let us go. So sing your "Alleluias" today and every day, and live life differently because of it. We are not the exclusive members of the salvation club, but we are those who have seen and heard and been touched by God's Good News to all the earth. So let your hearts be glad. On this Easter day, may the reality of God's abiding love for you lodge deep in your heart, and change you: make you loving and courageous, faithful and strong. Alleluia. Thanks be to God. Amen.