

Sand or Stone?

Spring is a time of wonder and delight. Silence gives way to the sound of singing birds. Formerly cold and dry nostrils are filled with the smell of grills again in use. Eyes see barren trees burst forth with colorful buds, flowers, and leaves. Spring is a time of wonder and delight. It never grows old or trite and I must say Johnstown does spring well. My soul has more than once been aroused by the sight of blooming and flowering trees in Moxham and Ferndale. With it being a time of wonder and delight, spring certainly is a fitting home for the season of Easter.

I mean: Easter too is a wonder and a delight. To be honest, we really can't enter into the flow of today's readings from Scripture until we appreciate this. In those readings, Easter is such a wonder that Peter has to explain what's going on to bewildered people in our reading from Acts. Easter is such a wonder that our reading from 1st John says we have no present way of anticipating or visualizing where it will carry us in the end. Easter is such a wonder that in our reading from Luke Jesus has to open his disciples' minds as to how his death and resurrection were foretold by Scripture all along. To recall a parable of Jesus that makes use of the rhythms of spring, Easter is that itchy-bitsy mustard seed that grows well beyond its inauspicious beginnings to become a safe and secure home for the birds of the air. Like spring itself, Easter too is a wonder and delight.

Think about it. If Easter were not a wonder, there would be no excuse for the ignorance that Peter speaks about in our reading from Acts. Those he addresses found Jesus to be such a mustard seed, such a nothing and a nobody, that they chose a murderer named Barabbas over him. Peter's hearers didn't see Easter coming. They didn't have the foggiest idea that Jesus was the Author of Life; the King of kings and Lord of lords. And Peter wasn't much better.

If Easter were not a wonder, there would be no excuse for Peter's denial and betrayal of Christ in the hours leading up to the cross. And it may just be that Easter remains an unpredictable and unfathomable unknown for some today. If so, their ignorance shall be forgiven. It's why Jesus from the cross prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Easter is such a wonder that we can't anticipate it in word and deed. Until we discover the wonder and the delight of Easter, all we can do is live in ignorance as Peter and his hearers once did and as some still do today. But what about when Easter is out in the open? Do things change then?

It's here where we really enter into dialogue with today's appointed scriptures. Our reading from Luke informs us that once Easter had become a discovered wonder for the first disciples, they were to invite all nations to repent and to enjoy the fresh and never-ending start we have in Jesus. With Christ out of the tomb and forever vindicated by God, the first disciples were to announce that lives lived in Christ are built on stone and lives lived apart from him are built on sand. And sure enough, this is what Peter does in our reading from Acts.

By way of both healing and proclamation, Peter documents the wonder and the delight otherwise known as Easter so his hearers might discover it. And then, having put Easter out in the open for people, Peter wastes no time. With Easter a discovered wonder, he immediately invites his hearers to repent so their sins, the fruit of their prior ignorance, might be wiped out. This is how the rules of engagement change after Easter is out of the bag and out in the open. Once Easter becomes a discovered wonder, there's no longer any excuse for resisting Jesus and his way of faith, hope, and love. Once the wonder and delight of Easter become as real as singing birds, smoking grills, and blooming trees, it's time to repent. It's time to turn in Christ's direction and to follow after him; doing and speaking as he himself would. It's why our reading from 1st John somewhat shockingly says that no one who abides in the crucified and resurrected Christ sins. It's not that we're no longer going to sin and fall short. It's that we're no longer going to water down Christ and his way. It's that we're no longer going to call sin anything other than sin; one of many possible departures from Christ and his way of faith, hope, and love. Once Easter is out in the open, we no longer suffer fools gladly. Once Easter has become as real for us as the marvelous flowering trees of Ferndale Avenue in spring, we no longer trade in the ignorance of the world; instead trading in the wisdom of Christ. This is how things are to change for us when we discover the wonder and the delight of Easter.

Think of it as if you were someone who had closed the door on a bad relationship. One of my favorite breakup songs is "Feel a Whole Letter Better;" first recorded by the Byrds and then later by Tom Petty. Given the huge Tom Petty fan I am, it's surprising I didn't think of it when I was selecting songs for this service. It would have been appropriate. Once we discover the wonder and the delight of Easter, we say to the ignorance

of the world with which we were formerly enraptured and enthralled, “I feel a whole better when you’re gone because Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” But even though I forgot Tom Petty and the Byrds in my initial preparations for this service, I didn’t forget Gloria Gaynor and her song “I Will Survive.” It’s how things are to go once the wonder and the delight of Easter become real for us. Once we know the wonder and the delight of Easter, we know we’ll survive if we say no to the world and yes to Christ. And so, when the ignorance of the world comes knocking, asking for another date, may we say, “Go on now! Go! Walk out the door! Just turn around now! You’re not welcome here anymore.” And believe you me! We do have the opportunity to discover the wonder and the delight of Easter that enables and empowers such words here at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church.

Is Jesus going to appear for us as he once appeared for St. Paul on the way to Damascus? Probably not! Can we go back in time to the empty tomb itself? No, we can’t. But this isn’t necessary. Thousands of years and miles removed from ancient Palestine, we can discover the wonder and the delight of Easter in one another. It’s one of the things I appreciate most about our reading from Acts. Those to whom Peter preaches discover the wonder and the delight of Easter not through one-on-one contact with Christ or the empty tomb, but through exposure to how Christ is rising in Peter and the other disciples. Christ’s powerful healing flows through them and this makes Easter real for others. And though our present-day miracles might not follow the same script, you better believe miracles still abound in the Church.

Here at Mt. Calvary in our confirmation class we have teenagers concerned not about themselves, but about persecuted people much of the world ignores, if the world knows about them at all. Here at Mt. Calvary stimulus dollars are rolling in for the needy rather than for more stuff we don’t need. Here at Mt. Calvary an aged person with many healthcare needs was for a time rescued from inattentive nursing home care by someone who was not a blood relative, but a sister in Christ. Here at Mt. Calvary, there are dedicated volunteers who drive miles to care for the children of Coopersdale or to pick up an item for a sale benefitting our ministry. Here at Mt. Calvary, we’ve got those who will cancel a scheduled trip to see out of town children so they might answer a call to serve Christ and his Church. Make no mistake about it! The wonder and the delight of Easter can be discovered here at Mt. Calvary Lutheran. Christ is rising from the dead all around us in and through each other. With Easter now out in the open, it’s time for only one way and that Christ’s way of faith, hope, and love. Practicing repentance in the process, when the ignorance of the world comes knocking again as it will, asking for another date, may we be therefore be empowered and emboldened to say, “Go on now! Go! Walk out that door! Just turn around now! You’re not welcome here anymore, for in Christ I will do more than survive. I will conquer and triumph; forever enjoying the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

Amen!