

Easter 7 – May 16, 2021  
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
John 17: 6-19

Today is the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter.

It is also the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension, which was Thursday, May 13<sup>th</sup>. 40 days after Easter, Jesus ascended to God leaving his followers, for good this time, but promising to send them a helper, an advocate. They are to go to Jerusalem and wait.

Today is the Sunday preceding the Feast of Pentecost, so their wait will not be too long.

Today is also the last Sunday of the Easter Season. There you have it;  
definitely a transition Sunday, a pivotal Sunday.

The first chapter of Acts tells us a little  
Of what happened with the followers of Jesus  
Those 10 days between the Ascension and Pentecost.  
It tells us about the beginnings of what we now call church,  
And probably has something to say  
About being members of the Body of Christ in the world today.

Have you ever considered how rigorously honest the Bible is?  
It really tells it like it is...  
Doesn't sugar coat our humanness at all.

Look at the Book of Acts.  
As I said, here begins the story of the spirit-filled community,  
Soon to become the story of the Church with a capital C.

But before we get there,  
We have to revisit the story of the Ascension  
AND the story of Judas  
With all of Luke's gory details.

Is that the way you would begin our story?  
However Judas died, it was not pretty.  
It was tragic...  
And there is warning for the followers in that tragic ending.  
And there is work to be done.  
The circle of 12 must be rebuilt.

Then we hear Peter speaking in a way we've not heard before.  
Where is our lying, cowering, brash, foot-in-the-mouth Peter?  
He's speaking with authority and certitude.

Something has happened to Peter;  
Something quite different than happened to Judas.

Was Peter's betrayal of Jesus really any less than that of Judas?

Perhaps, it was even greater,  
If things like degree of betrayal can be weighed.

Peter denied Jesus that night of his arrest.

Judas pointed him out in the garden.  
Guided the soldiers and authorities to him,  
who were probably going to arrest him sooner or later, anyway.

Judas said: "Here he is."

Peter said three times: "I don't know him."

Betrayal of Jesus,

Betrayal of the Gospel, the good news of the risen Christ,  
Comes in all kinds of ways.

Later in Acts, as the honesty of our scripture continues,

We hear about the deception of Ananias and Sapphira,  
The squabble between Peter and Philip  
And the various mobs, academicians, bureaucrats, money grubbers  
Who literally gave the early leaders  
A run for their money, as we say.

The gospel is rejected by many  
And that rejection continues today.

What I want to point out for us though

Is the difference between Judas and Peter.  
Judas is dead.  
Peter is trying to carry on.

They both had betrayed Jesus by word and action.

They both knew what they had done.  
Both were racked with guilt and shame.

Peter must have found forgiveness.

Peter must have come to really know Jesus, to believe Jesus.  
Peter was able to put his sin behind him  
And go on;  
go on stronger, changed, filled with new life and energy and passion.

Judas was not able to go on.

Judas must have have really believed.  
Judas must have been devoid of hope.

The contrast in response moved me to think that

Maybe Judas wasn't there  
The day the scribes and pharisees brought  
the woman caught in adultery to Jesus. (John 8:1-11).

This story comes in the first half of John's Gospel.

I bring it up now because I imagine it had a  
Huge impact on those who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

Do you remember the story?

The scribes and pharisees certainly  
Wanted to shame and punish the woman.  
They also were using her to get at Jesus, to try to trap him.

They shove the woman at Jesus, saying:

“The law of Moses commands us to stone her.  
What do you say?”

Jesus bends down and writes with his fingers on the ground.

He does not sneer at the Pharisees.  
He does not stare them down.  
He does not hold them or the woman in their sin.  
He gives them an opportunity to change and be changed.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his fingers on the ground.

The pharisees keep on badgering Jesus...

Finally, he straightens up and says:  
“Let anyone of you who is without sin,  
Be the first to throw a stone at her.”

And once again he bends down and writes on the ground with his finger.

There are parallels here to an important Hebrew scripture.

Who else writes with their finger?  
Who else also writes twice?

Remember when Moses broke the first tablets of the ten commandments?

He went down from the mountain with them  
and saw the rebelliousness of the people.  
They had made a graven image, a golden calf to worship while he was gone.  
Moses was so angry, he broke the tablets.  
God was angry.

Moses goes back up the mountain to intercede for the people.

Moses has the moxie or whatever we dare call it  
To ask to see God's glory.  
And as the glory of God passes by Moses, God says:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love, forgiving iniquity, and transgression and sin...”

And then God writes again, with God's finger, the second set of commandments.

God writes twice and offers forgiveness.

Back to Jesus and the woman,  
For now, everyone else is gone.

Jesus stands up and looks at the woman,  
Not staring, not accusing, simply looking.  
Jesus says to her: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"  
She answers: "No one sir."  
Jesus says: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

Unfortunately, I have to imagine that many  
Went away with their hard hearts not changed one bit.  
They didn't stay to witness the miracle, the gift, the offer of new life.  
The woman, the woman goes away forgiven, loved, alive!  
To sin no more.

Jesus has demonstrated something radical here.  
Something the disciples and members of the crowd had not seen before.

Change can come without punishment.  
Forgiveness offers hope, invitation, life-giving challenge.

So, as I was saying,  
Judas must have not been there that day,  
Or if he was, his heart was as condemning  
As that of the mob and the authorities.

But Peter...  
I think that Peter was there  
This time quietly watching, paying attention, moved by what he heard and saw.  
Perhaps he made his own connections with the story of Moses  
Or someone else in the group helped him to grasp it later  
As they talked about this, powerful, strange, unpredictable, irregular  
Incident with Jesus.

God writes twice and offers forgiveness.  
That's what Jesus did  
That is what God does.

Change comes best with forgiveness, not punishment.  
For forgiveness offers hope, invitation, life-giving challenges.

That's part of the Easter message we dare not forget.  
Its part of our package of hope  
And how God wants us to work with others.

But most importantly,  
That's how God will continue to be with the church.  
That's how God is and will be with us.

Our gospel reading this morning is known  
as the "final discourse", or Jesus' final prayer  
It is an elegant petition to God for the disciples protection and care  
For their continued courage and hope,  
For they have been given what they will need.  
And they have believed.

A little further on, all that Jesus asks for his disciples  
Is also asked for the believers to come  
For us and the Church,  
The body of Christ in the world today.

We are in a time of turmoil, a time of transition,  
A time of not knowing what worship and church community,  
Let alone work, and education, and recreation and on and on,  
Will look like next week, let alone next year or five years hence.

I picked up words of wisdom from an instructor at the gym.  
She said: " There is no going back to normal....just what is somewhat familiar.  
There was no going back to normal for the disciples  
And not even a going back to the familiar.

The glory of Easter  
Is that Jesus was raised from the dead, yes.  
But there is greater glory in that  
The risen Christ returned to the very people  
Who had forsaken him,  
Who fled in cowardice out into the night  
When the soldiers came to arrest him.

God will not be defeated.  
The Church will not be defeated  
By the betrayal of Judas  
Nor that of Peter, not any other.

The church, that company of some-time betrayers and cowards,  
Picks itself up, brushes itself off,  
And elects Matthaïas to take the place of Judas.  
We go on.  
By the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, we go on.

Like Peter, and the woman about to be stoned,  
We are offered and hopefully accept forgiveness;  
Rise from our own sin and darkness  
And go on stronger  
Go on changed and energized, renewed,

To in turn offer forgiveness in place of judgement,  
Hope in place of despair,  
The invitation and challenge of God  
To be an Easter people in the world today.