

Amazing isn't it that we are here today celebrating Easter as part of a spiritual movement that began over 2,000 years ago with a mystic rabbi named Jesus who walked the earth, died a shameful death on the cross and then rose again.

Deep truth lies within the mystery of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. If not, this movement wouldn't have lasted the test of time. It is a truth that has been embedded in western civilization and its culture – the cathedrals, the art, music, philosophy, and poetry. It is the unnamable that we strive to name – a sense and taste of infinite love. It is this exquisite love that Jesus embodied and invites us to embody as well.

Even though church as we know it is waning and more and more people find their center of gravity as spiritual but not religious, the mystery of Christianity – its myths, its spiritual power still captivates hearts and minds.

Today we have an opportunity to travel back in time – before Christianity before the gospels were even written down. To imagine what it must have been like for Jesus's friends - his core group- in those days and months after Jesus died.

Can you begin to imagine the surprise and shock of the past week's events – the hoped-for overthrow of the Empire with Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, his table turning encounters at the temple, the way he agitated the chief priests and scribes with deep truth, his arrest, trial, and humiliating death on the cross. This is not what those early followers were expecting.

During that week Peter was scared, confused and in hiding. He had abandoned his friends and Jesus. He had even denied that he knew Jesus 3 times before the cock crowed on good Friday.

And yet, here he is in this story today – grounded, confident, bold. He has undergone a death to his fear and a resurrection in love. We experience him today in this passage as a changed man.

And what he says is filled with meaning – a lifetime of meaning.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Remember that the word *fear* in this context refers to a deep reverence, awe, and obedience towards God.

John records these words in the book of Acts – the acts of the apostles – this is the collection of stories that tell of what happened to the early Jesus followers after Jesus died, rose again and then ascended into heaven. At this point Pentecost has happened. God’s spirit of love has descended upon the apostles and opened their hearts to a different way of knowing and being in the world.

Peter says these words to a Gentile family who for the observant Jew, would be considered heresy. It is the first time that Peter realizes that the saving power of Jesus extended beyond the Hebrew people.

The saving power of Jesus – that is a loaded phrase isn’t it?
Especially on Easter.

We probably know phrases like this by heart “Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins.” “Jesus was the sacrificial lamb who makes it possible for us to get to heaven.” “God so loved the world that he gave his only son to die on a cross.”

Many Christians have used these phrases to divide and to instill fear of eternal damnation into people if they don’t believe in Jesus and say the sinners prayer.

It’s hard for us religious people to hear, but the most persistent violence in human history has been “sacralized violence”— a way that we legitimate our natural instincts of fear and hatred. We imagine that we are fearing and hating on behalf of something holy and noble: God, religion, truth, morality, our children, the love of country. But in actuality the only thing we are doing is becoming what we fear and hate. And this simple perpetuates the cycle of division and violence.

There is a word for this that comes in handy when we think of the unfolding story of Holy week – scapegoating.

In the Hebrew Scriptures – the book of Leviticus to be exact, God instructed Aaron, that he had to atone for the sins of God’s people as the priest. This became known as the Day of Atonement.

In this ritual a priest would lay hands on a goat, placing all the sins of the Israelites from the previous year onto the animal. Then the goat would be taken out into the wilderness and left there.” Through this ritual the Israelites were cleansed of their sins for another year. This scapegoating was supposed to restore the relationship between God and God’s people. When you think about it – the ritual itself is powerful as an action that all can witness of the removal of guilt and anxiety.

But it also reveals a destructive pattern in our human psyche - we, as humans, tend to transmit our pain onto others. We see this pattern throughout history – as we compare and compete, blame and conspire, condemn and crucify. Scapegoating, or creating victims to relieve ourselves of guilt and fear, seems to be ingrained in our nature.

In our world today, we witness this cycle persisting. Fear, hatred, and exclusion often masquerade as noble causes, justified in the name of God, country, or morality. You see, in order to have Power and control we either need to play the victim or to create victims of others. And most often these go hand in hand.

This pattern is playing out all around us today.

Throughout the world, refugees and immigrants have often been scapegoated for a range of issues. Early in the pandemic, there were instances of Asians and Asian-Americans facing discrimination and violence due to misinformation and blaming them for the virus. We see the scapegoating of people of color in our policing policies and crowded prisons. The queer community is another easy target for scapegoating and blame. Politicians and political parties often use scapegoating as a strategy to deflect blame or gain support. Scapegoating has been used to start wars and kill innocent people. On social media people can become targets of online hate and blame for various perceived wrongdoings or controversies. In debates around climate change scientists have been accused of promoting "fake" science or having hidden agendas. This list goes on and on...

And yet, it has never worked to eliminate evil and save people. It has only created division and hatred – violence and suffering. Dare I say – evil.

And into this destructive pattern walks Jesus – the one we proclaim as our scapegoat – the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sins of the world. He has become our get out of jail free card. Our guilt free tonic. Our death bed confession. Today we eat our chocolate bunnies and rejoice because Jesus died for our sins.

But maybe, just maybe we've got it wrong.

Could it be that Jesus is the ultimate scapegoat who turns the entire system of scapegoating upside down?

Theologian Jennifer Garcia Bashaw writes,

“The Gospel writers focused on the stories of the marginalized.... These were the people Jesus taught, healed, and befriended in his life—the societal victims and outcast people who lived not only on the periphery of the empire but on the periphery of their own culture. The gospel story, then, is a story *about* a victim, written *by* victims, and *featuring* victims. It is good news for victims; it is a scapegoat's gospel.”

If this is true, if this at all resonates with you, then Jesus' life and death exposed the violence of scapegoating. Jesus willingly walked into a world steeped in violence.

He was murdered not because God wanted or needed his sacrificial death but because as humans, when the survival stakes are high, when we let fear have its way with us, we determine who is in and who is out through violence and death.

But Jesus ... broke that system because what was supposed to happen didn't.

The scapegoat didn't stay dead. And the victors, in this case, didn't get to write the only version of the story. Jesus was not forgotten in the annals of history. His story – the truth, lives on.

The scapegoat came back to life and told a different story, a truer story, a story about life and love, inclusion and compassion. And through his story, Jesus revealed our ideas about God had been wrong all along.

God and Jesus are *nothing* like the violent and vengeful world we live in.

Jennifer Garcia Bashaw continues, “Jesus willingly becomes a scapegoat to draw attention to the scapegoaters; he submits to death on a cross to draw attention away from the scapegoats....

In his life, Jesus championed women, befriended and healed the poor and the disabled, and welcomed in the outsiders.

In his death, Jesus becomes the woman, the infirmed, and the outsider. The Jesus who saved women from society’s shaming was himself publicly shamed, stripped naked, and despised. The Jesus who healed sick and disabled bodies became disabled himself, flesh pierced and torn, weakened and held captive by nails and his failing body....

If Jesus’s life reversed the fate of victims he had met, then his death reverses the fate of future victims. He becomes the scapegoat to end all scapegoats—and exposes the truth that could end human blame and violence once and for all. If only we had eyes to see and ears to hear.

After Jesus became a victim on the cross, exposing the scapegoat mechanism and its fatal effects, the story is carried forward by the scapegoats of Jesus’s society.

Remember, It is the women disciples who discover the tomb and become the first witnesses to the resurrection and the first evangelists to carry the news to other Jesus-followers.

When we enter into the truth of this story of Jesus’ life, ministry, and death as the ultimate scapegoat, we are invited to stop creating scapegoats and work on their behalf instead. This is our work to do – to see this pattern of scapegoating and commit to choose compassion and understanding instead.

We see this transformation in the days and years following Jesus’ resurrection with his disciples. And today we witness it with Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, a captain in the Roman Empire.

Peter, a devout Jew, is confronted with a vision challenging his beliefs about clean and unclean. Through this vision, God expands Peter's understanding, that God’s love knows no boundaries. Peter, who once allow fear to have power over his life and his decisions,

now boldly proclaims the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, breaking down barriers of exclusion. There will be no scapegoating here.

Peter's transformation is not just a personal story; it is our invitation as well. It invites us to examine our own biases, fears, and tendencies to scapegoat. Like Peter, we are called to embrace the radical inclusivity of God's love, recognizing that no one is outside its reach. And this is difficult – to pray for our enemies – to see the light of Christ in everyone we meet.

Our world more than ever needs to break free from the cycle of scapegoating and to champion the marginalized.

Today we are invited to embrace the radical love embodied by Jesus Christ – that even the gates of hell cannot hold back the power of Love and Grace. Peter's journey reminds us that transformation is possible, even in the midst of fear and disbelief.

So Let us go forth as bearers of the Good News, committed to creating a world where all are seen, valued, and loved. So that we can boldly proclaim everyday - Christ is risen
Indeed! Amen.