

SCRIPTURE: Acts 3:12-19

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,

SERMON: “The Beloved Community: Transformed & Transforming” The Rev. Brent Damrow

The word “transformation” is a big word. It’s an important word. And it’s thrown around a lot these days. I don’t usually watch television, but up in Maine there was cable TV, and so... temptation fallen into. I noticed, as I thought about this word, how often it was used. There were advertisements proclaiming mail order diets that would transform our waistlines. There were HGTV’s myriad of shows of radical renovations of homes that send the message that clearly says re-doing your house will transform your life. All sorts of gadgets guaranteed to transform your golf swing, procedures to transform our smiles, beds to transform our sleep. And quite frankly, 5 or 7 or 12 – depending on who you listen to – simple steps to transform our outlook. Transformation, I fear, is becoming less radical, less earth-shattering, less... well... transformative.

When the TV wasn’t on, my time this last week in Maine was spectacular and renewing. Every day, a cold crisp start gave way to gorgeous sunlit skies. There were long hikes, there were diverse authors, there was inspired if not great cooking (on my part), there was good sleeping, there were connections with friends that I have not seen in far too long. All of it came together to be a balm for me, to soothe those stressed out places, to massage those worn down spaces. It all helped me to let go of pain and struggle, and to find new perspective. In fact, coming back with those commercials echoing in my mind, it would be tempting to tell you all this morning just how transformative it was. It might make you and me feel better for proclaiming that word.

And yet, I don’t think the verdict is quite in on that yet. For to make the claim of transformation is, if we remember the definition from the Cambridge Dictionary, about a complete change. It’s about a change that is noticeable, not just to me, but noticeable to everyone, in both appearance and character. And it’s a change that often or almost always is for the good. To be transformed would mean to have found change that endures as I return to the blessings, the responsibilities and the challenges of being a spouse, a parent and a pastor.

In full honesty, it is yet to be determined whether that time needed, as beautiful as it was, was simply a respite, a rest stop, a recharge, an injection of much needed beauty into my life, or

whether it truly was transformative for me. With, of course then, the possibility of it thus being transformative for Jon, for Jake, and for our shared ministry here in this church.

It has only been two weeks, two weeks since we gathered out there on the church front lawn on Easter. And I can tell you the number of phone calls and text messages and emails I got as to just how beautiful, just how meaningful, just how important that gathered and streamed service was. But I wonder if that has yet become truly transformative, whether that experience really transformed us, whether it brought about a complete change, a change that is noticeable in how you look and how you act. A change that others can see and say wow, that's a change for the better. Or was that day, sadly, just a respite, a rest stop, an injection of needed beauty into your lives?

In our reading today, it is fundamentally clear what Easter was for Peter. In part we know it because of how clear it was to everyone who had gathered on that day. Peter, the one afraid on that day of betrayal to even be associated with Jesus in any way, now sharing in the full power of His resurrection. And it was clear to everyone gathered there that it was transformation, that it was real, and it was deep, and it was change for the better. In verse 12 that started the reading, there is wonder and admiration. It says the people flocked after Peter. They were astonished. They couldn't believe how he changed.

Well, not just him, because you see this story falls on the heels of another very important story. Peter and John had brought restoration to a man who had been born without the ability to ever walk or to work. The Bible tells us that the people of that time weren't heartless; they cared for him. In fact, every day they carried him, once the gates to the Temple opened, to a place where he could sit and beg, and ask for the coins that he needed for food, to survive, to at least live. Peter looks at him and he says I don't have any silver, I don't have any gold. Instead I have something so much better. Peter said I offer you the name of Jesus, the Christ, the Resurrected One. Get up and walk, Peter says.

And that man was transformed, make no doubt about it. The people in the Temple knew who he was. They knew of his history from the beginning. They had defined him by his sitting and waiting. Now they saw who he was, full of life, recognizable, deep, full change that was so important. In fact, the Bible says that this man went around the Temple dancing and leaping and praising God – an Easter morning breaking out.

And the conduit for that change, the one professing and proclaiming in the public square, the one who likewise had been utterly and completely transformed – Peter – remember the slinker and the denier, Peter – the one who told Jesus, no Jesus, you can't die, we can't let any of that happen. Remember Peter, the one who wept bitterly at his own condition. For him, Easter was no respite, no rest stop, no recharge. It was utter transformation. And now Peter had something to offer everyone there: truth and grace.

Peter is blunt in his truth. He does not shy away from human failings and limitations. Because I think Peter knows them firsthand, and how they can be overcome with truth and even forgiven. He lets the people have it in this passage. He tells them the truth of what has unfolded, and the truth of the Easter resurrection. But what struck me in this reading is not just his courage or his

bluntness, but the opening that he leaves for them on that day and for us on this day. I think through his own ignorance Peter can gently see theirs and ours, through the forgiveness offered him by Jesus he can turn around and share that with everyone.

I want you to look at your bulletin for a second, look at the end of the reading. Do you notice how this reading remarkably ends, grammatically? It ends with a comma. It is a comma. This reading for today ends in the middle of something. We claim to be comma people in the United Church of Christ. “Never place a period where our still-speaking God has placed a comma.” What follows in verse 20 is this: Repent, “so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus.” It’s so important to not stop but to keep going right past that comma.

In one of the books that I read up in Maine, “Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self” by Richard Rohr, he worries that we as people of faith have placed a period on the Easter story. A period at the Resurrection, something that Rohr believes is in fact the ultimate comma. The Resurrection, rather than a miracle to be proven, an intellectual conundrum to be solved and resolved once and for all, Rohr (who, by the way, does conceive of the event as having physically really happened) sees resurrection as the manifestation and the ultimate combination of spirit and matter. Not just what happened to Jesus, but friends, what has, what is, and what continues to happen to each of us if we welcome the Easter truth inside. The very undoing of death. Death, all that diminishes. Yes when we stop breathing, but all that diminishes and the end of our physical existence. Because here spirit and flesh are united as one. What takes resurrection beyond mere intellectual assent for Rohr, and into the realm of transformation is that resurrection takes the great truth, the divine mystery of God, and locates it in our own fleshy body and experience. Don’t forget verse 20, God sending Jesus to each of us. The Message’s translation says this: “As showers of blessing to refresh each of us.”

Sure, we give thanks every Easter for the incarnation, both revealing humanity fully to God, but also equally and perhaps more importantly about introducing us, humanity, more fully to God, and how this God of love works. The word “religion” comes from re-ligio – re-binding or re-connecting. Friends, I think resurrection is the reminder that we at Easter re-bind ourselves in and through the love of God that transcends everything, even death, and makes us one with everything. It is not just a distraction or a respite, but the stuff of total transformation. And as people of faith, do we dare let the Easter truth be not just a day of joy, a worship service of respite, but like Peter a cataclysmic event that changes us so much that people can’t help but notice. Can we like Peter honor our faith so much that we still make room for the shifts that resurrection is still bringing about, as scary as they might be. Or are we willing to settle for answers, even beautiful ones, that do allow us to survive, even if they prevent us from being fully alive?

Later in chapter 3, on that day that Peter allowed transformation to take over, do you know what Acts says? Acts says that Peter’s transformation led to 5,000 people being transformed and giving themselves over to this way of living. Five thousand people. Remember the feeding of the 5,000? Five thousand in the Bible is a way of saying Stop counting! Too many to imagine. Peter’s transformation led to the transformation of multitudes. And I’ve got a question for you. Will ours this Easter lead to any?

Simone Weil (French philosopher, mystic, and political activist in the 1940s) said many different ways in many different times that she thinks it's easier for non-Christians to become Christian than it is sometimes for Christians to become Christian. To let the change, this radical change, fully into our hearts and minds. And if you struggle with what Simone Weil said, remember that all the Gospels repeatedly show that it was the outsiders, those who had been less comfortable with all the answers, those less steeped and steeled in those answers, who found the fullest meaning in Christ in his lifetime.

One final thing that gives me hope as I return from Maine, as I try to be transformed like Peter was in my work as a spouse, parent and pastor, rather than just finding better coping mechanisms, is that in all accounts of the Resurrection, remember that Jesus didn't lose his scars or wounds. There was no magical cream or medicine that made them disappear. He brought them with him. But those, too, were transformed. They became, I think, places of hope for other wounded ones out there. Rohr calls them both a message and a trophy. Pain transformed is no longer pain transmitted.

So my question for you is Do we dare? Do we dare live as resurrected people through His Resurrection that is also ours? Do we dare let go enough of our seeking and looking and chasing, that as verse 20 says, Christ might come to us and transform us? Will we be changed enough that people will chase after us like they chased after Peter and John in utter astonishment? Can we simply offer Christ, the question and the answer, the truth and the mystery, the reality and the possibility? Can we make room for our own transformation, and then just point people to God's open house with Christ as the open door?

Friends, I know that the answer is Yes. That is, yes if we, like Peter and John, like that small early church who formed the beloved community, the ones who you remember from last week started sharing and caring, simply root all we do and all we are in the birth, life, death and absolutely the resurrection of the one we know as Jesus the Christ. For as Jesus said in every single Gospel, what is impossible for humans on their own is completely possible in and through God. That is the truth of resurrection. May it be a blessing to you and to us, a blessing of thorough, complete and total transformation for you, for us, and then for all who see or encounter us. Amen.