

“Easter People”¹

Scripture: John 20:19-23

William C. Pender

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We are now two weeks past Easter and yet the wisdom of centuries of Christian worship says we are not through with Easter...one Sunday is not enough. Indeed, one of my favorite descriptions of what it means to be the church is that we are an Easter people. Our very being is defined by Easter...it is tattooed on our hearts...it is evident in our lives. So this morning, listen to another Easter text...the evening of that first Easter day:

John 20:19-23: ¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” [The text will continue that one of the apostles, Thomas, was not there...and so Jesus will come again for Thomas]

The Baptist preacher Will Campbell, in his autobiography, *Brother to the Dragonfly*, tells about a friend who compared the church and Jesus to a dyed Easter chick. (You used see these dyed baby chicks before Easter. I don't see that anymore—I think we are more sensitive animal rights these days). The friend said: “You know, Preacher Will, that church of yours and Mr. Jesus is like an Easter chicken my little Karen got one time. Pretty thing...dyed deep purple...but pretty soon that baby chick started feathering out. You know, sprouting little pin feathers, wings and tail and all that. The new feathers weren't purple. No sirree Bob, it was a Rhode Island Red, and when all them little red feathers started growing out from under that purple, it was one terrible sight. Daughter Karen couldn't stand that chicken any more. So, we took that half-purple and half-red thing out to her Grandma's house and put out with all the other chickens. It was still different, you understand. And the other chickens knew it was different. It didn't mess with any of the others...wouldn't fight back or anything...just stayed by itself...really suffered, too. But little by little, day by day, that chicken came around. Pretty soon, even before all the purple grew off of it, that durn thing was behaving just like the rest of them chickens. It would fight back, peck the heck out of ones littler than it was, knock them down to catch a bug if it got to it in time. Yes sirree, Bob, the chicken world turned that Easter chicken 'round. Now you can't tell one chicken from another. They are all just alike. The Easter chicken is just one more chicken.”

Will Campbell writes that “I knew he wanted to argue, and I didn't want to disappoint him.” So Campbell said: “Well, the Easter chicken is still useful. It lays eggs, doesn't it?” But that was just what his friend wanted Will Campbell to say. “Yeah, preacher Will, it lays eggs. But they all lay eggs.

¹ One of the beginning points in this sermon was an unsuccessful attempt to find my copy of the Will Campbell anecdote about the “Easter Chicken.” An Internet search led to a citation of this story in a sermon by Paris Donehoe, “The Reason We Are Here.” <http://www.fcc-elgin.org/sermons/sermon.asp?y=2003&m=01&d=26>; her sermon also pointed me toward the Craddock story and included the porcupine analogy. Her sermon was an excellent resource about considering the mission of the church.

Who needs an Easter chicken for that? And the Rotary Club serves coffee. And the 4-H club says prayers. The Red Cross takes offerings for hurricane victims. Mental health does counseling and the Boy Scouts have youth programs.”

In other words, what’s special and different about an Easter chicken...what’s special and different about an Easter people? Does the “people world” turn the Easter people ‘round, once our feathers have grown out or faded? The Easter people...are we so different than “people people?”

That first Easter the followers of Jesus were no different from anyone else who had suffered a tragedy...like so many families and friends at Virginia Tech this past week. They were shattered...they were numb...they couldn’t figure out why. About the only thing most of them could do was to hang together. And not even all of them did that—as I mentioned the apostle Thomas was not there. Jesus would come again when Thomas was with them.

The astonishing event of Easter is that Jesus came back to these devastated, shattered, fearful, disciples. And not just fearful of what the authorities might do the same to them that they had done to Jesus. They are fearful of facing their own failures...failures to stand by Jesus. No, not everyone was a Judas, selling Jesus out for money. Not everyone was Peter, loudly saying, “Count on me” and then just loudly denying he even knew Jesus. But every one of them had failed Jesus

Here is the astonishing thing about Easter: Jesus comes back to them...just as he keeps coming back to us. Jesus keeps coming back. I don’t know if you caught this very twist in our opening hymn this morning, one of the oldest Reformation hymns in our Hymnal. Look closely at the first line: Christ the Lord Is Risen...again. If you have been around on Easter Sunday morning you’ll catch the difference. The usual hymn is Christ the Lord Is Risen Today. Or Jesus Christ Is Risen Today. That’s great for Easter Sunday...but what about today—two weeks past Easter? The Moravian poet who wrote this hymn gives us a surprising and graceful twist. Christ the Lord Is Risen Again...again...again...again.

Every Sunday is a little Easter. Remember you and I do not worship on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath begins on Friday evening and ends Saturday at sunset. We do not worship on the Sabbath day that is prescribed in the Ten Commandments. The early followers of Jesus radically departed from a Sabbath day practice of the people of God for over a thousand years. The early Christians worshiped on the first day of the week, which is Sunday. Most of our printed calendars still put Sunday as the first day of the week, even though our lives tend to operate as if Sunday were the end of the week, part of the week end. This radical shift to Sunday was because that was the day of the week that God raised Jesus from the dead: each Sunday was a little Easter.

Christ the Lord is risen again. And he comes to those who are grieving, those who are numb, those who are fearful, and particularly those who long for his presence...particularly those who long for his presence. Remember Jesus did not appear to Pilate, the Roman governor...or Caiphias, the high priest...or Herod, the puppet ruler of Jews in that day. None of them wanted to see Jesus again. Pilate had washed his hands of Jesus. Caiphias the high priest thought Jesus was dangerous. And Herod only wanted Jesus to entertain him. Jesus only appeared to those longed for his presence.

The hardest people to reach with the good news of Jesus Christ are those that do not think or feel that they want Jesus in their lives. We often bemoan how full our services are on Easter Sunday and

then how low the attendance is the next Sunday. For many that's all they sense a need...until Christmas. That's enough religion for them.

Personal testimony time...that's not enough for me. Without regular practices such as worship, I forget who I am and to whom I belong. I get conned into believing that I am the master of my fate. I think I have some measure of control over my appetites. I get self-absorbed into my fears and anxieties. I build walls that I think will protect me from others. I live in continual judgment of those that I think are fools, or weak, or below me. I become closed off in my own upper room.

Every Sunday is a little Easter: Christ the Lord is risen again. And Jesus stands in our locked rooms. Jesus is our midst saying, "Peace be with you." Saying once again that forgiveness is central...and that he brings the Holy Spirit for us to receive. I, for one, need that regularly. We are an Easter people but we get swept up into being just like everyone else. And so Will Campbell's friends say: "And the Rotary Club serves coffee. And the 4-H club says prayers. The Red Cross takes offerings for hurricane victims. Mental health does counseling and the Boy Scouts have youth programs." What's special about an Easter chicken...an Easter people?

Tonight, many of us will gather in the Activities Center at 5 to have a conversation about what has made us an Easter People. There's still room for you to come. We are going to talk about the mission of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church. We are going to talk about our purpose for being. This will be a key conversation for us to have tonight and to keep having.

However, I came across something this week that verbalized one reason I struggle with this vital conversation. Mission studies have a tendency to focus on what we like, what we will do, what has worked for us in the past, what will motivate us to show up, what will inspire generosity, what we long for ourselves and for our families. Mission studies are all about us.

But one church leader has said it a different way. He says the church does not have a mission...because it not about "us." God has a mission. God has a mission and that mission includes the church. We are part of God's mission.

We know that...sometimes. One of the hymns that we Presbyterians sing as if were in the shower and all alone (that's when we make the joyful noise...or so I am told...I have not surveyed our shower habits)...one of those hymns that we sing in full voice is "Here I Am Lord." Remember the chorus: Here I am Lord. I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me.

Most of us get hooked at one time or another with this definition of what it means to be a church: a voluntary association of believers...a Jesus club with no set dues and no set attendance requirement. That is so unbiblical...so far wrong. The church exists because God chooses for the church to exist. You exist because God chose for you to exist. There is nothing voluntary about the church of Jesus Christ.

American culture has a hard time grasping that the church is not about my choice or even our choices. And let's be honest: people have given up on the church. Many have given up because of the stupid things in our past. Many have given up the church because there so many half-baked ideas and activities. Many have given up on the church because it asks too much and gave back so little, or accepted too much and demanded too little. But none of these charges are reason enough

to give up on the church. You are here, I am here, for one reason only: God wants us here. If you are ready to throw in the towel and give up on the church, then take it up with leader of the church: God. The church exists because God chooses for the church to exist.

Christ the Lord is risen again and again and again; to say “peace” to troubled followers, to say “forgiveness is central” and to gift us with Holy Spirit. That’s not to say it is easy: it is hard to be church. The church has been described as a pack of porcupines in a snowstorm. We need each other to stay warm, but we get kind of prickly when we get too close.

God calls us to be church...and that’s not always easy. Church seems to be about budgets, committee meetings, scheduling, misunderstandings, hurt feelings, persuading folks to do something they do not want to do, disappointments. And the chicken world turns the Easter chicken around.

One of the writers and preachers that I most appreciate is man by the name of Fred Craddock. He tells a very personal story about what it means to be church.

My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn’t go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, “I know what the church wants. Church doesn’t care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn’t that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.” That’s what he always said.

Sometimes we’d have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, “There’s one now, sic him, get him, get him,” and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, “The church doesn’t care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge.” I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn’t say it. He was in the veteran’s hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They’d taken out his throat, and said, “It’s too late.” They put in a metal tube, and X rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: “In this harsh world, draw [thy] breath in pain to tell my story.”

I said, “What is your story, Daddy?”

And he wrote, “I was wrong.”²

That’s one porcupine getting close. We are an Easter people. Christ is risen again and again and again. And he bursts into our closed-in lives and speaks the Easter greeting: Peace be with you. And he invites us to be the church which is part of God’s mission.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, eds. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 14. as quoted <http://www.southchurch.org/sermons/01302005.htm>