

The Week After Easter

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Preacher: Richard Kelley

[0 : 00] Hello, church. It's often an interesting task, preaching after Easter Sunday. It is particularly interesting doing it virtually with my only audience being my husband.

In part, it's difficult to preach after Easter because attendance is always way up on Easter, since everyone feels just a little more obligated to go to church. I appreciate that I wasn't alone in this feeling with comics of pastors declaring that every Sunday is now going to be Easter, or this fun twist on the longtime church member who only shows up on Easter.

And yet, even though I know that, there's always a little part of me that feels like the drop in attendance the week after must have been my fault, that people somehow heard I was preaching and decided they would rather watch Frozen 2 or the final season of Schitt's Creek.

In part, though, preaching after Easter Sunday is difficult because we return to our normal. As Pastor Anthony highlighted last week, even Jesus' disciples return to fishing after the resurrection. Easter is a celebration of the victory that Christ achieved through resurrection.

[1 : 26] It is a reminder of the hope that we have in Jesus, in the promises of God that are made to us throughout the Bible. It is a reminder of the wholeness we are called to as children of God and as participants in the renewal of all things.

The problem is that sometimes, in our effort to focus on the victory, we leave out the journey that Jesus endured. And many of us, after celebrating the victory, after being reminded of the hope and wholeness promised, return to the journey and feel alone.

And there's a lot of reason to feel hurt right now. We are, as a world, experiencing something that has never happened in our lifetime. A global pandemic.

One that has killed over 150,000 people and has infected millions worldwide. And nearly three-quarter million people in the U.S. alone. One that has killed over 150,000 people in the U.S. alone.

This pandemic has created fundamental shifts in our routines and patterns. And it has asked us to choose to be physically distant from those we love and care about.

[2 : 43] It brings fear and uncertainty. It raises anxiety. And it isolates. It raises the benefits of Fredy and happiness of COVID-19.

Because, in some ways, I experience both the best and the worst of it. See, my husband and I are privileged enough to have the opportunity to work from home and to be able to be together while doing so.

And while I am sure he is tired of having to be part of every meeting I have, he's even participated in a couple, we're overall doing fine. But I also work with individuals in the District of Columbia who are most at risk of being hurt by the uncertainty.

In my work with children, I am seeing safety nets and social structures decimated because there are no safe third parties or places for a child to go while sheltering in place.

I see families struggling with substance abuse and that those challenges are being exacerbated in this stressful situation. Many of the immigrant communities in D.C., many of our neighbors, are harmed by the job cuts and won't benefit from unemployment insurance or the government relief.

[3 : 59] And domestic violence survivors are being put in tense situations with no escape. One survivor I'm working with explains that she's unable to move forward with her case right now because she has no place where she can safely talk on the phone with a lawyer and she's sheltering in place with her abuser and doesn't see any other alternatives for her and her child.

Day after day, I interact with people that are living in what feel like impossible situations. For others, while the threat may not be physical or financial, this is a time of intense loneliness.

I can't imagine how our extroverts and our physical touch people are managing day to day. Even as an introvert, I'm missing seeing actual people, something I may have never thought I would admit to.

See, the problem is that isolation can exacerbate mental health conditions. Isolation can exacerbate feelings of self-doubt.

And isolation can leave us with a lot of time to self-reflect, which means a lot of time to focus on self-doubts, on shame, on hurts, on fears, and also strips us of the healthy habits we might have developed to cope with those concerns or challenges.

[5 : 26] Now, there have been a lot of memes on Facebook, and I'm sure everywhere else, I'm just not on them, that talk about using this time as a gift, an opportunity to slow down and reset patterns.

And while this might be true for some, it might be an opportunity for some of us, that's just not true for everyone. While in particular, extra time can certainly be seen as a gift, a time for self-reflection and growth for some, the reality is, for some of us, too much time with our own thoughts can be terrifying.

I have to admit, for a long time, I didn't really like myself very much. I would hide away from myself by being others-focused, keeping myself busy.

When I had the time to sit down and reflect too much, it was terrifying because I actually had to deal with myself. I would start unpacking past experiences, past traumas, that I intentionally boxed up and repressed so that I didn't have to deal with them.

I hated having to face myself. Because when I did, I felt inadequate, worthless, ashamed, and hurt. Now, I've been able to process a lot of that over a long period of time.

[6 : 47] But the reality is, too much alone time still scares me. But here's what I want you to take away. That as Pastor Anthony reminded us last week, yes, Jesus meets us in the mundane, and he also meets us in the hurting.

Now, a couple years ago, I also gave a sermon after Easter, and I asked us to expand how we understand the story, that we often focus on the victory in the resurrection, which is important.

And it's important because it captures the fundamental message of the gospel, that God loves us without reservation, and has endowed us with inherent worth by creating us in God's image.

And to demonstrate that love, God sent Jesus as God incarnate, fully human and fully divine, to endure the brokenness of this world, to demonstrate what radical love and radical grace looks like, and to conquer all that brokenness through resurrection.

Through Resurrection Sunday, through Christ's victory over death, we are reminded of how far God will go for each and every one of us. The late Reverend Peter Gomes puts it this way, the claim of a God bigger than those who worship him, more gracious, more generous, more hospitable than we are, is at the core of what Jesus calls the good news or the gospel.

[8 : 21] And it ought to be good news that God is bigger than we are. And while this is important, I want us to reflect also on the process, on the journey.

Because in an effort to bask in the victory, sometimes we forget about the path that led to victory in the first place. Because even with the victory of the resurrection, the cross still sucks.

I'll say that again. Even with the victory in the resurrection, the cross still sucks. Jesus was sent to earth as fully man and fully God, and experienced everything we experience.

Jesus experienced hope and wholeness, yes, but he also experienced the hurt and the process of healing. And we can't erase vital parts of Jesus' story.

The false gospel of surface happiness that was at least taught to me when I was growing up is shattered when we look at the real life lived by Jesus.

[9 : 34] See, our faith and trust and hope has to be strong enough to acknowledge that pain and suffering exists. And the pain and suffering exists, not because of our actions, but because of the reality of a broken world that breeds injustice, oppression, and harm.

We need to be a church that can be comfortable with these moments. And instead of offering a pithy sentence that writes off reality, we need to be a community that creates real space and accompaniment when people are suffering.

And this is one of those times, one of those times that we can't afford to erase parts of the story and parts of living like Jesus.

Now, I don't mean to entirely knock these pithy statements. I grew up with them, and I'm sure others did as well. And there's nothing bad or inherently inaccurate about acknowledging that we don't

know all the ways of God or that God's plan is better than ours.

But these statements don't wrestle with the real feelings of pain in our lives. And I think part of why we revert to these pithy statements is not that we don't care, but that we want to help.

[10:55] And we want to fix the problem. And most importantly, we don't know how to. But Jesus modeled this for us as well in an interaction we find in Matthew 26, verse 37 through 38, where Jesus goes to pray and asks his disciples to watch with him.

We read, He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him and began to be sorrowful and troubled. He said to them, My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

Stay here and keep watch with me. Okay, I just have to pause for a moment because this is one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible.

I include it in any sermon I can because I just can't fathom how Peter and these other two felt in this moment. And yes, the same Peter Pastor Anthony talked about last week.

And yes, he really does seem to show up everywhere. Now imagine with me for a moment that you and a couple of friends are walking together or going to church together and all of a sudden one stops and turns to you and says, My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

[12:13] How would you respond? I actually think and I'm proud to say that this community would be better than most at responding. Some of you would be willing to sit and pray with that person.

Others, probably our social workers and therapists, would try to move towards more practical steps in processing and unpacking. Meg, because she's amazing, would pray for you and then plug therapy.

But also, a lot of us would probably not know what to do. We would feel uncomfortable or unequipped. Maybe in our nervousness, we would respond, Yeah, my day's been tough too.

Or just move on to another topic. Or maybe say nothing at all for fear of making it worse. But here, Jesus is modeling how we can involve community when we're hurting.

And there's three things that we can do when we hurt. First, we can acknowledge to someone that we are hurting. Second, we can acknowledge internally or externally that they can fix it, that they cannot fix it for you.

[13:29] And third, we can ask specifically about ways that we want to be accompanied. Now when we look at this passage, this is exactly what we see Jesus doing.

He acknowledges to his disciples that he is hurting. He says, My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. And this is so important.

Because sometimes, it seems that we have all learned that we're supposed to go into church perfect. But the reality is, Jesus in his own life models vulnerability.

He models what it looks like to bring your whole self with you. He's overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

And acknowledges it. Now we know that Jesus is not asking them to fix it. In fact, this is moments. This statement is moments before Jesus would be betrayed into the hands of those that would crucify him.

[14:38] It's the same night as we see in Matthew 26, 51 through 53, that Jesus will reprimand one of his followers for striking the servant of the high priest and cutting off his ear.

We read, At this, one of Jesus' companions drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Put your sword back in its place, Jesus said to him, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.

Are you not aware that I can call on my father and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? See, this is amazing.

Jesus is clearly not in need of Peter or anyone else saving him. He has legions available for that, but he's asking people to be part of his hurt, part of his sorrow.

When we return to our earlier passage where Jesus is praying, while Jesus doesn't want them to fix his hurt, he does ask for a very specific accompaniment.

[15:41] Stay here and keep watch with me, he asks. Now, if you're familiar with this passage, we will know that the disciples actually fall asleep.

But isn't that why we find Peter so relatable? That he tries so hard and yet failed so frequently. But luckily, we're modeling after Jesus, not after Peter.

So again, if you're hurting right now, I encourage you to follow Jesus' model. and acknowledge to someone that you are hurting. Acknowledge that they can't fix it and ask specifically for ways you

want to be met in that hurt or accompanied through it.

And that's different for everyone. Sometimes that's talking. Sometimes that's silence. Sometimes that's something entirely different. But I invite you to email me or email Pastor Anthony or Pastor Angela or Pastor Ramon or Pastor Jessica.

Email people in your dinner party or affinity group. Email someone you know in the church. Our prayer director, Meg, or our elders. Or call someone.

[16:58] I know that's ancient technology by now, but it's still readily available. And for those of us in our community who maybe aren't hurting right now, there's a challenge for us too.

We need to work to be more like Jesus. And in sort of mirroring that, there are three things that we can do to be a more supportive community, to be a community that reflects God's love in God's presence.

When someone shares with us they're hurt, we can acknowledge that they're hurting. See them. We can acknowledge both internally or externally that we can't fix it for them.

And we can offer to accompany the person in a way that they want to be accompanied. That's it. See, we are called to be in community with one another, but we're not called to become someone's savior.

That role is already filled. We just want to be a reminder of God's love here on earth. Because moments on the cross are part of the story of Jesus.

[18:08] So we as a church are called to meet people in those moments as much as we are to meet them in moments of celebration. For those of you who are hurting, don't let anyone make you feel less than you are.

just because you're hurting. I spend so much time conditioned to believe that if I hurt that I am not trusting Jesus enough. It's the equivalent to the pray harder mentality where my response has always been unless you've been praying with me, you cannot judge my prayer life.

But the Bible sides with you, those that are hurting. Because we see very clearly that Jesus hurt even when he knew the end game. Just like we do.

See, Jesus was sorrowful to the point of death. Jesus wept out loud. Jesus cried out to God. And Jesus knew. Jesus knew the end game.

He knew resurrection was coming. He knew victory was literally days away and still hurt because that is part of the human experience. And therefore, as we model our lives around Jesus, we have permission to be in these spaces as part of the journey.

[19:28] So takeaway one, it's okay to be hurting. You are no less faithful, no less Christian, no less Jesus follower, and certainly no less part of the beautiful and complex image of God because you're hurting.

The second takeaway where we'll spend the rest of our time is really just a reminder that Jesus is with us in the midst of our hurting.

I'm captivated by the final chapters in the book of John, which is by far the most extensive discussion of Jesus' interactions post-resurrection. And this makes perfect sense given the focus of the Gospel of John.

Many of you may be aware that the four Gospels all have different audiences and focuses. For example, the Gospel of Matthew is often described as focused on the Jewish communities, while Luke is more traditionally historically focused.

And John. See, John is often described as more focused on the spiritual aspects of Jesus as God rather than the recording of the human history of Jesus as man.

[20:36] So it makes sense that John would be most concerned about Jesus' interactions after the resurrection and what they mean about how God sees us.

And in these narratives of Jesus' time with his followers after the resurrection, we are being shown how Jesus meets us in our hurt when we feel abandoned or afraid or uncertain or ashamed.

Jesus shows up. Now, each of these stories could, of course, be its own sermon. We are only touching the surface. But even as we stay on the surface, we see over and over again Jesus present in moments of hurting.

We'll begin in John 20, verse 11, which reads, Now Mary stood outside of the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I do not know where they have put him. At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

[21 : 59] He asked her, Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking that he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out an Aramaic, Teacher. Mary approached the tomb and saw that Jesus' body was gone and her immediate reaction was to cry. Seems perfectly reasonable to me. But even when approached by angels, she was so focused on what she lost, what she thought was gone, that she couldn't see what was happening in front of her. She told them that her Lord was taken away. And even when Jesus appeared, assuming he was the gardener, she made the same request, tell me where Jesus is.

But Jesus was right there with her. See, sometimes we expect God to appear in certain ways in our life, to be present in specific ways.

[23 : 13] And when that doesn't occur exactly the way we planned it or thought it would be, we assume that God is gone altogether, that Jesus has abandoned us.

And that feels terrible. I remember as a kid that I clinged to the footsteps poem because often I felt so different, so outside of expectation that I couldn't imagine that God was there with me.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the poem, it sort of covers this idea of someone reflecting on their journey at the end of life with God and seeing through the sand two sets of footprints, but then sees parts where there's only one set and asks, well, where were you when there was only one set of footprints?

And God answers, that's when I was carrying you. As I said, I'm not anti-pithy statements. And in fact, this poem brought me a lot of comfort.

And a much younger me would imagine what the path would look like when Jesus and I looked back at it together, when I didn't feel God's presence, but really, God was carrying me.

[24 : 33] I imagined a lot of caring, I must admit. And sometimes would think day to day, did Jesus carry me today or were we walking together? And I think about this pain of feeling abandoned, of feeling alone, and the number of times that God was there even though I didn't feel it.

Now, if we continue on a few verses later in John 20, 19, we see Jesus appearing in a different way to his disciples. We read that on the evening of that first day of the week when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and sighed, and the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Now, one of the things that I find most fascinating about the Bible is that many times we read from books of the Bible and they capture major things in just a couple sentences. It almost makes you miss what's going on. Pastor Anthony spoke about this interaction a bit last week, but I want us to center on this fear, on this emotion, on this situation.

Jesus' disciples, now the same disciples who ran away and hid in terror once Jesus was crucified, were now hiding in fear of persecution by the largest and by many accounts one of the cruelest governments known to man at that time.

[26 : 14] Each of Jesus' followers likely feared the same fate. If Judas sold Jesus out, couldn't he have given the authorities the rest of the names too?

And crucifixion, which is a painful way to die, was a common punishment for those who incite riots or political disloyalty, which is just what Jesus and his followers did.

I could imagine them waiting in this room any minute for someone to come and burst down their door and drag them out to be crucified. John even described that they had the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders.

Certainly, these disciples in their fear felt that God couldn't be further away. But Jesus appears even there amidst the fear and says, peace be with you.

If we continue to read, we see Jesus appear again starting in verse 24. Now, I won't read the whole thing, but it's on the screen.

[27 : 27] But again, we see Jesus show up amidst uncertainty. Thomas, who was one of the disciples, might even have been feeling a bit upset because he wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples.

He's in such uncertainty and such doubt that he can't believe that Jesus is back until he sees it himself, even though all the other disciples said they had seen him.

So Jesus shows up again and does something incredible. He shows Thomas his scars. He meets Thomas in his uncertainty.

And finally, and perhaps most powerfully, we see Jesus meet Peter in his shame. In John 21, starting in verse 15, there was a very curious interaction between Jesus and Peter.

Now this is after they had eaten together. And when they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?

[28 : 33] Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my lambs. again, Jesus said, Simon, son of John, do you love me?

He answered, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Jesus said, take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.

Jesus said, feed my sheep. Now, this is the Peter who denied Jesus three times, and who felt terribly after doing so.

I can't imagine how much shame Peter felt sitting there with Jesus in his presence. It must have been one of those awkward breakfasts with that elephant in the room not being discussed.

[29 : 40] Peter running through all the ways in his mind of how to apologize for failing Jesus, feeling so unworthy in that moment.

But Jesus meets him in that chain. I like the title that the NIV gives to this section, Jesus Reinstates Peter.

Peter. Because how powerful is it that Jesus not only meets Peter in his hurt, in his shame, but lifts him out of it by reminding him that his worth in God's eyes has never changed, and that God still has a purpose for him.

What's most fascinating in all of these narratives, whether it's Jesus meeting Mary in her isolation, or the disciples in their fear, Thomas in his uncertainty, or Peter in his shame, is not just that Jesus meets them in their hurt, but how he does it.

See, he's never upset at them missing the point. Jesus didn't criticize Mary or the other disciples for not having faith or trusting that he had returned.

[30 : 58] He doesn't get mad at Thomas for asking Jesus to prove that he was actually on the cross, and he doesn't condemn Peter for messing up yet again.

No, God is not only present in our hurt, he walks with us in it and loves us through it. Why does this matter? Why even talk about this?

Because I know people in this congregation are hurting. some because of COVID-19, some because of things completely unrelated.

And I want those of us who are hurting to know that the story of Jesus includes us as well. I also want to challenge us as a congregation, as a group of believers, to show up the way Jesus shows up for people who are hurting.

We don't have to fix it, hurt. But particularly right now, community that can meet us in our hurt is critical. Just one last thought before we pray.

[32 : 09] I mentioned that hurting is part of the journey. Hurting doesn't need to be rushed through, but it also doesn't need to be stagnant. These moments of hurt, these moments on the cross, we walk through them and heal through them.

And God wants to be with us in that healing. When we're done healing, they leave scars. Even Jesus kept his scars from the cross.

A resurrected body, a victorious event, scars intact. Now, we understand God to be all-powerful. And certainly, if God can resurrect, God could have healed the scars, return the body as new and unblemished.

But God didn't. God, incarnate in Jesus, kept them and showed them to his disciples that they may believe. and modeled again for us what a life following Jesus can look like.

Because scars, once properly healed, can be a powerful part of our story. As I mentioned before, I don't think that God wishes or forces anything bad on anyone.

[33 : 38] I believe that's a consequence of the brokenness of this world. but I do believe that God can take even the hurts and scars and use them. We are told in Romans 8, 28, that we know that in

all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Now, I think about the many ways that my own scars, whether childhood traumas or my experiences as an LGBTQ person in the church, have been redeemed in ways unimaginable, have allowed me to meet people in their own hurt, and have allowed me to grow in my understanding of God, and has allowed me to love others more deeply.

When I reflect on many of my own experiences, I can see where God met me in those times. though if I'm honest, rarely would I have been able to see that while in the moment.

I can also see how God has used those moments. God saw worth even when I felt most worthless. God saw purpose even when I felt most lost.

And God saw a reflection of God's image even when I felt most shattered. It is okay and I would argue Christ-like to hurt.

[35 : 06] It is an important and valid part of Jesus' story. It makes us no less worthy, no less Christ-like, and no less an image-bearer.

And even when we hurt, even when we feel abandoned, or afraid, or uncertain, or ashamed, God wants to meet us there. Not to chastise us, but to accompany us through it.

Please pray with me. God, I lift up those who are listening and those who are not, that we may be reminded of your presence and your persistence during this time of uncertainty.

In particular, I want to pray for those who are hurting right now. Whether feeling isolated, or afraid, or uncertain, or ashamed, I pray.

I pray for those who are enduring financial stress right now, those who are physically or emotionally unsafe right now, that you show up in powerful ways during this time.

[36 : 13] God, we pray for this world, that while we know that you don't seek hurt for people, that you can use it in powerful ways. And might this time be one where people are compelled to show others what your love looks like in action.

We pray for peace and for a renewing of your presence in our life, that as we enter this week, we are reminded that we are part of your complex image and refreshed to be your hands and feet in this congregation, in our communities, and in the world.

In your name we pray. Amen.