

# Jesus Didn't Come to Keep the Peace

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[0:00] All right, so good morning again, and happy Easter, y'all. Hallelujah, happy Easter.! Again, my name is Toneta Landis Ina, and I'm one of the pastors here.

And I want to say, first, that I am so grateful that you are in this room, that you have shown up here, or that you are watching us online. I know that getting up and making it out here when it's raining outside, when I got up, it was gorgeous.

But now, it's raining outside. I know getting up, getting out of the house, some of y'all put on your Sunday best. I know that's hard. Some of y'all got your nails done.

Kind of like my wife. Check it out, she always gets her nails done, and they're gorgeous. Some of y'all went to the barbershop and got a fresh cut. Well, I just want to say that I'm grateful you're here, and you look good.

I know, too, that while, for some of us, Easter Sunday is just part of a journey that we've been on for a long time, part of a rich and satisfying journey of life with Christ.

[1:19] For others, it's not that easy. That may not be the case. Making it out the door wasn't about discomfort because of a rainy day, but about a discomfort with a God who seems to have left too many questions unanswered.

A discomfort with a God that seems too narrow, too coercive, or maybe just too good to be true. For some of us, I can imagine that the discomfort has lasted far too long.

It's felt like almost too heavy a weight to bear. When you realized at your church that you weren't serving the kingdom of God, but rather your pastor's ego.

When you realized the church of your native tongue, where they play the music you love, and you can feast on the food that feeds your soul. When you realized that church would likely never be able to accept all of you because you're too flamboyant, or you're too angry, or you're too curious, or you're too sexual.

Hallelujah. Or you're too... Time to come out the closet. You're too disabled, or too queer, or too militant, or like me, too black.

[2:46] Too Asian. Too so many different things. The season of discomfort that has lasted far too long since you realized that the evangelical faith you loved is in bed with unquestioned patriotism and unrepentant pedophiles.

Or maybe there's just been a discomfort with a life without God that has left no room for enchantment and mystery, for grace and surprise.

After all, as professor of religion, Liz Bukhar says, what if theology is just this?

Asking the hardest questions about suffering, meaning what we owe each other, and letting religion's long memory inform the answers.

Or perhaps you are finally able to proclaim confidently with a poet, Mary Oliver, that you refuse to live locked in the orderly houses of reasons and proofs.

[3:56] That the world you live in and believe in is wider than that. And anyway, what's wrong, she says, with maybe?

Whether you feel relaxed in this moment, whether you feel relaxed, whether you feel wary, you are welcome here. If the kingdom of God is like a mansion with many rooms, then you can be assured that there is space enough for you.

And whatever your feelings about Christianity or Jesus or church, we come to this moment together. Together. To this celebration at the heart of the Christian faith.

To this epicenter of the new beginning. To this feast of the new creation. Together. Together. Together.

Together. And I'm also aware that it's easy to make Easter into a mere sentimentality. To domesticate it.

[5:07] Or, if you grew up going to church, to just drape it in nostalgia. For some of us, it might be aligned in our imagination with an image something like this.

And I do have something to say.

While that, you know, I do have a secret about this. That Jesus was from the Middle East and not from Minnesota.

We've grown up with these images. But make no mistake.

This year is every year when I have read the gospel accounts and hopefully when you have read the gospel accounts discovering the empty tomb, we have felt the power and the glory.

[6:07] I can almost feel the dense half-light of the early morning on my skin. Hear Mary's intake of breath when she sees the stone rolled away from the cave where Jesus had been buried after he was crucified.

The sounds of running feet. First of Mary's and then of Peter and the disciple that is simply known as the one Jesus loved. I wonder what the empty strips of linen that had entrapped Jesus' body, what did they smell like?

Like death? Or like perfume? And I can taste the fear, the frustration, the anger that overtakes Mary as her body is wracked by sobs of panic and grief.

But then the sweetness. Oh, the sweetness of the voice of Jesus calling Mary's name.

The exhalation of shock and disbelief. Of shock and pure joy. He is risen.

[7:28] He is risen indeed. Indeed. Yet in all the power and the glory of that first Easter, it can be easy to forget that there was far more than this kind of touching scene of reunion.

There is something more subversive going on. Artist Ben Wildflower tried to capture that something in his reimagining of a treasured Eastern Orthodox icon as the Anastasis.

In his version titled Christ the Excarcerator, Jesus is depicted setting the captives free from the hell of ice custody.

From the harrowing journey that is leaving the home that has your heart for another home where you will most likely be hated.

and reflecting on the Jesus of his icon, Wildflower writes in Sojourners that this is not a law and order God.

[8:37] This is a jailbreak God. So this morning, amid the power and the glory, I want us to ask some harder questions.

I want us to ask why that jailbreak had to happen. Why did Jesus have to submit to the cruelty of a Roman cross, lay dead in a tomb for three days, and then finally rise, vindicated by God?

Why did he have to descend to the place of the dead and lead captives in his train, as the writers of Ephesians says? What's at the heart of all that?

What does it mean? But to answer those questions, I think we need to cast a little further back into John's gospel.

While it is appropriate that we feel the power and the glory, while we behold this empty tomb, I think that we need to look back at another story to make sure that we experience the empty tomb as much more than candy-coated melodrama.

[9:55] That story is found in John 11 and is known as the rising of Lazarus. I encourage you to open table.sitter to follow along in the sermon notes if you haven't done that already.

And y'all already know I like to include a lot of scripture, so bear with me. I ain't afraid of a long passage. So read along on the screen or on your phone or if you have a Bible.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair.

Her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sister sent a message to Jesus, Lord, he whom you love is ill. But when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory.

So the Son of God may be glorified through it. Accordingly though, Jesus loved Mary and her sister Lazarus and her sister and Lazarus.

[11:11] After having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this, he said to the disciples, let us go to Judea again. And then skipping down to verse 17.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. And then the passage goes into this moment when Jesus enters Bethany and he has this amazing conversation with Martha.

And Martha says, she basically complains in confidence, which is a very, very Hebrew Bible thing to do. She says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But even now I know that God will raise, will give you whatever you ask of him. Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

[12:28] Do you believe this? She said to him, yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. Then Jesus again, greatly disturbed, came to the tune.

It was a cave and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days. Jesus said to her, did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said it for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.

[13:41] And then the last portion of this passage, many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, what are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to him, you know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

Okay, so this is a story about the raising of a dead man.

[14:55] Raising of a dead man back to life by Jesus. And this raising to new life is ironically the reason why Jesus is crucified. It is because of this miracle that the Supreme Court of Jerusalem decides to meet.

see, when those who will death as a means of staying in control, as a means of contriving a safety they can't even guarantee in the first place, when they can no longer keep people bound and entombed, we all have problems.

So the council meets, they seek a political solution to this new spiritual awakening among their own people, then Caiaphas, the high priest, says something powerful that helps us answer, at least in part, this question, this first question of this morning of why was Jesus crucified?

Caiaphas seems to step into what I imagine were competing viewpoints with this kind of perfect political expediency and realism. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

Caiaphas prophesies what will actually happen. One man, Jesus dies to save the nation and even more the whole world. He dies to gather those who have been scattered.

[16:24] Now I deeply believe that the cross of Christ is like a kaleidoscope. At every turn of it, at every turn of contemplation, you can see something different that is wholly beautiful.

And at one turn, it is clear that one reason Jesus allows himself to be crucified is to become the scapegoat who will expose the evil of scapegoating. Caiaphas believes it is fine for one person to die if it will keep the peace.

Fine for one person to be sacrificed to maintain the mirage of unity. And we too often believe the same thing.

We choose a group of people to blame for the problems of society and then we justify our dismissal and disposal of them. If you're on the right, that might be immigrants, that might be queer people. If you're on the left, that might be Christian nationalists in your own family. Yet God knows that this kind of scapegoating runs the world, has run the world since the beginning of time.

[17:39] And so Jesus penetrates its logic. He becomes the one man that does die for all. As scholar Jennifer Bashaw writes, Jesus dies as an innocent victim to reveal the lie of scapegoating and he comes back after his own resurrection speaking peace.

Jesus kills hostility and opens the way of transforming love. Now you might say, pastor, pastor, what does that mean for me?

It means we don't need a them to make an us. It means that no one has to be on the bottom for us to be on top.

It means that we no longer need permanent enemies. But every enemy has the possibility at any moment of becoming a friend.

Okay, so that grounds us in one way of thinking about why Christ died. But what about resurrection? That's what we are here celebrating this morning.

[18:57] What helps us think about that? To grasp that? Well, I love that in this story of Lazarus, the revelation of God comes within a very personal family drama.

Very real and emotional, real emotions from the people involved. A loved one has died. Lazarus. This is something that we know about intimately.

intimately. This is something that we know about intimately. This feeling of losing someone we love. A few weeks ago, some of y'all might remember that I found myself moved during the benediction to share about the loss of someone I loved.

I've never done this publicly. Here we go. Okay. Years ago, a good friend of mine died suddenly in her sleep. Her name was Bonnie and she was a wonderful person. I knew her from church, what my brother lovingly calls the tea party church.

I was not in the tea party. I hope I can say that on the stage. Oh, Lord, it's Easter. Okay. My brother calls it the tea party church. And I knew her from that church and I frequently studied her as she worked toward her PhD and toward an undergraduate degree.

[20:18] Because she was older than me and looked at me almost like a little sister. She would sometimes treat me at a restaurant. That I couldn't afford. Or just show up for me.

And we stayed friends through the multiple transitions in our lives up until she became a professor and I was a high school English teacher. And I still remember the sound of the phone ringing in my classroom on the morning of that teacher work day.

A friend calling to tell me that Bonnie had died. she was younger than I am now. And I remember thinking about how she went to sleep fully expecting to wake up the next morning.

That was the day I understood the meaning of the phrase the sting of death. The morning I realized in my body how unnatural the end of life felt.

felt. And that feeling of unnatural ending is what this story of Lazarus is about. The sting of death is the reason that Jesus is so agitated and disturbed in the story.

[21:29] The reason why he weeps. And here is our clue for why Jesus had to be raised. See, in Western Christianity we tend to view the major predicament of our lives as the power of sin.

But in Eastern Christianity think the Orthodox churches they see the primary predicament as death. Where we often repeat as a mantra that the wages of sin is death.

The Eastern churches consider scriptures such as Hebrews 2:14 through 15 central. Since the children have flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death.

That is the devil. And free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. death. To be sure there are a lot of nuances here such as the difference between original sin Adam and Eve passing down genetically their sin to all of us and ancestral sin Adam and Eve by their sin creating a world in which our primary problem is death that death has entered. they sinned now we die. But to spice it to say that the eastern view in that view it's our slavery to the fear of death that is actually what causes sin.

[23:17] all the ways that we seek to shore up our identities to make ourselves immortal to preserve our legacies to make a name for ourselves are a response to our death anxiety.

So when Jesus raises Lazarus saying unbind him and let him go we know that something more is afoot.

we sense that our slavery to the fear of death is not all there is. We sense that the only way to escape our slavery to the fear of death which makes us so vulnerable to sin is for death to be overcome by someone.

And that is exactly what Jesus does. in a foreshadowing of his own resurrection he tells Lazarus' sister I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me even though they die they will live and everyone who believes in me will never die. See Jesus doesn't just perform resurrection.

[24:37] Jesus is resurrection. He is the one who explodes death from the inside by his resurrection and clears the way for freedom.

He leads us out of all the hells in which we find ourselves and says unbind him unbind her unbind them and let them go.

Y'all Easter Sunday is a jailbreak. And no matter whether you have entered this room in joy or discomfort you are invited to hear the call of Christ to start walking out of your tomb even though the grave clothes have not yet been fully unwrapped to know yourself coming back to life even when they still call you a dead man because Jesus is resurrection you can be set free from the lie that you have to be perfect that's a lie I confront daily from the lie that you will never recover from the lie that you will never be good enough from the lie that you are too flamboyant or too angry or too curious or too sexual or too disabled or too queer or too militant from the lie that

God is dead and nothing genuinely new nothing truly transformative transformative or decidedly different can ever come to pass but we know a man we know a man Jesus we know a man Jesus so it is for you this day to consider the two most important questions in these stories of raising to new life the first comes from the story of Lazarus do you believe this the second is to Mary as she searches for Jesus at his empty tomb who is it that you are looking for those are the questions at the center of our lives those are the questions at the center of

Easter while I certainly don't believe that there is only one way to hold faith in Jesus or only one way to seek him after all the kingdom of God is a mansion of many rooms I do believe that it is ours to be here together this morning at this empty tomb to contemplate the power and the glory the overwhelming love the scandal the offense can you be here can you be here with us at this empty tomb in an awe that is beyond a saccharine sentimentality and sits you on the threshold of something subversive believing trusting knowing even if you don't have all the answers that he is risen he is risen indeed amen