

Easter People in a Good Friday World
A Sermon on John 10 and 1 John 3 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ April 21, 2024

We are Easter people, living in a Good Friday world. As on Good Friday, there are moments when our grief and sorrow are deep, and we are shaken to the core. This has been a Good Friday sort of week for our community.

For the past week our community has been grieving the deaths of two public safety officers. One was a police officer of the Syracuse Police, Michael Jensen, age 29. The second was a deputy of the Onondaga County Sherriff's department, Michael Hoosock, age 37. Both were killed as they attempted to arrest a man for driving dangerously, reportedly over 100 miles per hour. The man who killed the officers was also shot and killed in a shootout that shattered the peace of a residential neighborhood in Liverpool, just five miles north of St. Paul's.

Every violent death such as these is tragic. The deaths of these two officers brings additional layers of grief. We grieve their deaths especially because, according to newspaper reports, the man who shot them was one of millions of Americans whose lives have been devastated by drug and alcohol addiction. We grieve their deaths especially because, at the time they were killed, they were doing their essential task: trying to keep the rest of us safe. We grieve their deaths because, in most situations, the officers of the Syracuse Police Department and Onondaga Sherriff's Office do their work with skill, intelligence, and compassion.

We grieve their deaths because they went to work every day with full knowledge of the danger they faced. It is more dangerous to be a police officer in America than in most countries in the world. It is more dangerous to be a police officer in America than in Mexico, or India, or even Sudan. It is more dangerous to be a police officer in America because there are more guns, and more dangerous guns, in America than in most countries in the world.

Why haven't we changed the laws of our nation, the way the people of other nations have changed their laws, to reduce the number of guns? It all goes back to America's original sins, the sins of slavery, racism, and killing the native people of America and forcing them off their lands. Racial prejudice is the primary reason we have so many more guns. Our primal fear of people with darker skin has been born out of the sins of slavery and taking land away from the native peoples. We have so many guns because we are afraid of one another, and we are afraid of one another because of the deep racial divisions in our nation. The deaths of Michael Hoosock and Michael Jensen are a reminder of the deadly hold racial prejudice continues to have for our people.

We are living in a Good Friday world, and we are Easter people. God calls us to act as if we are witnesses to the resurrecting power of God's love. God calls us to be Easter people.

We find the foundations of what it means to be Easter people in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah writes: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways." As Easter people we practice humility. We are cautious when we have thoughts and feelings of victory over our rivals, because we remember that our thoughts are not God's thoughts. We are humble and reflective when the strategic plan we enacted appears to be working, because we remember that our ways are not God's ways. Being Easter people means cultivating humility in ourselves.

Being Easter people means being in a steady, close relationship with God. The close relationship between God and God's people is the central theme of the second half of the Gospel of John. In John 10 we read these verses: *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.* We are saved by God's gift of this close relationship. As the hymn writer Robert Bridges writes: "God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own." Being Easter people means being in relationship

with the One who creates us, and calls us 'friends', and took on flesh and lived as we live and died as we will die.

Being Easter people means being willing to give up something precious. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.* This theme is continued in our reading from 1 John: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* Michael Hoosocker and Michael Jensen were willing to lay down their lives for our safety, for you and for me. The author of first John makes clear that he is not expecting members of the congregation to literally give up their lives. The central point of the passages from the Gospel and letter of John is that God's way involves giving up power and empowering others. This is not our way of doing things. People go to great lengths to increase their own power and take power away from their rivals. Being Easter people means being willing to give up our power for the sake of God's work.

All of this is about conversion. It's about us emptying out some part of ourselves in order to make space for God to abide in us. This is the point of our passage from the first letter of John. The elder of the congregation described the way Christ gave up his life for us, then writes, *we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* The members of the congregation might have thought he was speaking literally of people giving up their lives, and dying for each other, so he clarifies his message in the next verse. *How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?* Laying down our lives for one another means giving up some of our worldly goods in order to help our brothers and sisters in need. Laying down our lives means putting God's love into action. Being Easter people means making a space for God's love to be in us, and cultivating that love.

The elder of the congregation continues, saying: *Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. By this we will know that we are from the truth.* The elder is talking about integrity. Integrity is when we tell the truth and are willing to hear and accept the truth. Integrity is when our actions are in alignment with our words. Being Easter people means having integrity.

The final, and perhaps the most important story that informs and empowers us is the Easter story itself. The main idea of Easter is that death is never the end of the story. The main idea of Easter is that we cannot get to Easter without going through Good Friday.

This has been a Good Friday sort of week. Every day since last Sunday, as I was moving around our city, I continued to see police officers and deputies of the Sherriff's Office, doing their jobs, working to keep us safe. This is what it looks like to be Easter people. Our public safety officers are not giving up. Don't give up.

We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world. Don't give up on this journey we are on together. Don't give up on these close relationships God has created among us and with us. Don't give up on encouraging one another. Don't give up on helping our sisters and brothers in need. Keep listening for the voice of the one who calls each of us by name. Keep on cultivating the love of God that abides in you.