



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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**The Third Sunday after Easter:
Easter in Between
1 Peter 2:11-17 &
St. John 16:16-22
Fr. William Klock**

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The disciples were confused. John captures it well in our Gospel. After the Last Supper, while the disciples were with him in the upper room, Jesus began taught them and that discourse runs from John 13 to John 17. These chapters are full of hard saying—and they were particularly hard for the disciples for whom the events of Jesus betrayal and death and resurrection and ascension were still in the future. Jesus talks about loss and sadness and he talks about joy and he talks about perseverance in the face of opposition. But they sat there confused. Every time they thought Jesus was starting to make sense, he'd say something and they'd be lost again.

In that part of his discourse we read this morning, he says things like, "I'm going to my Father", "Soon you will see me no more, but soon after that you'll see me again", and "Truly, truly you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices, but then we'll see each other again and the tables will be turned and you'll be the ones rejoicing."

And, of course, the disciples are left shaking their heads in confusion and asking each other what all this means: "Where's Jesus going? Did he tell you he was going somewhere?" "What does he mean he's going to his Father?" They didn't understand because none of this had happened yet. They didn't understand because they were still thinking of the Messiah in the terms that most of the Jews were thinking of him—sure Jesus looked

humble and meek now, but pretty soon he was going to throw off the poor, itinerant rabbi disguise and take care of business.

They also didn't understand because Jesus is weaving two and probably three promises together here. As the discourse unfolds, John will separate each of them out. But Jesus makes his point with a lot more punch by simplifying everything. This is Easter and this is what it means to be Easter people. Jesus is going to be arrested, mocked, beaten, and crucified. He'll be dead for three days. His friends will mourn, they'll be afraid, Sunday will find them hiding behind locked doors, fearing that the authorities will come for them next. But on Sunday Jesus will rise from death and his new creation will dawn. While they're weeping and afraid, Jesus will be setting lose the power that will begin making all things new.

Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit is tied in here too. Jesus will die—he'll be away—and then he'll rise from the grave—he'll be back and they'll see him again. But then again, Jesus will only be with them a short while. After forty days he'll ascend to his Father, he'll take up his throne to rule his kingdom, but they'll see him again in the person of the Holy Spirit, whom he will send so that they'll not only understand all of this, but so that they'll be empowered to live the new life he's promised.

But there seems to a third promise packed in here too and that's the promise of Jesus' final royal return at the end of the age, when all his enemies have been put under his feet and he comes back with his heavenly entourage to take up his eternal throne.

At each level, Jesus' promise is a promise of difficulty, whether it it's the fear and grief they felt during those three days after his death, whether it's the time of prayer and waiting between his ascension and Pentecost, or whether it's the time in which we live today, ambassadors

living in hostile territory, proclaiming that Jesus is Lord, while we wait for his royal return. The new creation is born out of the pain of the old the way a baby is born out of the pain of labour and childbirth. The Christian life makes a lot more sense when we look at it through this promise of Jesus—when we remember that he didn't promise that life would be easy, that all of our prayers would be answered the way we want, or that life would be full of health and wealth once we choose to follow him. No. Over and over Jesus promises just the opposite. Being a disciple is like living through childbirth. Jesus promised that the world would hate us. No unregenerate person wants to admit that Jesus is the true Lord, because doing so means being confronted by the reality of their own sin and rebellion, doing so demands repentance as the only logical response and most people don't want to repent, they don't want to give up everything to embrace Jesus. And on top of that, every one of us still has to live with the consequences of human sin—with sickness and poverty and with death. The old has to die in order to be reborn. But we face these things in hope. The baby will be born, the labour will be over, and when we see the baby all the pain and all the tears will be overcome and driven away by the joy of that new life. Brothers and Sisters, the resurrection of Jesus is the evidence that Jesus' promises are coming true and that God's new world is being born.

And all of this has implications for how we live in this in-between time. It has implications for how we face the world and how we face all the sad and awful and difficult things that crop up in life because of our fall and humanity's separation from God. This is what St. Peter gets at in today's Epistle. Peter begins his first letter writing to his fellow Christians as exiles living in a great dispersion in hostile and foreign territory. It's an image he picked up from Judaism. The Jews were scattered all over the world, but no matter where they lived,

they identified themselves as Jews and they showed it by the way they lived. And Peter begins with that imagery as he addresses fellow believers in Jesus. Times are hard, life is hard—and a lot of that trouble is the direct result of choosing to follow Jesus—but right from the get-go Peter writes a joyful, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because through his mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope.” Death and decay are all around, but through Jesus God has given us the hope of life and, Peter goes on, “He’s given us that hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Each of us faces death—it might be from sickness, it might be from accident, it might be in the arena at the command of Caesar—but in Jesus we have “an inheritance that is *imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven* for us.” It’s the life we had in the garden when we lived in God’s presence and had access to the tree of life. It’s the opposite of most everything we see around us. And we live in hope of that great day when it’s no longer kept safe for us in heaven, but when Jesus returns to rule, when heaven and earth are brought back together as they were in the garden, when we can live in the presence of God having been fully purified and made new. In the meantime, Peter writes, we live for a little while suffering trials—but through these trials the dross is burned away and our faith is strengthened and purified like gold in the crucible.

This is what St. Peter’s first letter is about: hope in the midst of suffering and living in this world and this age full of hope and knowing that Jesus is in the process of making all things new. It’s about being Easter people who live in light of the resurrection, charging into the darkness with the light of the gospel.

In the first part of Chapter 2, the part immediately before today’s Epistle, Peter urges his fellow Christians to set aside sin. He draws on a whole bunch

of images from the Old Testament that point to the Church as the new Israel. He describes each of us as a living stone, precious to God, and being gathered together and built up as the Lord’s new temple—this time not a temple of bricks and mortar, but a living temple filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the cornerstone and just as he was rejected by the world, so will we be, but again, that’s all the more reason to have hope in the promises of Jesus. We are following where he has already gone. And so, Peter says, like Israel of old, we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people called to proclaim the mighty acts of Jesus, who has called us out of darkness and into light.

Peter understood what it meant to live in this in-between time. He understood what Jesus meant when he described our life with him as a woman in the middle of labour, but labouring with hope of the joy that is to come: pain and suffering and tears today, but joy tomorrow. But that’s just it. Our hope for tomorrow is expressed—it becomes a witness to the world—in how we respond to the pain and suffering and tears we have today. We don’t just proclaim that Jesus is Lord with our mouths. Brothers and Sisters, we are called to live out his lordship in our lives—we’re called to make it practical in ways that the world around us—so that the very people often causing the pain and suffering will see our faith and so that our lives will be to them a witness to Jesus’ lordship. Look at 2:11-12:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

When I was in high school I competed in a state-wide vocational skills contest. I was in the architectural drafting competition. I won first place in my county and then went to Seattle for the state competition. There were close to a thousand kids there and we pretty much took over a large hotel. At breakfast the first morning the person in charge of organizing the competition took the stage and reamed us out. Some of us—not me!—had been so noisy and rowdy during the night that several dozen people had actually checked out of the hotel and the hotel manager was threatening to bill our group for what they lost. The man who took the stage reminded us that we represented a highly respected national vocational educational association and that we’d tarnished its image with our bad behaviour.

Peter’s giving a similar warning. When he says that we are sojourners and exiles he’s reminding us that we belong to Jesus. We’re citizens of his kingdom. We represent him to the world around us. Think again of the good news that we proclaim: Jesus is Lord. He has conquered sin and death. He is God’s true King. For the Christians of the First Century this was a profoundly political and subversive thing to say. Everyone knew that Caesar was lord. To say that Jesus is Lord was to say that Caesar was not. Caesar didn’t like that. The people who really did see Caesar as their lord didn’t like that either. And they threw all sorts of accusations at those first Christians. Christians might as well be atheists, people said, seeing as they worshiped only one God. Christians were disloyal, refusing to profess the empire’s creed. And while the specifics may have changed over the last two thousand years, you and I face the same sort of hostility. We’re considered narrow and intolerant because we believe in only one God and because we believe Jesus is the way and the only way to life. We’re narrow and bigoted for calling certain things “sin” and for holding a biblical

worldview. And we're upsetting to people who trust in themselves or trust in their money or who trust in their government when we proclaim that only Jesus is worthy of our trust and worship.

And so Peter warns us: Be good ambassadors. Yes, sin is a real temptation, but walk in the Spirit and keep your conduct honourable. Don't give unbelievers, don't give non-Christians reason to speak evil against you. If they hate you and if they persecute you, let it be for your unfaltering faith in Jesus, not for your hypocrisy, not for the sin you commit while pointing out their sins. Let them hate you for standing for the truth, not for being sinful in the ways that you defend it. In other words, live as befits a holy people; no matter how bad it gets, don't respond to the world in worldly ways. Live your lives in a such a way that by your response, your persecutors will see the light of Jesus and his kingdom in you.

In verses 13-15 Peter focuses specifically on what all this means for how we interact with our civil authorities and rulers.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

The creed or the pledge of allegiance of the Roman empire was "Caesar is Lord". To proclaim that Jesus is Lord is to also proclaim that Caesar is not. That didn't go over well in the First Century. Many Christians were martyred for their witness to the lordship of Jesus. Plenty of Christians were tempted to treat the civil authorities with disrespect. After all, they represented Caesar who was just a pretender at the true lordship and divinity of Jesus. Many Christians

would have been tempted to mock Caesar and his rule. And many, seeing their brothers and sisters taken off in chains, crucified, or fed to lions, might have wondered if it wasn't then time to take up arms against the local authorities. That was the direction many of the Jews were headed in and it would have been easy for Christians to follow them.

But Peter says "No". As part of our witness that Jesus is Lord, we Christians must submit ourselves to earthly rulers—even the evil ones who cart us off to prison or to the arena because of our faith in Jesus. If the consequence of following Jesus is persecution, or imprisonment, or even death, so be it. If that's hard to swallow, just remember that by submitting ourselves to the injustices of earthly rulers we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. I'm pretty well convinced that this is what Jesus was referring to when he told the disciples to "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's". As the Father vindicated Jesus, so the Father will vindicate us. We are not called to vindicate ourselves. As the Father vindicated Jesus, so he will one day vindicate us.

It's true that Scripture gives us a sustained rebuke of corrupt and wicked earthly rulers. They are contrary to God's will, contrary to his plan. But it's also true, right from the beginning in Genesis 2, that God created us human beings to rule his Creation. Humans were meant to rule Creation. What that would have looked like had Adam not sinned, whether God would have established some sort of righteous monarchy or some sort of holy anarchy, is hard to say, but it is clear that God has established human rulers. It's just that human rulers are sinful and have done a bad job of ruling. Nevertheless, order is better than chaos and if history shows us anything, the violent overthrow of one ruler usually just results in more violence and more overthrows and a spiral into chaos.

Earthly rulers are God's plan; it's their sin that's not. But even sinful rulers are instruments of God's common grace, bringing order and restraining at least some sin.

Jesus calls us to follow his example of submission, even in the face of persecution and death. Yes, refuse to participate in or to support the evil of our earthly rulers, refuse to remain silent when confronted with evil, speak out against it—that's part of following Jesus—and never treat them like the gods they so often act like they are—but be prepared to suffer for it just as Jesus did. Again, our Father will vindicate us just as he vindicated Jesus in his resurrection. Our calling is not to be revolutionaries of the sort who respond to violence with violence. Jesus shows us a better way. By our peaceful and humble witness we shame those who would criticise us or who wish us ill.

Jesus shows us a better way. Jesus broke the cycle of violence begetting violence. He submitted to his death at Caesar's hands. When he was reviled he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten. No, instead he entrusted himself to his Father who judges justly. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where following Jesus is so hard, but it's precisely what Peter has in mind in our Epistle. When we suffer violence, our natural instinct is to respond with violence. When someone infringes on our rights, our natural response is to fight back. But that's what human beings have been doing from the beginning and all we see is sin begetting more sin, violence begetting more violence, and vengeance begetting more vengeance. Again, Jesus has made possible a better way. Jesus suffered violence and gave back forgiveness. He broke the cycle and made a way for peace and reconciliation and he calls us to do the same in our public life—with each other, with the people around us, and even with our rulers—even the evil and corrupt ones. By his suffering

Jesus brought forgiveness of sin to us, and now Jesus works through us. We forgiven sinners are now called to suffer as he did and to return sin and violence with forgiveness. Forgiveness spreads, the cycle of sin is broken, and Jesus makes new.

And so Peter sums up:

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Through his death and resurrection Jesus has freed us from our bondage to sin and that changes everything—and not just us; it changes the whole world even if the world doesn't realise it yet. And that's just it. This is why we who have experienced the power of the cross and the empty tomb, this is why those of us who know Jesus is Lord and who know the true King are called to proclaim his death and resurrection and his lordship to the world. This is why our humble witness is so important. And so Peter warns us: our freedom can never be an excuse or cover for sin. Just the opposite: we've been freed from sin to serve the Lord and that's what the world needs to see us doing. And in serving the Lord we show honour to everyone. Let the world see us loving each other as Christians. Let the world see us fearing the Lord. And let the world see us honouring the emperor—and anyone else who would do us harm. Of course we refuse to collaborate with evil. Of course we proclaim that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. But one of the most powerful witnesses to Jesus we can have is to suffer unjustly for the sake of righteousness and to respond to violence and injustice with forgiveness. That is what the cross is all about and we can face it in faithful hope knowing that Jesus not only died, but also rose from death and has promised the same to us. Again, he says in the Gospel: "You have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your

hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in the collect we asked for grace to live in a way that accords with our profession of faith in Jesus. We ask again, as we live with Jesus, as we steep ourselves in your word, as we receive your grace in our Baptism and at your Table, as we live our common life together, teach us what it looks like to live as people who have been transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, give us grace and courage to witness this life to the world, and help us to keep our witness consistent, loving each other, serving you, showing honour to all those around us—even our persecutors—and especially give us the grace to return evil with forgiveness as Jesus has done for us. We ask all this through him, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.