

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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April 15, 2018

Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48

Prayer: Oh, God, open our hearts and minds to your transforming love. Amen.

Peter. The rock. The keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. A famous disciple of Jesus and leading apostle of the church. We hear a lot of stories about Peter in the gospels, though not all of them are flattering. While he boldly declares that Jesus is the Messiah, we also know he loses his courage at the end of Jesus' life.

In today's first reading from Acts, we hear Peter's words to the people in Jerusalem who have gathered around him. They are amazed that he and John have just miraculously healed a lame man. Peter's words to them serve as a summary of the gospel message, reminding his listeners of Jesus' story and issuing an invitation to repent and turn to God.

As much as these words of Peter's are important, perhaps the fact that he is speaking them at all is even more significant. Throughout Holy Week, we heard more than once of Peter's three-time denial of Jesus. When Peter saw the trouble Jesus was in, he was just plain scared. He had been at Jesus' side throughout his travels, but when faced with the threat of arrest and maybe even execution, Peter lost heart—he simply could not admit his connection with Jesus. And after Jesus' crucifixion, when the women returned from Jesus' tomb to tell Peter and the other disciples that the tomb was empty, Peter didn't really believe it at first.

But when we meet Peter in Acts, he has been transformed. He has become the leader of the apostles, willing to face the crowds who had once called for Jesus' crucifixion and making bold speeches to anyone who would listen, including the authorities whom he had been so afraid of when Jesus was arrested. Even when Peter himself is arrested, which happens right after he delivers the speech we heard today, he remains committed to his mission and acts with great leadership and courage.

So, how did this happen? What allowed Peter to take on this new role with such confidence? Well...Easter happened. Peter experienced the risen Jesus—he experienced the eternal, infinite love of God in a profound way. Peter's encounter with the risen Jesus showed him that the love of God that had been made known in the person of Jesus would, in fact, never die. This is what changed Peter. This is what compelled Peter to share Jesus' message of compassion and forgiveness.

Peter's transformation is an example for us of the power of the gospel message. He hadn't been a perfect disciple, and he had abandoned Jesus in his time of need, but that didn't matter. The gospel message is that all are welcome to experience the love and forgiveness of God—no matter how flawed—and all can be transformed by this love. This is what happened to Peter, and he tells his listeners that it can happen to them, too.

But, let's sneak a peek at what happens in Acts when Peter is arrested just after the speech we heard today. The high priests are concerned about Peter and John, and they gather to discuss how they can squelch the success of their mission. One of these priests is Annas, who had also been a part of the group who had arrested Jesus. Now, I've been thinking about Annas a lot lately, because recently I found myself in the strange position of cheering him on. Let me explain. On Easter evening I eagerly watched the live version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* that was presented on television. I was excited to watch it not only because I love the show and know just about every word of every song, but also because one of my former students was performing in it. And, you guessed it, the role he played was Annas. So, there I was, watching and listening with excitement as my student, Jin Ha, sang--clapping for him even as his character, Annas, was condemning Jesus. In some ways I felt the same strange sense of discomfort that I often feel on Palm Sunday, when we begin the service shouting "Hosanna" and end it with cries of "crucify him." When I watched the show on Easter, I felt conflicted as I cheered for Annas, but, as I later reflected on Peter's message in today's reading, I realized that, in fact, we can—and should--root for Annas. We can because God roots for Annas—God roots for all of us. Peter's speech acknowledges that the people listening to him, and even their rulers (which would have included Annas), had "acted in ignorance" in condemning Jesus. And Peter goes on to say that all of them, no matter who they are, are included in the gospel message; they are all a part of the expansive, forgiving love of God. Do we know if Annas was ever transformed as Peter was? No, but we do know through Jesus' message and Peter's example that such transformation is possible, not just for Annas, but for all of us.

Today's gospel reading from Luke also underscores the universal nature of God's transforming forgiveness and love. In this passage at the end of the gospel, the risen Jesus has appeared among the disciples, and they are at the same time both joyful and terrified, not quite sure about what they are experiencing. But Jesus reassures them and commissions them, emphasizing that God's love and forgiveness is to be shared with everyone—not just Jews, not just Gentiles, not just perfect people or people we like and agree with, but everyone. And this should provide hope and inspiration for all of us. Just as Peter, a flawed disciple, could be transformed by the risen Jesus, by the undying love of God, so can we. Just as Peter's listeners, even Annas, were included in his message of forgiveness, so are we. Our transformation may not be as dramatic as Peter's, but that's OK. We can each find ways every day to reach out to others in love. We can find it in ourselves to forgive others. And in doing this, even in small ways, not only will we be transformed, but so will our world itself—perhaps in these individual acts of love and compassion and forgiveness we will find the true keys to unlock the kingdom of heaven right here on earth.