

“It Had To Be This Way” based on Luke 24:36b-48 and 1 John 3:1-7
Delivered on April 18, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Leo Ransone, elder

“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

According to Luke, in a passage just before the verses which will be our focus, those words were spoken to two believers who were on the road to the village of Emmaus. It was Easter Sunday. When the two realized that they were talking to the risen Christ, they decided to go into Jerusalem and find the apostles, and while they were still telling the apostles about their experience, Jesus stood among them.

In these passages, Luke is describing a vision of the cross and resurrection as the long-awaited fulfillment of Israel’s scriptural history in the prophets, the law of Moses, and the Psalms. All four Gospels see Jesus’ crucifixion as the moment when and the means by which God wins the victory over the forces of evil concentrated at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 2, as an example, starts by asking why the nations conspire and the peoples plot against the Lord and against his anointed, saying let us break their chains and throw off their shackles. It goes on ...Therefore you kings, be wise, be warned you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling or your way will lead to your destruction. Herod and Pilate, not being among the wise, ignored the warning to serve the Lord instead of themselves and became representatives of the kings of the earth, symbolizing the coming together of all the evil in the world doing their worst to Jesus, and God responds by exalting His son and declaring that he is now the true ruler of the world. To echo Isaiah 40, Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. The victory on the cross was so much bigger than just victory over the Romans of the time. It was victory over death and therefore over the corruption of power that uses it to “persuade” the people of the world to bend to its will.

Jesus chose Passover, the freedom-festival, to bring his confrontation with the political and military powers to its climax. After the exodus from Egypt and Israel’s rescue from slavery, Moses presented the nation with the law as given by God to make them the people in whose midst God could then come and dwell. But Israel rebelled and drifted away from God again and again, and throughout their history Passover increasingly meant that an exodus from their own enslaving sin and idolatry would have to take place, so that once again, through God’s forgiveness, their midst could again be a fit place for God to dwell. Their own corruption made the situation such that the victory of the cross and resurrection had to now be over not only their external slavery but their internal slavery as well. Salvation cannot be either victory over occupying forces or dealing with Israel’s own sin, it has to be both.

What is atonement? What is representative substitution? Meaning, what is it that Jesus died in our place? To understand the connection between the victory of the cross and Christ's death in our place starts with the nature of sin. Evil consists not in being created but in the rebellious idolatry by which humans worship and honor elements of the natural world rather than the God who made them. The root of all human sin is idolatry. This isn't just knowingly worshiping a statue of Zeus or choosing a false god from another religion. This idolatry is elevating anything or anyone above God. It makes you an orphan without your loving parent, and less and less human. When we worship idols, when we give love to things instead of God, we give our life's energy away and fail in our role as agents in the stewardship of creation. Losing our role as agents in this stewardship is to lose our life's purpose and our selves. Sin must be dealt with if we are to be redeemed from this cycle. Because creation is the work of God's love, redemption is something he will undertake with delight and glad self-giving. Redemption doesn't mean scrapping what's there and starting again from scratch but rather liberating what has come to be enslaved. Because Christ is our representative as Israel's Messiah is why he can appropriately be our substitute and because he is our substitute his dealing with sin has robbed the powers of mastery over us. Restored to our human purpose, we will engage in God's work of renewed creation, on earth as it is in heaven, The sacrifice of Jesus will allow heaven and earth to come together at last as a result of the covenant renewal brought about in the events of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

Luke's closing scene, for all its joy, excitement, and wonder, brings into focus for us yet another mystery. Post resurrection, what sort of a body did Jesus have? How could it at the same time be solid and real, with flesh and bones, able to eat a piece of fish, and also able to appear at will, and at the end be carried into heaven? In First Corinthians Fifteen, Paul explains that our imperishable bodies will be created by God to take us into his new creation. He says that some will ask "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool, he says, what you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, and God gives it a body as he has chosen. The new body will belong in both the dimensions of the new creation of which we will be citizens. As with the resurrection and ascension, our minds certainly are stretched beyond what we can comfortably accommodate as a functioning daily worldview in our present culture. Whoever said we would not be challenged by the gospel? We have a lot of work to do.

But so did the disciples, and Jesus in his last days with them gives them practical guidance and points the way to the whole mission of the church. He was therefore speaking to us at Absecon Presbyterian as well, since we are disciples of the disciples and privileged to be responsible for making new ones in turn.

What is the point of Jesus rising again? The answer is here, in a few sentences which will take a lifetime, and in fact all the history of the church, to work out. The church is to be rooted in scripture

and active in mission. Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, The Bible always envisaged that when God finally acted to fulfill all the promises made to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, then the whole world would be brought into the embrace of God's saving and healing love. That is what must happen now.

Repentance and forgiveness of sins are not, therefore, simply a matter for the individual, though they are certainly that. At the heart of being a Christian is the personal turning away from sin, and celebrating God's forgiveness, which is after all at the heart of the Lord's Prayer itself. But these two words go much wider as well. They are the agenda which can change the world.

Today's world is full of disputes between nations, ethnic groups, political factions, and tribes which struggle for supremacy by claiming the right to the moral high ground, and based on that high ground must be granted redress, revenge, satisfaction. All the "sinners" are always on one side of the argument and the "saints" are therefore due compensation. So, the moral high ground as a power structure for making others behave as fits in with our individual or tribal preferred worldview was what Jesus was trying to explain on the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem? Really? Is this what Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension points to as the goal and mode of a Christian life?

Some clarification of this dangerously out of focus "moral" argument is desperately needed or we will sacrifice our humanity. The goal of life in Western Christianity resembles the philosopher Plato more than Jesus with its focus on souls escaping earth to go to heaven. It leads to human moralism and a pagan view of salvation being that we are saved from an angry god who hates the world and killed Jesus to prove it. But Christian goals for creation are heaven and earth as one, free of sin, because God loved us enough to become a human like us and let sin do its worst by death, yet emerge afterwards by rising to give us life. To retrieve the biblical theology we need to correct each error, the Platonic influence, the human moralism, and the murderous paganism. The problem comes when human action is reduced from a vocation to share in God's work to a system of ethics, from calling to behavior. Behavior matters, but bearing God's image through our vocational calling is more than just right behavior. If that is not the case, we have put the knowledge of good and evil before the knowledge of God, again. Any such thing as innate moral sense in humans as a starting point for us to derive God as the ultimate moral being can only distort the larger whole, which *is* God. Keeping our focus on God is the purpose of morality, not the reverse. To free ourselves from the traps of thinking of ourselves as image bearers based in our own imagination or even "moral sense", good theology has argued that the "image" has to do primarily with calling, or vocation. Again, we are to be good and faithful stewards to God's good creation. Having a Calling means we have a caller, and putting God first means always listening to his call. The disciples had been living in a story which they hoped was leading to the redemption of Israel. This was, after all, what the biblical narrative had been about, though until Easter Day it could not be seen as such. Luke says that their eyes were prevented from recognizing Jesus. Like everyone else, they had not yet

understood what he was now here to show them. "It had to happen this way". Their whole mode of understanding life was about to be transformed. That transformation would take place not simply by the scriptural information supplied by the risen Jesus but by the person of Jesus himself, first born of the new humans, as the end of Luke's story makes clear. Esau McCaulley, one of my new favorite theologians, supplies us with this: What brings the warring parties of the world together is not the emergence of a new philosophy of government, or some recombination of existing ones. It is a person: Jesus, the root of Jesse. He is our example for how to be human.

Recall the first lines John wrote in his gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life..." John now says to us in the first verses of chapter three in his first epistle, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" And then he goes on to authenticate that, saying "And that is what we are!" We. We are just as John was. Just as the beloved disciple of Christ. God's child. Now, we are who we are as Christians simply and solely because of God's love and because Jesus laid down his life for us. Accepting the atoning sacrifice that Jesus achieved for us by the defeat of our sinfulness, we are free to become authentically human, though we do not yet know what worshiping God with our lives will make of us, but we do know that we are no longer bound by our former lives.

Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, could make no sense of any of this. They sought to envision in their minds the highest god, who was pure intellect. In their minds. God. An abstraction. Without spirit, feeling, humanity or relationship. This is Psychopathic and grotesque, do you think? Consider your *relationship* with our Trinitarian God, and with your flesh and blood, fully human brothers and sisters in Christ. See a contrast? Consider the Enlightenment philosophical period, giving birth to our modern Western concepts of self governance and exalting our own ability to use reason to accomplish it. How are we doing with that so far? We live in a country seemingly on the brink of dissolution. Now understand that John is telling us not to falter and to devote our hearts and minds to God and to one another as Christ taught us. We who maintain the hope that we will see Christ do so out of love for him, and it is that love which is our purification. Thus, when Christ appears again we shall know him because we will be like him. See a contrast?

John tells us to know that we all sin, but to also know that we don't all devote ourselves to it. When we stumble, we have to own the fact that we have willfully placed ourselves outside of God's grace and understand how and why that happened so that we can remove our willful offensiveness to his presence and be forgiven, because to live forever in his love is everything. Outside his love we die. That is why we do not continue to sin.

Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Amen

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

1 John 3:1-7 (NRSV) See what ***love*** the ***Father*** has given us, that we should be ***called*** children of ***God***; and that is what we are. The ***reason*** the ***world*** does not know us is that it did not know him. ***Beloved***, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been ***revealed***. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this ***hope*** in him ***purify themselves***, just as he is ***pure***. Everyone who ***commits*** sin is ***guilty*** of lawlessness; sin is ***lawlessness***. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no ***sin***. No one who ***abides*** in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little ***children***, let no one ***deceive*** you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is ***righteous***.