

V Easter A; RCL
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Scott Richardson +

Let's start with an insurance company commercial now airing: A mother picks up her child after soccer practice and notices that only one player remains – another parent is running late. The mother drives away but then has second thoughts. The final scene shows her sitting in the bleachers next to the remaining youth, with her child beside her and car beams offering light as darkness descends.

Perhaps it strikes you as odd that we're beginning with a word-picture from an ad. If that's true, let me offer this advice – take the gospel anywhere you can find it. Sometimes we find the God's word in testaments old and new; sometimes we find it beyond the text. The Living Word is revealed in scripture but it's not restricted to scripture. Anytime we're inspired to care for our neighbor, to change course as need arises, to see that every person is tended to, looked after, then we know we're in gospel territory.

The good news is bigger than the Bible and the converse is true, as well; not every word in the Bible conveys the way or the will of God. I mention this now because today's readings are blended – some point to Easter joy and some betray a different sensibility. On the one hand, we're assured that in God's house there are many mansions, that God is our crag and our stronghold, that we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation. On the other hand, we see firsthand the religious violence of the late-1st century. Stephen is stoned to death. Peter is concerned about mortal rejection. John, scholars tell us, puts words on the lips of Jesus asserting there's only one way to the Father.

These latter readings might be received as heroic, stoical, or promissory – many of us can't hear them that way any longer. We hear the pain of broken community, distrust, fracture. Because of the Bible, we know we're called to love one another, to tend to one another gently, to honor those near us and ensure their well-being. And, because of the Bible, we also know this doesn't always happen. So what did happen? How did we stray from the call to love?

For a couple of weeks now, I've been touting "Constantine's Sword" – a film that examines the roots of religious violence. James Carroll documents the breach that occurred in the decades following the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Before I give you the short version, let me acknowledge redundancy - I've covered this before; I mention it again because it's critical information for those who wish to live as faithful Christian people in a multi-religious society.

So here we go: first, remember that the earliest followers of Jesus were fully Jewish. They went to the public synagogue for the ministry of the word and to private homes for the ministry of the altar. They told the story of the Risen One wherever they found themselves. This message was accepted by a few and declined by many more. In time, their proselytizing wore thin and they were ejected from the worshipping community. They felt the pang of excommunication and wrote their pain into the biblical stories

being composed at that very moment. Stephen is stoned to death because of his witness. Peter says of the Jews, "They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." Jesus, in John's gospel, says, "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life; no one comes to the Father except by me." The unspoken subtext of that last quote almost surely sounds something like this: "... especially those hurtful people in the synagogue down the road who rejected us and our message and who, by casting us out, negated our witness, cut us off from our roots, removed us from the protective cover of Judaism, and exposed us to the persecution of the empire."

Here now is the important point: this was a family argument over the identity of one member of the family. That localized dispute pertained for decades, centuries, until our writings became enshrined as scripture. Once that happened, and once the emperor converted to the Christian faith, all bets were off; a pattern of religiously inspired violence ensued that made those first centuries disputes appear minor. We're just now coming to terms with this part of our legacy.

So that's the bad news. Where's the good news today? The good news lies in the inextinguishable call to love. Our true identity and our true mission endure. In spite of everything I've just recounted, we still remember who we are and who we're called to be. In spite of errors, miscalculations, and mistakes, we still proclaim God's best and deepest truth. When I was back in Washington, DC a few weeks ago I met a thoughtful man named Alan Jenkins. Quoting a friend, he said, "You know, Martin Luther King's most famous speech was not, I Have a Complaint. It was, rather, I Have a Dream."

We too have a dream and we're bold enough to believe that it is none other than God's dream. Yes, our history is indecorous, sketchy, spotted. Yes, we haven't always lived up to the high and noble calling. Yes, we've let lesser motives distort our decisions. And yes, through it all we still hold to the heart of our faith – all love to God, equal love to neighbor. This is God's best dream for us and it's always stronger than any other claim on us, past or present.

We can now historically recount how we got it wrong but let's also remember how we got it right. Let's remember those who lived with integrity, those who did the right thing in the difficult moment; those unnamed, unnoticed, unattested millions who simply did the work of love in their historical nano-second. You may well be one of them, tapped deeply into the dream.

The people of our faith or other faiths who carry things forward don't generally get recorded in the annals of history – they're usually thoughtful souls who see a need and address it without fanfare or hype. Let's not be surprised by that. John registered the angst of his community in today's gospel but he also captures the light of Christ – light that has guided God's people for twenty centuries. Jesus, in John's gospel says, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."

Scholars might tell us that these sweet words were also placed on the lips of Jesus – John's was the last gospel to be written and the one most susceptible to narrative expansion. My response in this case is a tad schoolyard: so what? This is good news.

These words bring us together. These words unite. These words give life. We will extend the work of Christ in our own day and, together, exceed all that he accomplished in his public ministry.

Here's how that might happen - a mother turns her car around because another parent is running late and a child is exposed to danger. A man gets off his duff and goes to Home Depot to buy the right light bulbs and, next time, decides to buy the right car (ego takes the back seat, planet-care rides shotgun). A woman organizes her life around the needs of distressed children – both here and beyond our borders. Friends of a person dying put their agenda aside, their schedule, their priorities, and offer sustained comfort to the one who is sick and to those made heartsick by the situation. Hundreds show up on behalf of our lowest-wage workers for a public liturgy, a Seder-in-the-streets, urging employers to do all they can to offer dignity and a fair living. A priest puts other work aside for a moment to witness to the suffering of migrant people - in their countries of origin, in transit, and here - and calls out for deeper understanding and greater compassion.

That's the dream – or at least that's how I get it; it may come to you differently. You may be in a different REM cycle with God – if so, all blessings to you. I'm persuaded that active compassion trumps all else. And when it happens, over and over and over and over again, we suddenly discover that we and our neighbor are fully alive in that alternative empire that Jesus referred to as the Kingdom of God. Amen.