

“Being An Empathetic Historian”

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

We have gathered the Second Sunday of Easter to remember this truth: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Jesus rose from the dead, accomplishing forgiveness, rebirth and God’s saving power for humanity.

One of the gifts of the history of the people of God is their consistent desire to be blessed by God. Broken relationship with God and one another was common. Reconciliation to God and others was elusive. The psalmist hits on the prevailing theme of every generation of those who have followed God since Abraham. That is, unity matters. Psalm 133:1 reads, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” God’s blessing is evident wherever a united and caring community exists. It is unity that compels others to take seriously the good news that God has for humanity.

Any time a political culture and religious culture of a society are united as one in the same thing, both political ideology and religious theology lose their distinctive influence. Unity is impossible when a political perspective becomes the talking points of a particular religion. In the case of America, the melding of conservative Christian theology with conservative political ideology and the melding of liberal Christian theology with liberal political ideology polarizes the division. This is evident with matters of racial justice, immigration, healthcare and gender equality. The good news of the gospel is clouded if eviscerated by these conservative and liberal alliances. Neither represents the gospel accurately and faithfully. Polarization and division foster despair

not hope; chaos not peace; unhappiness not joy; and hate not love. In this regard, Latasha Morrison, author of *Be The Bridge*, our resource book for this series, writes,

What is the truth? Hasn't truth become a complicated word these days when news is labeled "fake," where "alternative facts" serve as the basis for a sort of virtual, choose-your-own reality? This complexity, though, isn't as recent as many would think. Truth has always been evaluated from various perspectives, depending on whether one is the teller or the listener, the winner or the loser, the dominant party or the marginalized.¹

Truth, as defined in the Bible, is to love God and others.

And we know truth in and through Jesus who said he was the way, the truth and the life. Moreover, the Greatest Commandment, The Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25 are highly problematic if not practiced. Truth is heard and seen when it is lived.

Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2 and John 20:19-31 proclaim that sharing things in common and experiencing grace is the unity thread.

Psalm 133 proclaims that God's grace must be the center of the community's life together. There are no winners and losers. Psalm 133:3 reads "It [grace] is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life for evermore."

1 John 1:1-2:2 asserts that if we do not address our sin, we render Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection useless. 1 John 1:6-7 reads, "If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but, if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

¹Latasha Morrison, *Be The Bridge* (WaterBrook, 2019), 21.

John 20:19-31 signals the beginning of new life for followers of Jesus then and now. Jesus' appearing to the disciples following the resurrection and invoking the power of the Holy Spirit was a game changer then and is now. With Thomas' doubt, Jesus reframes as a means to a greater end. Resolving doubt leads to a deeper faith. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead still causes many people, believers and yet-to-be believers alike, pause. Fear that Jesus' life was a hoax is replaced with the hopeful picture that abundant life is possible for all who resolve doubt into actions of belief. John 20:27 reads, "Then Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'" Thomas did as Jesus asked and exclaimed "My Lord and my God." A new beginning occurred for Thomas as he resolved doubt and believed.²

The message of the Second Sunday of Easter is this: Jesus gives peace to anyone who resolves doubt in actions of belief. When we do not act on the Greatest Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount or Matthew 25, the promise of hope, peace, joy and love are elusive. The tomb is empty. Jesus is on the loose in and through his followers. You will be, in word and deed, hope, peace, joy and love for someone who is stuck in doubt. Again, Latasha Morrison writes, "As Christians of differing ethnicities, we share a common heritage, a common memory. We are reminded who we are and whose we are through our salvation history...And as brothers and sisters in Christ, we

²In the four paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Eric Wall, Joel B. Green, Pamela S. Saturnia, Jonathan L. Walton and Thomas G. Long in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 208-209, 210-212, 212-213, 214-216 and 216-218.

must not only share our foundational memories and practices of faith but also share and understand our personal and ethnic histories.”³ Resolved doubt leads to a new beginning.

Historical truths regarding how different ethnicities practice and experience Christianity, play an important role in moving us out of division toward unity in our common humanity. Truth frees us. We are freed to see how God intended humanity to live. Share things in common and experience grace with others. Declare there are no winners and losers. Address sin, yours and society’s, rendering Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection transformational.

Here is my take away challenge for today’s sermon application. Identify a Christian friend who is ethnically different than yourself. Exchange stories of coming to salvation in Jesus. Share the struggles you each have had and may still have with being one with the other. Experience a new beginning. Be humble. Be an empathetic historian. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 11 April 2021
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³Latasha Morrison, *Be The Bridge*, 24.