

Easter 6th Sunday “Christ Died Once for All” 1 Peter 3

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

In this Easter season Epistle, we hear the apostle Peter exhorting the Christians to live righteously, with a good conscience, turning from evil and doing good, seeking peace and pursuing it (1 Peter 3:8-12).

Peter suggests that we should have an answer at the ready all the time. We should do this in gentleness and respect, just like Paul in our first reading from Acts. But it is the opening words of verse 16 which give us great trouble here: keeping a clear conscience. Too often we think that we do not have a good or clean conscience, instead, it accuses us. And so, we remain quiet. But look at verse 21. It says that a good conscience is not found in our obedience but in our inclusion in Christ’s death through Baptism and His resurrection. We are **being washed in the waters of baptism. We have a good conscience because Christ has made us clean.** Our sins are gone, really gone. It is no sham; we have a rock on which to stand and make our proclamation, Christ himself.

But there is also a danger in this text. We could find in its words an excuse for a passive sort of evangelism, but I think that is a misreading of this text and the whole letter of Peter. God’s people are being persecuted, they are being ridiculed, slandered, and perhaps worse. Peter doesn’t really go into too many details, which allows us in subsequent generations to apply this even more broadly. He wants their lives to be shining with hope. They can face unjust persecution cheerfully and without complaint. They will give no offence and they will not strike back, and the slaves among them will obey their masters even when the master is not watching, the husbands will honor their wives, the wives will respect their husbands, even when that relationship is fraught with tension. Peter understands this behavior, this lifestyle, to be an evangelistic tool, a means whereby people notice that we solve our problems differently, we deal with our disappointments differently, and we see our whole life differently. The point is that this Christian way of life should be an obvious witness.

Now persecution has a way of making the Christian stand out, it is true. And I don't think that **our** situation is all that different from that which Peter's people faced. He never says they were being thrown in jail or martyred here. In fact, the **first century** Roman empire, for the most part, ignored the Christians. They were simply not on their radar screen. The first active persecutions of the Church which were not motivated by the insanity of the persecutors were in the third century.

It is more likely that Peter's audience were being ridiculed for their belief and that there were vicious rumors running around the community that they were some sort of a weird cult. We know that in the 150's Justin Martyr had to deal with the persistent rumor that Christians were killing and eating children at their communion services. (Remember that for the first several centuries Christian worship was considered so holy that only the baptized were allowed in.) So, it was shrouded in secrecy.

Peter says that the best response to such slander is not to get defensive and angry, but to get loving and serving. Silence the critics with the good works that you are doing, with the respectable behavior which impresses them. It is much harder to impress someone with good than with scandal. Although these days scandal is the more prevalent strategy, Peter's world was no different. You can feed a thousand people and not make the headlines, but if your congregation is wracked by some sexual scandal, it will be page one in the local paper. But this inequity does not dissuade Peter and should not dissuade us from our mission.

Our good deeds are driven by the amazing hope which we have. And I think this is where we, if anywhere, really stumble sometimes. God has promised that **in our words, He acts**. He has promised that **in our deeds, He acts**. Do we feed the hungry looking for a miracle? Do we forgive the sinner expecting that the God who took a Saul and turned him into Paul is still active and working the same miracles today?

Ananias had to have an expectation of God's great work to go to the house of Justus on Straight Street in Damascus and baptize Saul that day. It takes hope, an expectation in God to look at the teeming needs of this world and try to do something about them. You have to believe that God is working beside you, or you will give up and withdraw into your safe, little gated-community and shut your doors to the outside world.

Too often our congregations have shut our doors, set up walls, and forgotten that Christ has called us to be lights to our community. We cannot hear this evangelism text honestly unless the world can reasonably see our hope in action. That we are out there caring for the needy, forgiving one another and our neighbors, serving as the priests for our whole town, this stuff will give our neighbor occasion to ask about the hope that is in us. Otherwise it is vain hope that a visitor will walk through our doors and ask us about a hope they cannot see.

Are we really living out the hope that is in us, or are we burying it inside this building? Have we so avoided the ridicule and the censure of this 21st century community that we have literally become invisible to them and irrelevant to their lives? If the answers are troubling, this sermon is too. The Gospel is then to be found in the fact that Jesus established this congregation in order to be a light to our community, and He stands ready and willing to help us become just such a congregation.

The whole mission and purpose of our church is empowered by the sure and certain hope that we have through Word and Sacrament, and this hope empowers everything we do as a congregation. Then we can point to the fruit, the people who have come to know Christ's love through our ministry, and that encourages our continued service.

And we are brought back again to this appeal to God for a good conscience through the washing of Holy Baptism, because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us. This is our justification, our being made right with God through Jesus Christ.

This is our atonement, our being made one again with God's will through Jesus Christ. He is our good conscience. He is our life and we are connected to Him like branches to the vine through Word and Sacrament, Christ in us. And this empowers not only our evangelical message, but also our life in this fallen world.

The apostle has set forth Jesus as our example (2:22), who sets the pattern of suffering followed by glory (1:11). In faith we see this as the pattern into which God leads us, as his fellow apostle Paul also says (Ro 8:17), a pattern which ends in victory and full vindication of one's cause. Jesus suffered to carry out the will of God (v. 18). He was able to announce His victory and vindication as the risen Savior to the wicked spirits in hell who have vehemently opposed the divine purpose to save (v. 19), like the souls of Noah's detractors (v. 20) and demonic powers (v. 22; 5:8-9).

Most important of all, Christ gives us the basis for the sure and certain hope by which we live. He has suffered and died for our sins to reconcile us to God (v. 18). This gracious atonement is bestowed upon us in Baptism. Peter says that Baptism saves us and that it is to be seen not as a removal of dirt, but as a pledge of God's forgiveness. This is the blessing of a good conscience (v. 21), cleansed by forgiveness for all failures, and stirred to loving obedience to such a marvelous Savior, so that it is of service in the Christian's life (v. 16). Baptism saves by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because Easter is His victory over the curse of death, won by Him through His atonement and shared with us in our Baptism.

Our sufferings must be understood in comparison to the sufferings of Christ who suffered once the sins of all. Our own sufferings do not atone for our sins, but Christ's sufferings do. Our works don't make us righteous, but Christ's work does. Christ's death and resurrection go together in this verse. So do our atonement and our confidence. Christ made atonement for us by His cross, and His resurrection gives us absolute certainty that His sacrifice was effective – eternally so, since when Peter says "once," He does not mean **once upon a time**, but rather once for **all** time.

This is what Hebrews 7:27 means when it says, “Christ has no need, like the high priests of old, to offer sacrifices daily, first for their own sins, and then for the sins of the people, since He did this once for all when He offered Himself.”

God reveals Christ’s work for us in the simplest way possible. He does not make us jump through philosophical hoops, or require us to figure out special codes and secret symbols, or demand that we spend a lifetime of research in science or theology. Instead, He reaches out to us simple, limited people with common things that we understand: human flesh, understandable language, plain water. He became one of us: Jesus Christ, the baby in swaddling clothes, the teacher who walks dusty roads who also raises widows’ sons from the dead and whose body was shredded and pierced for our sins.

And He delivers this Good News, this miracle, wrapped up in something we live in every day: human flesh. He delivers the witness of Jesus into human eyes like Peter’s, into human ears like ours, in language that invites us to investigate the historical facts. He pours out this miraculous revelation on poor, flesh and blood, real people, babies, people who walk dusty roads, and all who suffer the adversities of living on this earth a little longer. A miracle hidden and revealed in history, the history of a God who died and a man who rose from the dead, the history of you and me who died and rose again in the same way, as He pours Himself out on you and me in Word and water, in the simple miracle of an identity in Christ in Holy Baptism.

And may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!