

Living As Easter People

Colossians 3:12-17

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April 24, 2011

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Reading through Paul's letters to the many churches, we see his passion for grounding our faith in the Easter story and then for letting that Easter story form our character. He writes to the church people at Colossae inviting them to wear the garments that signify they are, indeed, Easter people. He says, "Clothe yourselves with compassion." Compassion is one of the Easter garments. To live as Easter people is to embody compassion; that is, to allow ourselves to feel what the other is feeling, to allow ourselves to understand life from someone else's perspective. When we live in this way, peace has a chance to gain a foothold; justice has a way of blossoming; and fear creeps back inside its cave. It's an Easter Day whenever anyone pulls this garment out of the closet.

When we had completed our building project and had an elevator that could accommodate a wheelchair, we looked around this sanctuary and realized there are precious few places for a person in a wheelchair to locate. We came up with two or three schemes, and then someone had the bright idea to consult with a family who relies on a wheelchair all the time!

So Witt and Kate Guinn came over one night, looked the place over, and helped us to see that we needed to remove a pew or two. They were thrilled to be consulted. The church was acting with compassion, trying to understand the challenges of being confined to a wheelchair. When the trustees removed a pew over here, it was the dawning of an Easter Day!

It makes all the difference when someone who has strong legs tunes in to someone whose legs don't work so well anymore. It's an example of what Paul had in mind when he wrote his Letter to the Colossians.

Paul says to the disciples at Colossae, 'Clothe yourselves with forgiveness. "If anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other."' This would be a sign that we are Easter people, living our Easter faith, moving beyond knowing about the Resurrection to living out the Resurrection's promise. Clothe yourselves with forgiveness. Is this garment in your closet? Poke around behind the sweatshirts and dress pants and blouses; see if it's there. The women and men may well have found the tomb empty on Easter morning, but what they really found and what we continue to find is that hearts are full when a word of forgiveness is spoken.

In the novel, *North River*, by Pete Hamill, we meet a physician, Dr. Delany, who is estranged from his adult daughter. Her complaint is that her daddy always had time for his patients, but no time for her. And now that she has become a mother, she is making the same mistake with her son. A whole lot of forgiving needs to take place in order for Easter to dawn on that household! A wound that has been passed from one generation to the next can be healed; not by any prescription from CVS, but by those awesome Easter words, 'I forgive you.' It's these wounds of the heart and soul for which the Resurrection is a soothing ointment, a healing balm.

There are probably two or three people right now I need to forgive, and there's at least that many who need to forgive me. When we live as Easter people, we don't hold back this precious ointment. We pour it out lavishly. This is why, whenever I baptize a child, I never just sprinkle the child with a token few drops; I do a proper soaking with my hand cupped full.

This I do in the wild hope the child will grow and become a forgiving human being, wearing this Easter garment, being like those Colossian Christians, Easter people!

Paul says to the believers in Colossae, ‘Clothe yourselves with love.’ For me, love is the everyday clothes we wear to work, to school, to the coffee shop, to the grocery store, to the tennis court. In my closet, I have a few garments hidden away in long, formal-looking bags; a white sport coat, a Brooks Brothers suit that doesn’t fit anymore, and a fringed ceremonial shirt for special occasions. All the other clothes are everyday clothes; available clothes, they are the clothes for loving, for being an Easter person.

Our Lenten film series this year was sustained by the theme of love. We watched five films in which love often took the form of respect. The characters knew they were loved when they were on the receiving end of respect. Respect is one of those words that’s hard to define. We just know it when we receive it. We also know it when it’s withheld. Living as Easter people means thinking deeply about what it would mean to show respect to someone who, if we were to see that person coming down the sidewalk, we might cross the road and walk in the opposite direction. And then, having thought deeply, stay on the same side of the sidewalk and do whatever respect requires.

We had such a person in Westfield, Massachusetts where we moved when I was 13 years old. He was a man named Conrad Furrell. He was about eight feet tall. His feet must have been size 30. He was a giant. Adults explained to us that he had some kind of a growth hormone imbalance and that we were to be respectful. But we’d see him coming, and we’d dash to the other side of Court Street which is where we were most likely to encounter him. I’m sure we never considered how our behavior may have made him feel. One day, we came around a corner and there he was, face to face with us. No time to dash across the street.

We looked up at him, and he looked down at us. He didn't say a word. We said, 'Good afternoon, sir.' And we kept on walking. But I have to tell you it felt so wonderful not to have run across the street. And we never did that again. We always had a friendly greeting for Conrad. I think he never actually spoke a word to us, but it didn't matter because we had found a way to be respectful. That day was an Easter Day. Without really knowing it, without any trumpet fanfares, we were living as Easter people.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell their own versions of what happened on that first Easter morning. The details vary somewhat, but the truths of the story are the same. What I have found that matters the most is when any of us chooses to move beyond knowing the story to living the story, to actually being Easter people.

That is what I wanted to say to the church this morning, and, if given the chance, would say to the whole world. In the greatest of hope, Amen!