

Washed and Ready

a sermon based on

1 Peter 1:13-23

and delivered on

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3rd Sunday of Easter (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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I remember this one time back in college when I was running late for work. It was common then for me to running from one thing to another. At the time, I was taking a full load of classes and working two jobs to make ends meet. As I'm trying to get out the door for work, I can't find my keys. Mind you, I was living in a studio apartment, no bigger than the office I'm sitting in right now. There weren't that many places for the keys to go. I checked under the cushions of the sofa and sofa bed, I felt around the seat of my chair. No keys.

I looked in the bathroom. Nope. I looked on the counter in my kitchen (really a closet with a sink, mini-fridge, and two electric burners. The counter between the burners and the sink was maybe a foot wide. No keys.

Usually, when emptying my pockets, I put the contents on top of the dresser. Or was it a chest of drawers? I don't really know the difference and I don't care. I called it a dresser; and I've now listed all the furnishings of this apartment. I went back and looked. Nope: not there either.

Then it dawned on me. What if a drawer had been slightly open and the keys had fallen in? I reached down to open the first door, but I couldn't get a good grip on the handle, so I pulled the key ring holding the keys off my finger and set them on the dresser to open the drawer, when...

I'd had those keys with me the entire time. They were exactly where I needed them to be. My anxiety, however, took over. I was worried about being late for work; and almost caused it to happen that way. I knew where my keys were supposed to be. I knew where they were most likely to be misplaced. What I knew didn't just keep me from going about my day as usual: it stole any joy that I might have had; it blinded me to hope.

Cleopas and his companion, even though they'd heard the news from the Marys and other women about Jesus' empty tomb and angel who'd told them that he had risen, were destitute of hope. I suspect that they may have been with Jesus and the other disciples at the last supper, because of what it was that allowed them to finally recognize him. Yet through the day, as they walked along that seven mile road between Jerusalem and Emmaus (Even at a brisk clip, that's about a two and a half mile walk.) and Jesus came and walked with them. Even as he explained the Scriptures to them (They'd heard Jesus teach before. Right?) they couldn't get past their despair because they knew Jesus had been killed and was dead. {aside: Let's face it. There is something different about Jesus' resurrected body. Mary Magdalene first thought he was a gardener. He just sort of appeared into a locked room with the disciples and had to show them the marks of the nails in his hands and the gash in his side. But there was still something recognizable. Peter noticed it when he and the others were fishing and saw Jesus on the shore.} Everything these two knew about the world and how things were and happened, meant that not only did they not expect to see Jesus again, they were ready to dismiss (without really thinking about it) anything about this "stranger" on the road that would help them recognize him. It's only at the end of their journey that day, after this stranger has opened up the Scriptures to them so that they could start to think in a new way, that they realize that Jesus has been with them all along when taking the bread, he gives thanks. (Again, this is why I said that I suspect they may have been with him at that last supper.)

Here's what gets me, today. After they recognized him and he'd gone, what do they say to one another? "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us along the road? Were not our hearts burning while he was opening up the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32) Can we just ponder that for a moment? {PAUSE} "Even though we were too blinded by our despair, even though we were too blinded by what we knew and know, something was happening."

I included a few more verses than are part of the lectionary in that passage from 1 Peter that we heard earlier. In particular the beginning in which Peter advises those who hear to prepare our minds and to discipline ourselves with hope. This is important, because when he then reminds us that we are ransomed from the futile ways (that is the things that we know because that's the way the world is) not merely by a promise but by the blood of Christ, not just to remove the stain of our sins, but to renew us in life by a rebirth. Not just for our own sake.

Later on he says in 1 Peter 2:11-12

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.”

What follows is what convicted me this week as I complained about the extended shelter in place order:

For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Pet 2:13-16)

For today, especially, that sentence from verse 15, “For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish,” speaks to that rebirth.

As modern mainline Protestants, we don’t talk a lot about the blood of Jesus and what it means to be washed in it, even though his blood is mentioned more than forty times in the New Testament – after the resurrection. It just seems icky or uncouth. It seems less than intellectual. We can’t comprehend how his blood – his death – was/is necessary for us to have life in him. Ironically, it’s because of the new life that those early Christians experienced and the way their lives – caring for others in the midst of epidemics and famines rather than hoarding and exploiting the resources they had (things that the world just knows are the best way to survive) Their experience of being washed in his blood is actually what changed much of how we think the world should be so that it doesn’t quite make as much sense to us now.

Yet we still see how the world reverts in times of peril. Don’t we? Casting blame. Disparaging and demonizing those who are different or with whom we disagree. Why? Because mercy, kindness, love, and humility are signs of hope; where these things are obscured, hopelessness leads to fear and soul-crushing self-interest. That blindness – that ignorance – that inability to see hope or even to expect the possibility is there in so many lives.

How many people choose to believe that either there is no god, or that the loving, personal God that we know in Jesus Christ is merely wishful thinking? I say *choose* intentionally. It is a choice. This week I received an email with encouraging quotes. One of them is from C.S. Lewis who wrote, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.” When we claim the blood of Jesus – when we claim the power of God’s self-emptying love for us – it helps us to recognize where God has been tending to our needs all along. Having been washed in his blood, we’re ready: ready to see everything else; and ready to show everything else to others..

As Søren Kierkegaard said (in another of those quotes in that email) "Mercy has converted more souls than zeal, or eloquence, or learning or all of them put together."

Even when the world is as blind as Cleopas and his companion, unable to recognize Jesus, how we live – how we claim that hope that springs forth in Jesus’ blood – gives them a glimpse. If it doesn’t set their hearts on fire, maybe it will warm them enough, so that they – and we might recognize him at some moment and then realize or be reminded that he was right here where he promised to be the whole time. AMEN.