

“Easter in an Age of Exile”
Sermon Series – *Strangers in a Strange Land*
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(1 Pt. 1:1-9; Lk. 24)

Introduction.

Have you ever felt like an exile on Easter? Maybe you were far from home when the holiday rolled around, or you were on assignment for work or deployed in the military overseas. Perhaps you experienced a broken relationship in your family, and Easter just made you feel the estrangement all the more. Or maybe something awful happened in your life, and your dreams died. It’s hard to be an exile on Easter.

During the season of Lent this year, we’ve been looking at the idea of exile as a metaphor to describe how on many occasions as Christians we feel out of step with the world – like strangers in a strange land. We’ve also noted that the American church is now in a different place in our culture than it once was. We no longer have the home field advantage, so to speak, and Christian truth and Christian values are no longer shared by a majority of the people around us.

What does the message of Easter and the promise of the resurrection mean to people living in exile? What difference does it really make? And how can it affect the way I live my life? I believe the resurrection means everything, and I believe it can change your life!

I. Feeling like an Exile on Easter.

In the passage we’ve read this morning, the apostle Peter addresses his letter to people who were exiles. He writes, *“To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1Pt. 1:1)*. The words “strangers in the world” is a translation of two Greek words *parapidemioi diasporas*. Another way to translate these words is “exiles who are scattered around the world” or simply “pilgrims.”

The people to whom Peter was writing were literally exiles. They were scattered all over what was known then as Asia Minor, or in what is today western Turkey. But they were also exiles in another sense in that the followers of Christ were a persecuted minority in their culture, and in some contexts they had to meet in secret for fear of arrest. It was to these exiles that Peter wrote about the hope Jesus’ resurrection offers us.

Even after the resurrection, the followers of Christ often felt like exiles. In fact, it even happened on the very day when Jesus rose from the dead. You'll recall that Luke the evangelist tells us that late in the day the risen Christ joined two people who were walking on the road to Emmaus from the city of Jerusalem. Everything about them indicated they felt like exiles, and they were in a state of sadness and despair.

"They stood still, their faces downcast....They said, 'We had hoped He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place'" (Lk. 24:17,21). You can hear the disappointment in their voices. Their hopes had been dashed. Their dreams died. It's not uncommon to experience this sort of thing whenever your dreams have died, and you feel like an exile.

Many years ago, Eugene Peterson wrote a commentary on the book of Jeremiah, and in it Peterson explains that Jeremiah himself lived during a time of exile in the 6th century BC. You'll recall that the Jews were taken as captives and relocated to Babylon after they were conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. In his book Peterson writes, "The essential meaning of being an exile is that we are where we don't want to be. Exile is traumatic and terrifying. Our sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When that changes, violently, abruptly, who are we? The accustomed ways we have of finding our worth and sensing our significance vanish. The first wave of emotion recedes and leaves us feeling worthless, meaningless. We don't fit anymore. No one expects us to do anything. No one needs us. We are extra baggage. We aren't necessary."¹

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been in a place where you didn't feel like you fit anymore? Where you felt unnecessary? We all have, and the early disciples did when Jesus was crucified. It's a difficult place to be. However, it's in that place of exile where God often shows up. Peterson writes that the exile the Jews experienced in Babylon led to one of the most creative periods in the entire sweep of Jewish history. It was a time in which they lost everything that they thought was important to them, but they actually found what was *most* important. They found God.

And so did these disciples on the road to Emmaus that first Easter. The Bible says that *"When He was at the table with them, [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, and He disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures?' They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:30-33).* The resurrection changes everything for people in exile.

II. Exiles living with Easter Hope.

The apostle Peter writes about the hope of the resurrection in our passage today, and he says, *“In His great mercy God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you”* (1 Pt. 1:3b-4). In spite of their experience as exiles, and in spite of the frequent suffering and persecution they had to endure, hope was possible for them because of the resurrection of Christ. The victory Jesus won over the grave had given Peter hope that we too can overcome, and he said that God offers us that hope both in this world and in the next.

The Bible says that the tragic death of Jesus on the cross and the disillusionment the disciples experienced provided not only the means for our salvation but also the stunning turn of events which would change the world forever, let alone the lives of the disciples. Eugene Peterson says that “This very strangeness [of being an exile] can actually open a new reality to us... With the pain and in the midst of the alienation a sense of freedom can occur.”

For the Israelites the new reality meant settling down and finding out what it really meant to be God’s people in a foreign land. It meant choosing to flourish – to build homes, raise children, and witness to the people in their community. Even though they were in a place where they never wanted to be, they accepted it as God’s will for their lives, and they sought to bloom where they were planted.

The same can be true for us. If we find ourselves in an unexpected or unwanted place in life, that can be the prompt that motivates us to ask, “God, what are you up to here? How do you want to use this in my life? And what am I supposed to learn from all of this?” It can cause us to seek God in a new way with all our hearts, and to endeavor to live for what really matters most in life, now that the props have been pulled out from under us. Peterson writes, “Exile is the worst that reveals the best.” It happened for Israel when they were in exile. It happened for Jesus and His disciples in His awful crucifixion. And it can happen in your life today, too.

Last week Lisa Meyer of our congregation sent me a blog of someone she likes to read, and the writer, Jodie Berndt, highlighted the excerpts from Peterson’s book on Jeremiah I’ve mentioned already. But Jodie also applied the truths of what Eugene wrote to the recent victory the University of Virginia basketball team won in the NCAA Tournament when they became national champions earlier this month. (Congratulations to all you Wahoo fans! Go ACC!)

You may recall that last year the UVA basketball team was the first #1 seed in the history of the NCAA Tournament to lose to a #16 seed. It was a crushing and embarrassing defeat, and it represented one of the lowest points in life for both the team and its coach Tony Bennett. But they found a way to take that huge negative

and turn it into a positive. They accepted the loss as a “painful gift,” and it motivated them to work harder, play tougher, and coach better than they ever had before. Coach Bennett cited a line from a TED talk he heard to motivate and focus his players. The line was, “If you learn to use adversity and a painful defeat correctly, it will take you to a place you couldn’t have gone any other way.”

How you respond to the difficult thing you’re going through right now will make all the difference in your life in the future. You can either resign yourself to defeat, like the disciples did after the crucifixion, and you can get stuck in your own sadness and disappointment. Or you can allow God to use it as a moment to do a new thing in your life and look to Him to bring a transformation that will change you forever. Just look at what happened to those disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were so excited after they realized Jesus had actually risen from the dead that they got up from the table where they were eating and hurried back to Jerusalem, a journey of 7 miles. Even though it was nighttime, they couldn’t wait to tell their friends the good news.

Conclusion.

Earlier in my sermon I quoted Eugene Peterson when he said, “Exile is the worst that reveals the best.” That’s the message of the cross and the resurrection. It’s also the promise of heaven. Last year Eugene Peterson passed away on October 22nd. The day he died, he sat up straight in bed, and he looked off in the distance and pointed and said, “I would like to go with you.” He had the most peaceful expression on his face.

Eugene’s family believes he saw Jesus, or at least one of His angels, and he was beginning his journey to heaven. Just a few hours later he died. In his last moments, Eugene Peterson was clinging to the hope of heaven, and it was becoming a reality for him as he made his journey from this life to the next. This world isn’t meant to be our permanent home, and in a sense we are all exiles – pilgrims – on a journey following after the Lord until one day we shall be with Him in heaven.

Resurrection always gives us hope, and as exiles it’s the hope we have in Christ that can enable us to take the worst things that happen in life and see the redemptive work of God in the middle of it all. Consider this current example. On April 15th the world was shocked to learn that the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris was on fire, and flames devastated the 850-year-old church. But as the fire retreated, hopeful reports began to come out. Holy relics, works of art, and historic documents had been saved. Many parts of the old building miraculously survived. And contributions and pledges have poured in to ensure that the grand cathedral will be rebuilt. Resurrection.

However, the most remarkable part of the story that emerged from the burning of Notre Dame is what took place the night of the fire. Hundreds of Parisian Catholics, many of them young people, were kneeling in the streets around the building as it burned, and they continued to do so well into the wee hours of the next morning. The secular media had no idea how to process the sight of people praying and singing hymns as one of the most famous buildings in Paris was being reduced to ashes. Even as the old church was being destroyed, it managed to bring together those who seek eternal life through the One who promised, “I shall rise again!” Resurrection.

France is one of the most secular nations in Europe. Believers there feel like exiles. But on one of their darkest nights the light of their faith shone brightly, and God took the worst to reveal the best. That’s how God always works. It’s what He did with the cross and the resurrection, and He can do it in your life too, friend, whatever hardship you may be facing today. Easter faith gives us hope – today and always. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Thanks be to God!

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Run with Horses*, p. unknown.