

John 20:19-29

1 Peter 1:3-9

April 27, 2014

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WE ARE BAPTIZED, EASTER PEOPLE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

[I will begin the sermon by reviewing newspaper headlines and online news stories from Sunday morning, April 27. The headlines/stories will surely be along the lines of headlines and stories from Thursday, April 24, when I wrote this sermon: Veterans struggle with pain pill addiction; Syrian activists accuse Assad of new gas attacks; Russia threatens retaliation in Ukraine; the sinking of the South Korean ferry; the continued search for the missing Malaysian airliner; Ebola death toll rises again]

And yet, in just a few minutes, Sandee DiDomenico will stand before us and answer the following questions:

Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love?

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?

Either Sandee and all of us who have been baptized and made a public profession in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are completely naive, or we else we know something about the God we worship and serve that the world at large doesn't or won't recognize.

Listen again to the Call to Confession which I used this morning:

"In the time that has passed since Easter Sunday, have we become a changed people? Have we lived with hope and promise, trusting in the Risen Christ? Or have we been more like the earliest disciples, still gathered behind locked doors out of fear?"

Read the morning headlines. Watch the evening news. Check the hourly updates online. Consider the sufferings of your own family and friends. Think about the challenges you face in life. It would be easy to "gather behind locked doors out of fear."

But, friends, it is Easter! It **is** Easter! Not, "It **was** Easter a week ago, but now we have to move on or go back to the way things were."

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, admitted that, in the midst of great affliction and anxiety, he would repeatedly say, "I **am** baptized! I **am** baptized!" I don't just say, "I **was** baptized on Mother's Day, May 13, 1956." I can, and do, say, "I **am** baptized."

And there you have the connection between "baptized" and "Easter" in today's sermon title. Sermon titles might seem like a fairly unimportant item in the order of worship. Here's a little secret: sometimes it takes me all week to come up with the right sermon title. The sermon title is typically the last thing I send to Cheryl before she can print the Sunday bulletin. More often than not, she has to buzz me on the intercom and say, "Do you have a sermon title yet?" And I have to say, "I'm working on it."

When I went to our Wednesday morning Bible study, I had a list of eight possible sermon titles — none of which seemed right. As we talked about what 1 Peter 1:3-9 means for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, someone said she had read the comment that “We Are Easter People.” Immediately I knew that was the one. However, if you’ll notice in the bulletin, the sermon title was tweaked to “We Are Baptized, Easter People.” In those five words, I’ve tried to sum up what 1 Peter 1:3-9 means for your life and mine.

When I wrote down the sermon title to give to Cheryl on Thursday morning, I couldn’t decide whether or not to put a comma between “Baptized” and “Easter.” That may strike you as a picky — even nerdy — detail. But there’s a reason I wanted to get it right. I texted Sharon Moore and e-mailed Carol Steen and sought their grammar/punctuation advice. Sharon reminded me of the guideline, “If you can put ‘and’ between the words and it makes sense, use a comma.” It did, and I did. Carol consulted her copy editor, who sent back the following advice to the question, “Do you need a comma between ‘baptized’ and ‘Easter’?: “I would say no. In this case ‘Easter People’ is a compound noun, and ‘Baptized’ is modifying that compound, so there is no comma. A comma between adjectives is supposed to indicate that the two adjectives are of ‘equal importance,’ which is not true in this case.”

Her last sentence, “A comma between adjectives is supposed to indicate that the two adjectives are of ‘equal importance,’ which is not true in this case,” got my attention. When I thanked Carol in a reply e-mail, I said, “Interesting. I think I would argue that ‘Baptized’ and ‘Easter’ are both adjectives modifying ‘People,’ rather than ‘Easter People’ being a compound noun (at least for the purposes of Sunday’s sermon). In the case of my sermon, ‘Baptized’ and ‘Easter’ are of equal importance (that’s sort of the point of the sermon).”

The sermon title — and the intervening grammar/punctuation investigation — is meant to get at the core meaning of 1 Peter 1:3-9, which comes through in verse 3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . .” Listen to the key words: his great mercy; new birth; living hope; resurrection from the dead. As we come to the baptismal font with Sandee this morning, let us remember our glorious Easter celebration of a week ago. As I invite you to remember and renew your baptismal vows, let us all remember this: “We **are** baptized! We **are** Easter people!”

A few minutes ago, I read the first two questions I will ask Sandee before she is baptized. There are five questions in all. The first two and the last two are like book-ends for the central question — **the** question, which is, “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?” Now, listen to the last two questions:

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life’s end?

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Speaking of grammar and baptism, again, Martin Luther talked about the three tenses of time in understanding the meaning of baptism for our lives as believers.

There is the past tense: God **has** given us a new birth.

There is the future tense: In the last time all **will** be revealed.

There is the present tense: suffering various trials for a little while, (as we obey God's Word and fulfill our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ).

Just four verses later, Peter adds one more grammatical category, the imperative, in his instructions for the Christian life: "Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed." (1 Peter 1:13) What we celebrated last Sunday on Easter and what we celebrate today at the baptismal font are so closely tied together, they are almost one.

Listen to the way the apostle Paul describes the meaning of baptism for our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, not **just** in the future, but **now** in the everyday world: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his . . . But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:3-5, 8-11)

Let's go back to the headlines and news stories of the day, many of which seem to challenge the core idea of "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Actually, you don't need me to stand in the pulpit and read headlines to you to illustrate how difficult life can. As I look around the sanctuary, I think about the tears we have shed together over the years because of the sufferings and hard times so many of us — shouldn't I really say, **all** of us? — have gone through. Again and again, people say to me, "I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had my faith in God and Jesus Christ." But I've also heard people say, "Where is God?" or "My faith has been shaken to its foundations" or "I'm searching in the midst of these hard times."

Last week, I said that the Easter story is not the ending, just the beginning. We will act that out in just a few minutes, when we gather around the baptismal font, remember and renew our baptismal vows, and I put the water on Sandee's head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Just as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is not the end of the story, but just the beginning, so it is with our baptisms.

Since I have quoted Martin Luther, our close cousin in the Reformed faith, let me draw from our forefather himself, John Calvin, who had this to say about these verses from 1 Peter. Calvin said 1 Peter begins with a description of our indestructible hope so that we may “enjoy the invaluable treasure of a future life; and also that we may not be broken down by present troubles, but patiently endure them, being satisfied with eternal happiness.” That is our living hope — the hope that helps us live right now, right here, as followers of Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead. As someone has written, “We have Easter hope in a world of decay and death.”

My heart breaks with yours when you suffer illness and grieve the deaths of loved ones and go through hard times in life. So, please don't take this the wrong way when I say, much of that suffering is a result of our being human in a fallen, sinful world.

Everybody suffers illness and grief and hard times, at one time or another, in one way or another. Thank God we have a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to see us through such times!

But, when Peter writes “if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials” and talks about “the genuineness of your faith [being] tested by fire,” he means suffering and testing that comes our way **because** we are baptized, Easter people. He doesn't necessarily mean we have to go looking for various trials and sufferings as Christians. He does indicate, in a way that causes me to sit up and take notice and take stock of my Christian faith, that if we are truly following the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we can expect to have various trials come our way. And, when that happens, it is our “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” that will protect us by the power of God “through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

My closing words in today's baptismal celebration will be, “Sandee, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.”

And so we are:

* sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism

* marked as Christ's own forever

* people with a living hope, called to be faithful to our risen Lord

We are baptized, Easter people!

Let us pray: Gracious God, who has promised to be with us always: Give us the depth of faith and hope that does not depend on proof, that we may offer your love and hope to others and live each day in the assurance that you have given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen.