

## **“What Easter Makes Clear: For the Sake of the World”**

Mark 8:31-38; John 17:1-6, 20-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 17, 2026

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might embody and share the Spirit of the Risen Christ who makes us one. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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Today is the last Sunday of Eastertide. Technically, for the liturgical purists, we've already entered into the transition, with the Feast of the Ascension this last Thursday marking Jesus' departure from earth and Pentecost just around the corner, next Sunday. But we'll claim this one last Sunday, to finish up this sermon series, in which we are exploring “What Easter Makes Clear.” One thing that might not be clear is why I'm saying that these weighty topics we've been contemplating – incarnation, nonviolence, and inclusion, so far – are Easter lessons, when only that first Sunday after Easter actually involved resurrection appearances.

But the truth is that there is a lot more scripture interpreting what Easter meant from before and a while after the resurrection than there is in the immediate afterglow. Even Jesus himself spent more time explaining what was going on beforehand than he did later. And our scriptures today are a couple examples of that.

If you know anything about the gospel of John, you know that it is pretty different than the other three. Rather than a portrayal of the Last Supper, John tells us a story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. That happens in chapter 13. And then

all through chapters 14, 15, and 16, John has Jesus telling them things – about love and peace, about the true vine and the branches, about the Holy Spirit and how things are about to get hard. It’s a lot of words, and quite frankly, the disciples find it a little confusing. By the time we get to the verses we read today, though, Jesus isn’t just talking; he’s praying. So the verses we heard just now are not technically addressed to the disciples, but to God; though it’s clear Jesus wanted them to listen in. One could argue, even, that Jesus wanted us to listen in, since it’s one of the few moments when we’re mentioned – if you feel yourself included in “those who will believe in me through their word”.

So what do we hear in this pre-garden betrayal prayer? I hear themes of belonging and glory. There is a lot of “you in me and I in you and them in us” going on here, but also a lot of “glorifying glory that is about to be glorified.” But buried in the repetitive verbiage, is a deeper theme, and almost an answer to an important question: this prayer shows Jesus addressing the great Why. We usually talk about this prayer as Jesus’ desires for his church: he wants us to be one. But why? Why should the church be one? That could be a risky question in this age when the church is decidedly divided into way more than one. We could lament that disunity, but before we do, we should pay attention to what Jesus told us it was for. Because Jesus isn’t praying that his church will be one because it’s nice when a community is unified. It’s that very last line: “that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that

you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” We are not called to unity simply for the sake of unity, but rather because that is how our witness to the world about the God of love becomes credible. God really wants the world to believe in love.

So as much as we love to do Easter up into a beautiful festival of flowers and feasting and song, the real point is what comes next – how we carry that love and joy out into a broken world. There are hints of this in the post-resurrection stories too, of course: when Jesus tells the disciples at the end of Matthew to go and “make disciples of all nations,” or in the story of the Ascension from the beginning of Acts when he instructs them to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then there are the verses we heard from Mark this morning, which are not post-resurrection, but rather one of Jesus’ attempts to help the disciples understand what was coming before it happened.

Jesus says that those who want to follow him will need to “take up their cross”. Why? “For my sake,” he says, and “for the sake of the gospel.” It is difficult for us to imagine – living as we do, in a society that does not practice crucifixion – just how excruciating those words must have been to hear. No wonder Peter pushed back. Honestly, in some ways, it feels as though we’ve trivialized the idea of “having a cross to bear.” The phrase gets used to describe any sort of ongoing challenge we have to put up, whether a chronic condition or a perpetually grumpy boss. Sometimes, it’s

even used to justify inequities in who is required to tolerate what and who gets to get away with bad behavior. How did we get from someone choosing to take up the cross in hopes of following Jesus to pastors telling women that their abusive husbands are their “cross to bear”?! That is not good news!

It makes a difference that following the Risen Christ is supposed to result in good news. If it doesn't, it's not Jesus we're following. When Jesus calls the church into unity, he's not telling us to hush up about injustices and wrongs so as not to hurt anyone's feelings. He's challenging us to believe in the reconciling, transformative power of God's love and embody it so deeply that we can dare to work through our differences, even when it requires sharing hard truths and making humble confessions of our own sinfulness. Unity is not superficial calm that mirrors the false peace of the world that is held in place with force. Unity is living out the belief that what happens to one part of the body impacts every other part of the body, including and especially when it's hard or painful.

The world is not going to be impressed – indeed, it has clearly shown that it is not impressed by communities full of people who get along so very well because they all wear masks of forced cheerfulness and never talk about anything that matters. But do you know what would get their attention? A community that has taken the time and the effort to work through difficulty, to bring justice and reconciliation into a thorny, multi-sided conflict with no “good” solutions. Maybe we are one another's

crosses to bear. The thing that makes church different than other groups within our society is that, theoretically, a church could be full of people who don't have that much in common otherwise. As we know, this isn't usually as true as we claim it could be, but a church could have people of different socioeconomic situations, different races, different genders and sexualities, different educational levels, different geographic origins, different hobbies, different interests, different political leanings and more. If that were true, and we still came together to sing praise to God and to serve our neighbors with love like Jesus', would the world notice? I believe they do. I believe they are. Even when we're not doing it all that well, as long as it's clear we're trying.

In the end, it may not be that trivial to truly learn to get along with one another and work side by side. So much of the conflict that erupts in congregations is really about ego and anxiety, rather than the lofty theological things we claim it's about, like music styles and space use. But what if we could lay our "selves" aside, at least for a bit, and enter into these discussions deeply aware of the glory of God?

I don't think most of us in Disciples churches consider the glory of God that often, perhaps even less than we sing about it. What does that word bring to mind for you? I think of the words of the hymn "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise": "in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." But surely the purpose of glory isn't to obscure God from us? If we consider the moments when the disciples witnessed the glory of

God through Jesus, we think of the Transfiguration – blinding light again – and perhaps Thursday’s event, the Ascension. The impression these stories give is that the glory of God is a bit overwhelming. We Disciples tend to stay in our heads a bit too much to appreciate that, I’m afraid. But pause for a moment, and consider how lovely it might actually be, to be overwhelmed by something positive for once?

Life is too frequently overwhelming. We are overwhelmed by stress, by the horrors in the news, by the craven cowardice of our leaders, by the callousness of our neighbors casually dismissing the needs of vulnerable people. It’s exhausting. But what could it be like to be overwhelmed by love, by light, by beauty and wonder? I would guess that might actually be refreshing, invigorating, inspiring, even. It might give us what we need to take up those crosses and do the hard work of unity, even when it’s tedious and irritating. Because once we’ve experienced how much bigger than us this really is, it becomes clear that our unity is not just for our sake, but for the sake of bringing good news to the whole world, for the flourishing of all creation. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen.