

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
April 26, 2020

The Third Sunday of Easter:  
Cut to the Heart

Every year I look forward to this season of Easter. It's not a day; it's at least a season with fifty days -- the Great Fifty Days of Easter -- culminating with Pentecost Sunday. Have you ever noticed that we leave behind our Old Testament readings during this season? They are replaced by readings from the Acts of the Apostles, the next chapter of the story after Jesus' resurrection. We step firmly into the New Covenant in Eastertide with these readings from Acts in which the apostles are learning to live into Christ's resurrection themselves. They're asking, "How do we claim our citizenship in God's kingdom? How do we share the Good News that has changed us?"

In our reading today, it is actually just after the Pentecost moment. The Holy Spirit has filled the disciples and Peter gives this speech which we heard a portion of last week. He is the spokesman for this new Christian community that is driven to new frontiers by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Last week, we had this image of Peter standing before the crowds, people from all over the Hellenistic world gathered, and he addressed them saying,

We are witnessing things the prophets spoke about. Jesus of Nazareth, a man you knew as a mighty prophet himself, was handed over to you and you crucified him and he was buried. Now we know our ancestor, David, a mighty king and prophet he was, eventually died and his tomb is with us to this day. But this Jesus, God raised up from the dead and of that we are all witnesses and now the Holy Spirit is on the loose as never before.

That was last week. Today Peter continues the same speech, saying, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that *God has made him both Lord and Messiah*, this Jesus whom you crucified."

I'm not sure how you have encountered Peter's sermon upon hearing it in our readings. I don't know how you'd rate him as a preacher as you simply read or hear it but apparently it was quite something to take in. Our text says that when the crowds heard this something happened. One of the most revealing and descriptive phrases in the New Testament comes next -- revealing and descriptive because we have been there before, *we have been there ourselves* -- and you might even find that you're taken there again this Eastertide. "When they had heard this," our story says of those in the crowd, "They were cut to the heart!" They were cut to the heart.

Here is how one writer describes this moment:

The Spirit, which had invaded the disciples, now moves the assembly to compunction of heart, a rending conviction of sin. Yet they do not stay there, paralyzed by remorse and immobilized by sorrow. They immediately ask the apostles an eminently practical question, ‘What should we do?’ What to do about guilt? What to do about resurrection? How do we connect with it? Peter replies with a fully practical response, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>1</sup>

Here is a truly remarkable thing: Peter confronts the masses with the fact that they, like us, crucified this Jesus. Now the sin of our world is before us, a brokenness that we share in personally and systemically, yet “[we] do not stay there.” Christ did not remain in bondage to the powers of death, nor do we. God has been at work in all of this. Peter tells the crowds, he tells us, that God has raised this Jesus from the dead and made him both Lord and Messiah. And they were cut to the heart to no longer be able to deny the incompleteness of their lives and just a breath, just a second later, to find out that’ Jesus death took on their incompleteness and overcame it, he overcame sin, he overcame death itself. *They were cut to the heart.* They were cut to the heart with life altering Good News and they could only ask one question, “What then shall we do?”

Peter answers them, “Be baptized.” Join with Christ Jesus in his death and resurrection by being baptized. As Peter said, “For the promise is for you and for your children.” Easter is for you. All of this is God’s gift to you. Our baptism -- whether you are preparing for yours now, whether you are baptized already as an infant or an adult -- “our baptismal union with Christ in the paschal mystery unites us, through Christ, to God.”<sup>2</sup> We yearn for more and more of that saving union. We yearn for more and more of the gift of the Holy Spirit that we received in baptism. We are paralyzed by sin and fear no longer. Our hearts are cut open by this Good News that we have joined with Christ himself, that the grace of Easter through our baptisms, is ours now. Easter is for us and we are not done with it yet!

Still, there is more to the story. The second chapter of Acts is not even over. That is for next Sunday. Stay tuned to Easter. There is more of it to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Gatta, *Life in Christ: Practicing Christian Spirituality* (Church Publishing: New York, 2018), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Gatta, *Life in Christ*, 9.