

What I am about to tell you is a true story.

There once was a local church founded by one group of people that grew because members of another group of people – quite different from the first group – decided to follow Jesus too. The people who had once been the dominant cultural group in their congregation were now close to being outnumbered, and that trend gave every indication of continuing.<sup>1</sup> The differences between the two groups were visible in their first languages, what they ate and drank, how they dressed, what they enjoyed for entertainment. Each group brought a different lens through which they looked at life, at politics, at religion, at almost everything.<sup>2</sup>

Differences led to tension. Some of the tension was about culturally embedded stereotypes and biases into which they had been born. Some of the tension was born out of past and present oppression and violence between these groups. All of the tensions shared the touchstone of fear. Individuals in the groups had been taught, had learned, to be afraid of one another. There was no model for deep, meaningful, equitable relationships between members of these groups because outside of their local church context the groups didn't mix. In the outside world divergent cultures and convictions led to mutual suspicion and hostility reinforced by the worldly power one group held over the other.

Into that local church a Christian leader shared some words. They are not words calling that congregation to change the world. They are words inviting that local congregation into an entirely new understanding of itself, a wholly new identity.

“For Christ is our peace, [our rest, well-being, and salvation]

who made both groups one

- All the two groups
  - Foreigners and citizens
  - Far off ones and near ones
  - Insiders and Outsiders
  - Ones belonging and ones not belonging to the Church
  - Gendered ones
  - Insiders and outsiders
  - Employers and employees
  - Rich and poor
  - Slaves and free people
  - Oppressed and oppressors
  - Powerful ones and ones at the mercy of power

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Arland J. Hultgren is the Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Luther Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> See Adeyemo, Tokunboh, General Editor. *Africa Bible Commentary: A One Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

- Influential ones and voiceless ones

“For Christ is our [rest, well-being, and salvation] who makes all the groups one in order to make them one new person, [One new humanity]

- In Jesus’s own flesh, [the Body of Christ]

And in the making,

- reconciling us all to God
- [breaking] down the barriers of hostility that have kept groups apart
- through the cross putting to death the enmity between us, [between the groups, all the hostility between all the groups]
- establishing [rest, well-being, and salvation], establishing peace between us.<sup>3</sup>

## Everyone gets a fresh start!

- Not by erasing, overlooking, or ignoring the past by dispensing cheap grace. In Christ, God graces us with liberation from perpetuating the past, and the possibility for creating together an entirely new preferred shared future.
- Not that ‘others’ need to come to us or need to become like us. Paul proposed something much more startling, creating the humanity God always intended.

What God declared good in the beginning, we are empowered, by the Holy Spirit, to make real in our days, to incarnate as Christ’s Body in the world.

That is the essence of what being “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”<sup>4</sup> means, not resurrection people, but resurrected people.

Resurrections begin with death. The resurrection of Jesus began with his state-sanctioned execution. He was dark-skinned, a noncitizen. The decision-makers in the systems responsible for Jesus dying said they felt threatened by him, that they feared for their lives, or at least their ways of life. They said better that Jesus die, innocent though he was, than for the nation they envisioned, for them, to lose power, status, and place. Their words, not mine.

When an angel told several tomb-visiting women Jesus was alive again, the angel didn’t say he went to heaven. The angel said Jesus went to Galilee. The angel also said Jesus’s friends could see him there, not in church, in the flesh. Jesus’s resurrection was a this-world event.

The earliest public telling of the resurrection story was not at a funeral when, or at a grave where, a body was laid to rest. The earliest public telling of the Easter story was in the streets. From there, resurrection people carried the story into halls of power controlled by

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<sup>3</sup> *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation by Priests for Equality* [annotated]

<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Ro 6:11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

decisionmakers responsible for systems that killed the dark-skinned, innocent, noncitizen who refused to die quietly.

They told the Easter story as Good News. The power that raised a dead Jesus to life was available to raise up life-giving institutions if authorities would lay to rest their privilege instead of their usual victims. Easter’s story, for earliest Christians, was not about heavenly existence, but rather, about a whole new life available now.

We are still witnessing state-sanctioned executions of dark-skinned, noncitizen, citizen, and innocent people. Adam Toledo. Daute Wright. Ryan Whitaker. Carlos Ingram-Lopez. Breonna Taylor. And on Tuesday, 15 year old Makhia Bryant shot by Columbus, Ohio police just moments before the verdict was announced convicting Dereck Chauvin of murdering George Floyd. I could use the entire worship hour to say their names and still all the victims would not be named. Archbishop Desmond Tutu proclaimed, “Easter says to us that despite everything to the contrary...love will prevail over hate, justice over injustice and oppression, peace over exploitation and bitterness.” We need that kind of resurrection now!

That resurrection will also begin with death. No more deaths of dark-skinned, noncitizen, citizen, and innocent victims! Let die, instead, the white supremacy upon which our nation and its institutions were founded. Let die, instead, the narrative of American history that forgets to recount the genocide of indigenous people. Let die, instead, the fear that migrants will do to us what our ancestors did to the first nations living in this land. Let die the ignorance that same-gender-loving people somehow threaten the loving relationships of different-gender-loving people. Let die the myth that religious freedom justifies discrimination. Let die notions that these are political positions when they are actually divine moral imperatives. Let Christians take the Easter story into the streets, into halls of power controlled by our decision-makers. Let the voices of people of faith cry out so that no innocent victim dies quietly. Then the resurrection life of loving neighbor as self will find its heartbeat. Then the new humanity to which Paul called the congregation in Ephesus will emerge in our day!

“As difficult as it is, I must learn the new song that is capable of meeting the new need. I must fashion new words born of all the new growth of my life, my mind and spirit. I must prepare for new melodies that have never before been mine. Teach me ... that I might learn the fresh new accent, the untried melody, to meet the need of the untried morrow. I will sing a new song!”<sup>5</sup>  
So that everyone gets a fresh start!!

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman in *The Moods of Christmas & Other Celebrations*, 1973.